



By: Jacy Park

“No one told me that I would be a promotion risk, I was always told I was doing fine,” said a Chief Warrant Officer 2 with tears in his eyes as I advised him to get his family ready for a career outside the military. Countless officers and NCOs have confided in me that they truly did not understand the direction their careers were headed. They assumed they were doing well simply because no one directly told them they were not. Digging deeper, their raters and senior raters did not provide them the counseling and development they needed throughout their career. Were their leaders simply too busy? Of course not, unheard of, impossible. Every leader knows that their Soldiers are the most critical element of their leadership responsibility. Our Army motto is “People First! Army Strong!” clearly indicates that our military’s priority, our center of gravity, and our most lethal weapon system is our Soldiers. Yet, conversations like the one above with the Chief Warrant Officer 2 are more

common than not. So I ask you, are your counseling sessions with your subordinates a deep dive that focuses on your rated Soldier and their needs, or a drive-by session that checks all the blocks, but only skims the surface?

A conservative estimate for the number of hours spent taking care of a HMMWV is approximately 230 hours when you take into consideration weekly PMCS and semi-annual, annual, and biannual services. If we are expected to dedicate over 230 hours a year to a piece of equipment made of metal and rubber, how many hours should we be spending on our Soldiers to ensure that their personal and professional needs are being met?

Every leader should take the time to reflect on how they counsel their subordinates to ensure they receive the coaching and development they deserve. Do you schedule a 15-30 minute session where you inform the rated Soldier how they compare to their peers and then call it a day? Do you only make time for negative counselings because everyone else is doing just fine? Do you conduct most of your counseling verbally and informally? Or do you dedicate at least an hour every quarter to sit down with your rated Soldier to develop a plan of action to address their developmental needs? Personally, I have experienced both types of raters in my career. While some raters frequently provided informative feedback others had to be repeatedly reminded to provide counseling. They would say, "You are doing great, I will tell you if that changes!" coupled with what is meant to be an encouraging slap on the shoulder.

The wide variety of counseling experiences we have experienced is astonishing. No leader will dispute that dedicated, frequent, and tailored counseling is the foundation of a good training and leader development program. Our subordinates do not consistently receive the necessary focus from their rater to meet their individual developmental needs. Many Soldiers who need more help than others are often the ones who find themselves neglected by their leaders as they are a "lost cause." When I was commanding a particularly

challenging company, my mentor reminded me that these are the Soldiers who need the most of my time and dedication. Leaders exist to help the trouble-makers, the slow-learners, the unfocused, the misfits, the unmotivated, and the poor-performers. Do not look at these groups of Soldiers as a distraction to your leadership time. The top 30% of the Soldiers, whom we like to spend our time with, are ironically the ones who need us the least.

Great leaders are great trainers. Great trainers can create tailored, efficient, and effective programs for their Soldiers because they know their strength and weakness. They develop tailored training programs that enhance the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses of the Soldiers being trained. How do you accomplish that if you use a blanket counseling that only discusses your Soldiers' performance and not their motivations and fears?

Here are some points to think about for your next counseling.

1) Know and articulate the desired outcome of the counseling. Like everything else we do, our counseling sessions should have a clear purpose and intent so that we can develop appropriate talking points and discussions. Is it to improve their current performance? To prepare them for their next assignment? If you do not have a desired end state, you are just talking, not counseling.

2) Great counseling sessions start with great questions. You do not need to have all the answers. Do we feel compelled to hand out "nuggets" of wisdom as the all-knowing successful leaders? Asking questions is a forcing function that stops us from just talking and compels us to begin listening to our Soldiers. Furthermore, Soldiers will be more invested in the assessment and the subsequent plan of action if they are actively involved in the counseling session.

When was the last time you asked your Soldiers the following questions?

- What were *your* goals in the last quarter?
- What went well and what did not? What was your contribution? How can you do it differently next time?
- What made you happy? What made you unhappy? Why? What's on your mind?
- Who do you call when you are stressed? Why do you choose that person? How often do you speak to this person?
- What are you comfortable with? What makes you feel uncomfortable and why? How can we work on that together?
- What is your goal for the next quarter (personal and professional) and why? How can we develop a plan of action with actionable milestones that we can revisit at the next counseling?
- How is your family, friends, kids, parents, significant others, pets, etc. coping with your current situation?
- If you were the commander, what would you do differently?

3) Ensure that you and your rated Soldier take the time to determine what competencies or skill set the rated Soldier should focus on developing. There are two motivators that seem to lead to action or inaction. First is their ambition. What motivates this Soldier to wake up in the morning and drive on? What is the Soldier trying to achieve? This can be both personal and professional. The second is their fear. This is usually closely related to their insecurities and many people take actions to avoid them. Getting to the heart of our Soldiers fears is important so that we can get after the core issue, not just the symptoms. For example, a Soldier may cite their family as the reason for departing the military, but their real fear may be that they will not be selected for promotion. It is an easier pill to swallow when you martyr your career for your family than to face your fear of non-promotion head on. Leaders must know their Soldier's fears to coach their Soldiers towards achieving their desired endstate.

In the end, we are all allocated only 24 hours in a day. We must prioritize what we think is important and dedicate our time to those priorities. If we can dedicate over 230 hours on maintaining a vehicle, we can spare at least one (1) hour each quarter conducting a formal written counseling focused on our Soldiers – the true pacing items of our Army.

People First! Army Strong!

*Jacy A. Park is the 22d Chemical Battalion Commander at Fort Bliss, TX. She has served as the Chief of Officer Training for the Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear (CBRN) School, Field Grade Officer Assignment Officer at Human Resources Command (HRC) and Professor of Military Science for Florida International University in Miami, Florida.*

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)