



by Stein Thorbeck

It doesn't have to be this way.

“You are the first person that has actually counseled me!” These words or a variation thereof are tragically common. Many of us could be better counselors, either by frequency or impact. As leaders, the counseling process is one of our most potent tools to build genuine commitment. Don't let this be lost on you or your people. You are simply leaving too much on the table if you only use it to ask for compliance.

This article is as much about a practical method as it is about a mindset. There is a price paid for not getting counseling right, or at least not seeking to get more from the experience. Think about the times you have been counseled. Did you leave the session

feeling energized, or overwhelmed?

How about the people you counsel, do they leave inspired? Or did you leave them buried underneath a “heap of expectations?” Here’s my question to you – do you think they could breathe under there? When we counsel, we must challenge ourselves to give people oxygen.

I assess that our counseling problem comes in two forms: it is not happening enough or it is happening from the wrong mindset.

Counseling is not happening

Why? Arguably three reasons: First is time and personal effort. We are “busy.” Secondly, junior ranks can view counseling as awkward or anxiety-inducing. They may deauthorize themselves as “improperly qualified” to counsel others. There is discomfort in the overall dynamic of “laying out expectations” before seeking a signature. Third, the leader’s mental model for “what a leader does” never included counseling because nobody counseled them first.

Counseling happens, but from the wrong mindset

When counseling does happen, it is too often used as a tool of compliance. Even as an initial counseling, the superior uses the counseling form to download job expectations into the subordinate before they must symbolically “commit” to the new expectations with a signature.

The person being counseled is rarely invited to speak. Should they ever fall short of these expectations, they can be reminded of their “agreement.” Can’t we do better? We can. Counseling does not need to be daunting, and it can be made easier by inviting your people into most of the process.

For this to work, we must believe that people do not seek to be poor at their job, that they do not wake up looking to fall short of their duty description. I believe most are searching for meaning, space to perform, and an ability to improve. Let's look briefly at the science of motivation to better explain.

How Understanding of Motivation has Changed - A Primer

In [*Drive: The Surprising Truth about what Motivates Us*](#), author Daniel Pink outlines the evolution of human motivation in memorable language by naming our increasingly advanced motivational "operating systems":

Motivation 1.0 - Basic survival needs. Think food, shelter, security, sex, etc.

Motivation 2.0 - "Carrot and Stick" transactions. Motivation comes from external factors. Outcome is compliance.

Motivation 2.1 - A slight upgrade, but same operating system. This is 2.0 with company BBQs, casual Fridays, and workplace gyms. It is a recognition of the emptiness of the purely transactional approach to workplace happiness, yet misses the mark on total mindset overhaul. Pink believes most organizations operate here today. Outcome is cynicism and confusion.

Motivation 3.0 - Purpose, Autonomy, Mastery. Motivation comes from an internal drive to become a better self in service of something meaningful. This inner-drive will only come with full integration of these three factors. Outcome is commitment.

The Method - Adapting Motivation 3.0 to the Counseling Process with Purpose, Autonomy, Mastery

This article is based on the general structure of the Army Developmental Counseling Form

and can be used by anyone. There are five major components:

1. Reason for the counseling
2. Summary/discussion
3. Plan of action
4. Assessment/follow-up.
5. Leader responsibilities

These five components provide a tangible means to install the Motivation 3.0 operating system. The first two cultivate purpose. The third helps you give the gift of autonomy, and the last two create space for your team to share their road to mastery. Your “leader responsibilities” are to provide, protect, and enable their journey.

To accomplish this, you will separate your initial counseling into two days. One to discuss purpose and the other to discuss how to best serve that purpose. You will follow-up as necessary, determined by your people and their plan’s particular needs.

Purpose - Reason and Discussion

Day One - Communicating Purpose and Fit

STOP: Hand-waving discussion of the counseling’s purpose.

START: Be direct and outcome-oriented. Instead of saying, “the purpose of this counseling is initial/developmental/event-oriented” say, “the purpose of this counseling is to provide oxygen so you can find life in this organization. If done well, you will be properly challenged to meaningfully contribute to your personal development and to our team.”

STOP: Using the summary/discussion as a space to list all possible “expectations” the subordinate must COMPLY with.

START: Build COMMITMENT by communicating and discussing the organizational mission and vision, the priorities of the commander, and the unique “piece of the pie” the subordinate’s role and team serve.

Daniel Pink summarizes purpose as the “yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.” The implication being, without a sincere cognitive connection from personal task and role to “big picture” impact, motivation dwindles. Many “know” this in an abstract sense, but do they believe? Your goal on “day one” is to begin the process of turning this “head knowledge” into “heart knowledge.”

Once an initial understanding is achieved, adjourn and reschedule. Invite them to come back when they are truly ready. Tell them you want to see them “not too soon, and not too late.”

By separating the counseling into two separate days, you enable a better balance of speaking and listening. Use the first day as *your* primary opportunity to speak. The second day is for your subordinate to reflect, share their self-assessment, and how they will incorporate it into an overall plan of development and contribution to the team - this is your primary opportunity to *listen*. It is *their* opportunity to commit.

Autonomy - The Plan

Day Two - Utilizing the Self-Assessment with Purpose

STOP: Asking subordinates for their strengths and weaknesses with no purpose in mind.

START: Incorporate strengths and weaknesses and a reflection on what others can expect

into a meaningful plan.

At the close of the first day, you must ask for deliberate reflection. This includes at least two items: a strengths and weaknesses self-assessment and the question, “What can your team expect of you?” It has always been my experience when asking this powerful question that those counseled have higher expectations than I ever had for them. Let your people reach and use that momentum!

By inviting your people to reflect and share their personal vision of the ideal team contribution, shaped by strengths and weaknesses, we accomplish at least two things. The first gets their mind active and engaged to create a better plan of action. The second helps you think about your “leader responsibilities,” where it now *becomes your obligation to enable others to rise to the level of their own expectations.*

Day Two Continued - Planning with the GROW Model: A Framework for Clarity.

STOP: Creating your subordinate’s plan of action for them. You are robbing them of autonomy and robbing yourself of time and intellectual capital.

START: Challenge them to create a developmental contribution plan and dare to let them execute it.

Depending on your subordinate’s developmental plan, they can focus on building weaknesses or expanding their strengths. As a leader, you are looking to ensure your subordinate’s plan falls within what [Atomic Habits](#) author James Clear calls the “Goldilocks Rule” of difficulty for optimum engagement.

The GROW framework is my preferred approach because of its simplicity. It stands for Goal, Reality, Options, What will you do?

Goal: What do you intend to contribute to our greater purpose? What does “success” look like? Challenge your people to nest themselves into the commander’s priorities and organizational mission when creating their goals. The objective of this step is to “see” the end state. Where are you going? What does a meaningful contribution look like? The counselor ensures the goal serves the organization and the individual.

Reality: Where are you now? Use the self-assessment discussed above (and perhaps even a team or organizational assessment). The big idea is to build what management expert [Peter Senge](#) calls “creative tension.” That is, we so vividly understand the difference between here and there that we can not resist moving in the right direction.

For example, if we want to get to Chicago, and we know we are in Minneapolis, that’s a start. If we know we want to get to Michigan Avenue and we’re standing on Lake Street, that’s better. But if we know we are standing on a specific 10-digit grid coordinate, then all that is needed to move forward is to take a *single step*. *That* is creative tension.

Options: What could you do? The goal here is to get your brain’s associative powers flowing. Do not obsess about what you will do just yet (that’s next). Just come up with any way in which you *could* begin heading to Chicago. Think about the type of vehicle, who’s behind the wheel, timing, routes, and pit-stops. Think about options that are process or task focused, or both. Have fun with this step. Nothing is too silly or “unrealistic.”

Will: What will you do? Pick one. On a scale of 1-10, how serious are you about getting this done? What would it take to move from a 7 to a 10? What will you actually do? Once complete, ask that they sign to their plan. Isn’t that an easier signature to receive?

Mastery - Assessment and Leader’s Responsibility

Beyond Day Two - The Follow Up

Daniel Pink's claim that humans have an innate drive to improve is strongly supported by the incredible research of American psychologist Frederick Herzberg in his classic essay, [*One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees*](#). Here's one of the big ideas - the pursuit of growth, challenge, and mastery is more important than any individual snapshot of success or failure.

The assessment and follow-up section allows us to track the journey to mastery. It should be scheduled at the conclusion of "day two" and placed in the "leader responsibilities" to sit down again with the individual and revisit their plan.

Your role as the counselor and leader is to help your subordinate accomplish and track progress for their *own* goals. This undertaking is a paradigm shift - a mindset change from the leader-as-enforcer to leader-as-enabler, partner, and ally. The assessment and follow-up component should be used to allow the subordinate time and space to reflect on their progress, constraints, and limitations. Any constraints and limitations must be viewed as obstacles by the leader, which he can direct energy to remove and clear the path.

Conclusion

Counseling does not need to be difficult. When done in this way, I have found it energizing and inspiring. Those that have received this type of counseling from me have commented on its ability to challenge them in a meaningful way while sparking genuine movement. Mostly, that it provided them breathing space instead of suffocation.

Stop asking others to comply and start asking for commitment. Set your team up for success by shifting the balance of who is doing most of the speaking in the counseling conversation. By utilizing the principles of Motivation 3.0, we are embracing natural momentum instead of fighting it. We are releasing ourselves from unneeded stress and discomfort in the counseling process. Mostly, we treat our people with respect. If we do that, as the saying goes, they will do all the more.

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