

What are Chaplains For? Five Suggestions on How to Best Utilize the Chaplain



By Caleb Miller

There are many guides for officers or NCOs to become better leaders. There are also guides for chaplains to improve. However, I see very little out there helping leaders develop, utilize or rate the chaplains in their midst. This contribution to the professional development literature is a humble start.

There will come a time when nearly every officer and most NCOs will work closely with a chaplain (or their enlisted counterparts) on *something*. Maybe it comes in the form of seeking help. Maybe it is planning an event. Maybe it is the more formal role of supervisor or rater. This is not just a question for the Navy's "religious program specialists" (RPs) or Soldiers formerly known as "chaplain assistants." All service members have something to gain or lose.

The problem, however, is a lack of specificity in the job title. More than with other staff

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officers or direct commissioned officers, each chaplain's ministry will be done through the filters of their personality, background, level of integrity, convictions, and talents. This wide variety makes it very difficult to hold chaplains accountable or recognize genuinely good work from what briefs well or merely looks good on a storyboard.

Speaking as an Army chaplain, for example, on a nearly daily basis as a low-density MOS I encounter someone else's (often warped) version of what my job is supposed to be.

Personnel, intelligence, operations, logistics, supply, signal, and public affairs are complex but quantifiable needs. But why is there a staff officer devoted to religion?

Some Soldiers speak of chaplains, whether as a joke or with utter seriousness, almost as if we were wizards: veritable miracle-workers, experts in world religions, sources of endless positive vibes, highly trained crisis-whisperers who speak just the right words at just the right time and never back down when called upon to speak truth to power.

Other Soldiers struggle to say anything constructive about us; they find our activities at best confusing and, at worst, cringeworthy. Perhaps a chaplain failed them at a crucial moment in their lives. Perhaps their assigned chaplains have always lacked people skills. Perhaps these Soldiers are prone to distrust anyone wearing a religious symbol on their chest. Whatever their reason, they are content to mostly avoid us.

These various attitudes all assume a particular role or purpose for the chaplains. But what can be done to cut through some of this noise and use the variety for mutually beneficial results?

- 1. Ask the chaplain you are working with about their philosophy or approach to their role.**

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself what chaplains actually do? What purpose they

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serve? What image comes to mind when you think of the “best” chaplain? Is the “ideal” something closer to the warrior monk from [The Last Kingdom](#), Father Mulcahy, or the medic from [Hacksaw Ridge](#)?

The chaplain you work with has opinions on that: not all chaplains are white or male or Christian, but even among those who are, there is a diversity of approaches to providing spiritual or pastoral care. You can learn most of what you need to know about a chaplain from how they describe their role.

Reciting the doctrine only goes so far. There are many ways to assign the chaplain purpose without really saying anything. Chaplains deal with “spirituality” and the “soul” and “religious support” but what do these concepts translate to practically, when there is such a wide range of how to define these things in our formations and in society?

Senior chaplains ask their own versions of these questions: What does this mean in a cultural context where Soldiers are becoming less familiar with (and in many cases increasingly suspicious of) organized religion? To what extent is suicide prevention in the chaplains lane rather than a shared responsibility? Are singles and marriage retreats one aspect of our ministry or all that service members should expect from us?

You may not need to get so “in the weeds,” but some basic questions are helpful:

- Does the chaplain you are working with seem passionate about advocacy for needs or protecting religious freedoms?
- Do they simply want to talk with and encourage people?
- Do they talk about staff work and advising the commander?

I have seen chaplains who gravitate toward event planning or battlefield circulation or small group counseling or preaching in the chapel or mediating conflict. There are chaplains who

make it a point to provide refreshments in their office or at the range. There are chaplains who do loads of volunteer work, or pour their energy into the chapel. Which kind of chaplain are *you* dealing with?

2. Consider what kind of chaplain your unit needs - and relay that information

This seems like a no-brainer but is just as often overlooked. Most chaplains would benefit from any insight into what a particular unit or formation needs beyond their own observations. Talking to the intel community is different than talking to mechanics or infantry. What is effective in one unit does not always work in another. Circulation, battle rhythm, and morale issues look different in each of these groups. “Go do chaplain things” is a nebulous mission. Especially if you are a supervisor or rater to a chaplain, one of the talking points in an initial counseling that would greatly help most chaplains is some sense of the needs:

- Should the chaplain plan events or nest into the existing battle rhythm events?
- What is the religious make-up of your unit?
- Who feels left out or overlooked?
- Has discrimination or preferential treatment been a problem?
- Which staff meetings is it crucial that the chaplain (or a representative) attend?
- What events help the most? Retreats? Classes? Volunteer or charity work?
- What information does the chaplain need to provide leaders and especially commanders?

3. Recognize the difference between chaplains and other counselors.

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In a context where there seems to be a counselor or program for every last need or concern, there are two equal and opposite dangers: on the one hand, it is likely you could easily overtask the chaplain by sending every disciplinary issue or emotional soldier to the chaplain. On the other hand, you could easily undertask them by sending service members who could benefit from a conversation with a chaplain to another counseling agency without fully understanding who could serve them best.

Chaplains, if they are wise, tend to refer service members beyond their skill to other resources. Those with complex relational, emotional, or financial issues usually need caregivers who can prescribe medication, construct a budget, put someone on a continuous care plan, or do in-depth therapy. Some chaplains receive advanced training in these things, but most of the time there is another, better counselor out there.

However, these same chaplains, if they circulate well, will probably excel in areas like conflict mediation, grief, helping others through “bad days,” listening to utterly confidential confessions, and even consultation on which resource to use.

Whenever a service member simply needs a place to talk and vent in a safe environment, away from the chain of command and with full confidence that what they say is not going to go in any records, the chaplain has a lot to offer.

(There is of course the kind of pastoral counseling that involves religious practices - but take notice of how I can list out the benefits of using the chaplain as a counselor without mentioning organized religion once.)

4. To the extent that there is trust between you, involve the chaplain in your plans.

Especially in the Army, there is no rule that says the chaplain must be planning a separate

event off on their own little island and adding to the training calendar only after others have set the battle rhythm. Often the chaplain's team and resources are smaller than the rest of the staff, which makes chaplain-sponsored events small scale.

Integration is key. Assuming you have a decent relationship with this individual, trust them in front of a crowd, it is entirely appropriate to schedule them to train on something (relationships, resiliency, whatever the talking points of the week happen to be) while handling the rest of the logistical questions that normally consume the chaplain or the assistant - timeline, number of attendees, cost, etc. The more specific you are in telling the chaplain what you want them to discuss, the better the event will be.

5. Remember that Chaplains need help too.

Nearly every chaplain I have ever encountered came into the role with good intentions and a servant's heart and truly wanted the servicemembers under their care or in their sphere of influence to flourish. Yet chaplains notoriously struggle with how to translate all those good intentions into actionable counsel or realistic and timely plans, and service members who appreciate what they do also struggle with how to help them. This leads to burnout, compassion fatigue, or disengagement - a distracting hobby in the form of other volunteer work or chasing after tabs and medals.

Bottom line:

Most chaplains, regardless of rank, role, faith tradition, prior service, expertise, or personality are average, limited, and all too human. They are more flawed than their most enthusiastic supporters like to imagine. But, like a kicker on the football team, they are more crucial to mission success than their critics would have you believe. Regardless of your level of agreement with this individual on theological or religious matters, you can help them so they can better help you.

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