



Leaders of the 10th Mountain Division Sustainment Brigade participate in command mentorship physical training (PT) at Fort Drum, New York, 8 January 2024. During this session of command mentorship PT, the soldiers participated in a ruck march over different kinds of terrain. (Photo by Sgt. Alexander Kelsall, U.S. Army)

The Science, Art, and Practice of Mentorship

Making Army Techniques Publication 6-22.1 Come Alive

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The U.S. Army published Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring*, in February 2024. This manual replaced the July 2014 version titled *The Counseling Process*. This evolution of doctrine fills critical gaps in our understanding of professional development by providing a helpful guide to effective communication among Army professionals. The most consequential of these filled gaps is the attention to mentorship, a frequently cited and often misunderstood tool in the personal and professional development process. Though *Providing Feedback* provides a sound basis and serves a valuable purpose, we identified some areas that require additional details for practitioners to truly understand the art and application of mentorship. By intertwining both science and art, we aim to establish the essential role mentorship plays in the personal and professional growth of our people. As two officers currently engaged “in a voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience, that is characterized by mutual trust and respect,” we would like to offer insights attained through practice that will complement and supplement the useful framework established by ATP 6-22.1.¹

ATP 6-22.1 gets many things right, not least because a publication directly addressing mentorship now exists! Until *Providing Feedback*, there was a glaring gap in the Army’s professional development toolbox and in the publication of doctrine formally recognizing the importance of mentorship in developing leaders. Other significant achievements include the publication’s treatment of adaptive communication, its emphasis on mutual self-awareness, its detailing of the foundations and multiple types of mentorship, and its introduction of the Johari Window model. Adaptive communications and self-awareness are the centerpieces of chapter 1 that focus on how to provide feedback, which is a previously neglected area of the Army’s leadership doctrine. The lead chapter acknowledges generational differences in communication and emphasizes the need for self-awareness to minimize bias and acknowledge limitations.² Acknowledging the importance of two-way conversations and differences in perception are key factors in establishing trust. The manual’s final chapter, specifically dedicated to mentoring, goes a long way to break down the myths of

mentorship. These include offering tips on initiating the relationship, general ground rules, and the various forms that mentoring can take.

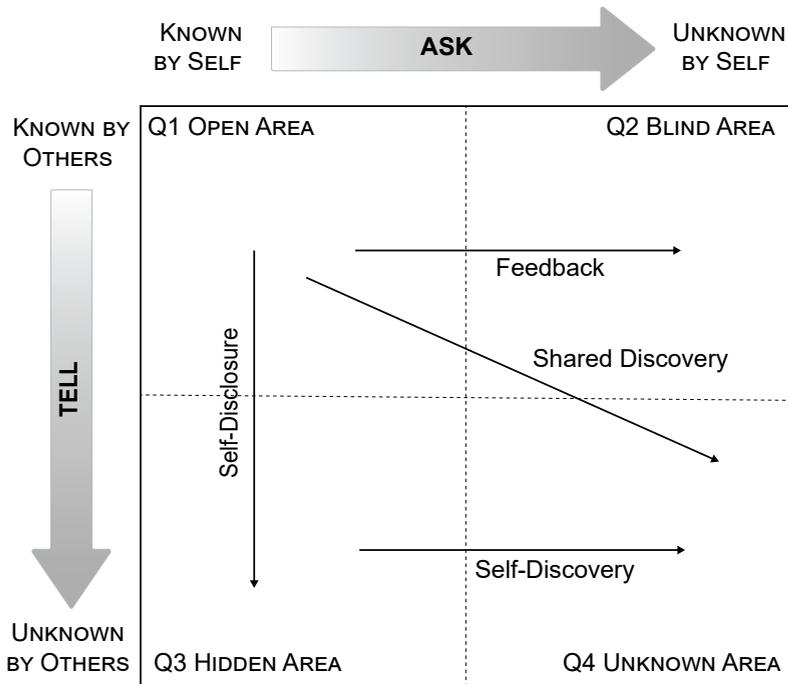
Acknowledging both the adaptiveness of mentorship and the no-one-size-fits-all approach will go a long way in knocking down barriers to mentorship access. The final highlight of the manual’s approach is the use of the Johari Window. Developed in the mid-1950s by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, this visualization tool helps people understand themselves and others and improves their relationships; it is a powerful tool for mentors and mentees.³ Though more often associated with coaching, the Johari model provides pathways for feedback, discovery, and disclosure to expand awareness and open mentors and mentees to change and development (see figure 1). These key features are but four areas in a manual full of useful information; however, there are potential areas of misunderstanding that may cause challenges in the mentorship process.

For all the great contributions of ATP 6-22.1 that advance the Army’s understanding and application of counseling, coaching, and mentoring, there are some areas that require modification in future editions. There are three specific areas we will highlight and will address in turn. First, the manual creates an artificial, and possibly self-defeating, distinction among the three modes of feedback: counseling, coaching, and mentoring. Second, it fails to free counseling from the negative perceptions held by many in our uniformed and civilian ranks. Finally, the manual does not put these functions of feedback and self-development in the context of the Army’s other two developmental domains, namely, operational and institutional development.

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(Figure from Army Techniques Publication 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling—Coaching—Mentoring*)

Figure 1. The Johari Model

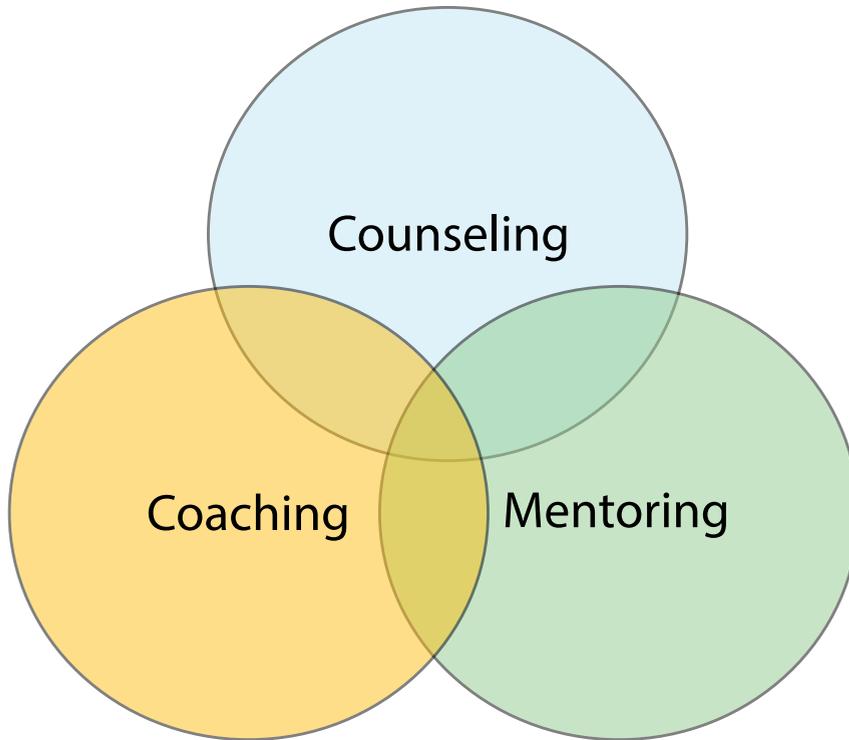
Addressing the distinction between feedback mechanisms is the most important to resolve.

ATP 6-22.1 categorizes counseling as a process, coaching as a technique, and mentoring as a relationship.⁴ Each is portrayed as a separate entity used for a specific purpose. The manual reinforces this distinction by portraying them in a tabular format that draws distinct boundaries among the concepts.⁵ In reality, and as practiced and observed by the authors of this article, all three means of feedback frequently interact. A superior counseling a subordinate will often revert to coaching a specific skill or providing mentoring advice in the “process” of completing the required performance counseling. Similarly, a mentor will frequently coach the mentee on a required skill and provide feedback on performing the duties required of a specific position in which the mentor has experience. Maintaining this compartmentalization is disingenuous and limits the effectiveness of feedback; all tools are always on the table. The relationship among counseling, coaching, and mentoring is more like the image in figure 2, which denotes a supporting and reinforcing relationship among the three approaches. The techniques are not mutually exclusive and can be used in complementary ways.

Another critique associated with considering each feedback mechanism as a separate entity is the failure to reduce the negative connotations associated with counseling. Though the publication stresses that “the counseling process is distinct from the documentation process,” the chapter on counseling is heavy on the multiple administrative requirements and structure of the event.⁶ The sheer weight of bureaucratic requirements takes away from the spirit of the techniques espoused in the other portions of the document, namely, having a candid conversation with the people we lead. In a recent professional development forum with Army career professionals as the main audience, a senior supervisor was lauded for the stringent documentation he ruthlessly enforced with his counseling regimen to ensure the organization complied with all regulations. Though we admired his

devotion, was not the spirit of the feedback session placed in jeopardy? Though documentation is essential, we would gladly accept acknowledgment on a notecard or the back of an MRE box for a meaningful conversation with an employee. In the authors’ interactions with junior leaders, young soldiers often relate that the counseling process is frequently a “knee-jerk” reaction to create the right paperwork trail or fill a check-the-leader block. We end up fighting the metric instead of embracing the interaction’s ultimate purpose. In essence, let us spend more time in the dialogue, employ the many effective strategies for coaching contained in chapter 3, and not waste unnecessary hours on minutiae.

Our final critique is the lack of attention to putting feedback and self-development in the context of the Army’s overall professional development doctrine. Self-development is one of three domains of development. Institutional and operational development compose the other two “legs” of the development stool. The institutional domain consists of Army centers and schools that provide formal educational and training programs. The operational domain consists of those activities and positions where Army personnel gain on-the-job experience.⁷ True growth and development must include



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Venn Diagram Depicting the Relationship Among Counseling, Coaching, and Mentoring

experiences, reflection, and feedback from all three. The benefits of counseling, coaching, and mentoring include making sense of the experiences gained in the institutional and operational domains and offering a self-development plan designed to address the gaps in one's development. ATP 6-22.1 should be more explicit in establishing that relationship.

Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring is a timely and useful document. Despite our critiques of its gaps, it is truly a meaningful start point. To evolve the professional discussion and provide both junior leaders and would-be mentors a practical guide, we offer some additional insights gained from our mentor-mentee relationships. We do not offer these thoughts as “the” way but as “a” way to consider in the act of giving and receiving feedback.

Tip #1. Mentorship Is Not a Marriage

Mentor. Establishing a professional yet “informal” relationship with a subordinate can be awkward, particularly if it is of mixed gender. The willingness

to reach out is likely the top inhibitor of establishing a mentoring relationship. The mentor needs to assess where they can be of help and who around them is open to help. Understand that those we are seeking to help may need your insights for a day, an assignment, for a few months, or forever. Do not start with a look to the far horizon. Start small, offer your hand, and do not get upset if the hand is not accepted.

Mentee. Seeking out a mentor can feel hard and make you uncomfortable. Factors that contribute to hesitation include the mentor's rank or position, concern over a same-gender or mixed-gender relationship, and not knowing how to approach someone to start the conversation. When selecting mentors, it is important to identify what it is you are looking for. Some examples can include similarity in personalities, desirable character traits and values, duty positions

or branches that a mentee seeks to achieve or attain, identifiable competencies, support in specific areas for growth and development, and availability. Of note, there can be multiple and different types of mentors in someone's career and life. Some mentors may be desirable for a specific situation, some for seasons, and some for life. Do not feel debilitated in asking a leader to be a mentor. What is the easiest and best way to get a mentor? Start the conversation! If the relationship quickly ends or withers, start another! It is also reasonable to be forthcoming on the length of time or situation you would like to be in that mentor-mentee relationship.

Tip #2. Be a Human First

Mentor. Though our profession may frown at the idea of “taking the rank off,” that is exactly the first thing that should occur in a mentoring relationship. The senior needs to set that tone. Start with the human needs of the individual you are trying to help. Where are they going? What do they want to do? Where are they starting from?

Mentee. The person makes the uniform. A desirable mentor models the behaviors the mentee wants to emulate. The junior member of a mentorship relationship will quickly detect a mismatch between the audio and the video. Before we are soldiers and leaders, we are people. It is a point that cannot be underscored enough. It is vital to enter a mentor-mentee relationship acknowledging that to grow as a uniformed service member, we need to grow as a person first. In that vein, a mentor-mentee relationship is a great place to speak honestly, ask hard questions, and be open to ideas. This is the time to discuss fears, concerns, hardships, challenges, and uncertainties. Most mentees will find that the mentor has experienced it, seen it (often in many different forms and situations), understands the event or the emotions, and can help you process and walk through it, armed with tools and knowledge to take the next step forward.

Tip #3. Follow the “Two Ears, One Mouth” Dictum and Listen Twice as Much as You Speak

Mentor. Tied to the previous tip, the most important thing a mentor can do is listen. As senior officers, we sometimes like to pontificate and listen to the sound of our own voices. Most of the time, in a mentorship role, we just need to listen and ask the right questions. Good questions lead to self-discovery.

Mentee. There is a time to talk and a time to listen. A mentor can provide myriad advice, tools, support, correction, and validation regarding various situations and personal development. Be open and receptive, actively participate in the process, apply the recommendations, and incorporate the advice. Be willing and ready to take risks, move out of your comfort zone, and grow.

Tip #4. Help Build a Network

Mentor. ATP 6-22.1 harps on self-awareness. One of the most significant realizations a mentor can come to is realizing they do NOT have the expertise required to offer an insight to help guide the mentored officer. When that happens, a good mentor finds someone with the requisite expertise *and* complementary attributes to the mentee and then helps make the connection between the two. The larger and deeper web of mentors you create, the more opportunities are available to the mentee.

Mentee. It is completely acceptable to conclude that “this mentor is not working out for me.” Similarly, there is no pressure to maintain that mentor relationship beyond a certain period if it does not feel like the right fit. It is also okay to recognize that a specific mentor may not be the right mentor for every situation. That is where having a few mentors (or many) can aid in developing a mentee. Establishing a support network and having at least a few mentors can allow a mentee to have the right support group for many situations and moments. It takes a village to develop a junior leader through the ranks and provide the right exposure to many points of view and experiences. It is also helpful to have more than one person to present with problems or ideas to make the most informed decisions.

Tip #5. There Are No Perfect Mentors or Perfect Mentoring Relationships

Mentor. Though ATP 6-22.1 associates the word “organic” more with coaching, the word applies just as readily to mentoring. Where a formal mentoring agreement may be useful to some, we find a mutual consensus much more in tune with mentoring.⁸ Set some ground rules and how you will carry on your conversations—interval, tone, media—so both parties are comfortable and satisfied. Some mentorship relationships will last a long time; some will end quickly. All types are beneficial, so just be clear on expectations.

Mentee. Mentoring is relational, not transactional. It is a mutually beneficial endeavor that exists between two complex people at different stages of their lives. Psychologist Erik Erikson introduced an eight-stage model in the late 1950s for psychosocial development across the lifespan that illuminates the different actions and motivators of a person during stages of life. In most cases, a mentee will fall within stage 6 of this model, where further development of identity/sense-of-self and cultivating relationships are most important.⁹ A mentor will usually fall within stage 7, where middle-aged adults are compelled to foster positive change and contribute to society in a way that creates a generational impact.¹⁰ This relationship works best when both parties are intrinsically motivated and equally invested. Expectation management is critical. Transparency on both sides about communication styles, personality traits, backgrounds and needs/wants are essential.

Mentors are not infallible; conversely, mentees have thoughts, ideas, and perspectives that contribute to the development of both parties. Be active, not passive. Like any type of human relationship, mentors and mentees can sometimes disagree, become frustrated with advice or results, or find the relationship has hit a natural termination point. Approach the process with grace, be realistic, and embrace that learning is to be had from the experience, regardless of the duration or outcome.

Tip #6. Be Vulnerable

Mentor. Like “taking off the rank,” opening yourself up to true introspection and unfiltered sharing will lead to much better mentorship outcomes. The conversation will never evolve to genuine communication if we cling to power distance or defensiveness. No one is perfect, and everyone makes mistakes; sharing those times of weakness not only offers teaching moments but also supports the idea that there is no such thing as a “no-defects” leader.

Mentee. A mentor-mentee relationship is not the place to worry about looking like you have it all figured out. There is no judgement in the struggle, the uncertainties, the not knowing what to do, or the follow-on questions that may appear trivial. It is incumbent on the mentee to be vulnerable, be open, and be shameless. Only through honesty can you attain a productive and developmental conversation and deepen the

relationship and trust between the mentor and mentee; it is an opportunity for both parties to come to the table with genuine, shared experiences. A good question to follow a vulnerable statement for the mentee might be to ask if the mentee has ever felt a particular way or experienced something specific. In most instances, an affirmative response will be followed by multiple anecdotes. Shared experience goes a long way to both assuage turbulent emotions and provide practiced recommendations for the next step.

Conclusion

Army doctrine made significant advancement with the publication of ATP 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring*. Expanding on previous leadership development publications, the Army has finally applied some depth to useful but often neglected concepts of coaching and mentoring. The Army publishes doctrine to establish the basis of understanding and set the accepted terminology for professional discussion. Doctrine is not static and is subject to the test of application in the real world. In highlighting some of the perceived deficiencies identified through mentoring, we endeavor to expose these areas to additional scrutiny and possible revision. Based on these experiences, we offer other practitioners of the art some techniques and points for consideration as they apply this critical tool in the development of the Army profession. ■

Notes

1. Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2024), 17.

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. Dan Pilat and Sekoul Kraastev, “The Johari Window,” The Decision Lab, accessed 22 October 2024, <https://thedeisionlab.com/reference-guide/psychology/johari-window>.

4. ATP 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback*, 17.

5. *Ibid.*, 18.

6. *Ibid.*, 19.

7. Army Doctrine Publication 6.22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2019), 6-9.

8. ATP 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback*, 65.

9. Saul McLeod, “Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development,” Simply Psychology, last updated 25 January 2024, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/erik-erikson.html>.

10. *Ibid.*