



Staff Sgt. Christopher Trueblood, an Army Reserve drill sergeant assigned to 4th Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment, mentors trainees during "The Forge" at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, 27 August 2025. The Forge is the culminating field training exercise of basic combat training, testing everything trainees have learned before graduation. (Photo by Lt. Col. Xeriqua Garfinkel, US Army Reserve)

# Winning the Talent War

## Creating a Culture of Mentorship

Maj. Chris Slininger, US Army

*We don't just grow soldiers; we grow leaders, and mentorship is the soil.*

—Author

Over the past year, I have had the privilege of leading the development, piloting, and implementation of the Army Junior Officer Counsel (AJOC) program. Our mission is to "enable junior officers to drive change that continuously shapes organizational decisions and to foster a culture of innovation and communication with senior leaders."<sup>1</sup> To

accomplish change, we use data to inform our efforts. We have three primary data sources—the Department of Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES), the Department of Army Exit Survey (DAES), and the AJOC Army Experience survey.

Over the past four annual DACES and the current DAES, work/life balance, unstable career progression, and family strain are the top reasons junior officers leave service.<sup>2</sup> Our Army Junior Officer Experience survey reveals that over the past year, nine hundred junior officers report burnout, a decline in trust, and a lack of mentorship in our formations.<sup>3</sup> As we focus on increasing the

Army's readiness and lethality to face large-scale combat operations and continuously evolving battlefields, the Army must retain the best junior and noncommissioned officers to lead at the tactical level. So, what is the Army missing? Development. Direction. Dialogue. In other words, today's force demands mentorship. The purpose of this article is to lay out the author's proposed structure to address this need through dynamic mentorship, defined as mentoring that is adaptive, intentional, reciprocal, and above all, human centered.

This is not the traditional coffee chat or check-the-box counseling model. Dynamic mentorship strengthens unit cohesion, reinforces trust, and enhances continuous transformation, which is critical for building tough teams capable of thriving under chaotic conditions. Integrating dynamic mentorship into daily operations, we directly improve readiness and sharpen our edge for lethality in future fights.

## Dynamic Mentoring—There's More to Mentorship than Retelling Old War Stories

*Mentorship, as defined by junior officers, means more than casual guidance.*

—Army Experience Survey<sup>4</sup>

The fourth annual DACES report stated that the top reasons junior officers stay in the Army are for service, purpose, and leadership opportunities. Those who leave do so because they feel unseen and unvalued by their leaders and the Army.<sup>5</sup> Forty-seven respondents in the AJOC survey recommended formal mentorship programs to help develop junior officers and make them better leaders. Unfortunately, field-grade leaders are rarely cited as providing the needed development: "I've had more career support from peers than from senior leaders."<sup>6</sup> To retain high performers across the force, the Army must move from mentorship as a nice-to-do to mentorship as an organizational imperative. However, formal mentoring programs rarely work, so the Army needs to develop a mentoring culture. The added benefit to a mentoring culture is the reduced personnel costs due to retaining high performers who would otherwise leave, allowing the Army to increase the selectivity of officers and decrease accessions.

Junior officers demand active, approachable mentors who provide feedback and career insight.<sup>7</sup> As a

more senior officer, you might think you are already accomplishing this through your evaluation counseling (if you do it) and late-night PowerPoint critiques with a war story. Still, you are likely missing the full story from your junior officer. We need to pause and reassess whether we are mentoring someone and *doing* most of the talking. Our primary job is to ask questions that help develop insights into their goals, assist them in framing options and decisions, and identify opportunities for growth and excellence.

Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling-Coaching-Mentoring*, finally provides a doctrinal definition of mentorship as "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."<sup>8</sup> Doctrine further delineates mentorship into two subcomponents: supportive feedback to reinforce behavior and constructive feedback to improve or change the mentee's behavior. Furthermore, ATP 6-22.1 defines the stages of mentorship as *prescriptive, persuasive, collaborative, and confirmative*.<sup>9</sup> These stages come from a 2005 *Army Mentorship Handbook*.<sup>10</sup> However, these stages are not aligned with a preponderance of mentoring stages in academic research. Kathy Kram, the first thought leader of mentoring in work settings, illuminated four phases: *initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition*.<sup>11</sup> This break from the traditional phases of mentorship leads to issues when soldiers go to develop a mentoring relationship.

Army doctrine's four stages of mentorship places too much emphasis on mentor-driven guidance rather than mentee-led

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**Table. Mentorship Stage Comparison**

Army Stage	ATP 6-22.1 Description	Kram's Equivalent Phase	Analysis and Critique	Key Mentorship Insight
<b>Prescriptive</b>	Mentor devotes significant time and provides detailed information to the mentee.	Initiation	ATP 6-22.1 is too mentor-driven early on; should focus more on building trust and learning about the mentee's goals and needs.	Mentee leads the relationship; early mentorship is about trust-building and understanding.
<b>Persuasive</b>	Mentor challenges the mentee to pursue new goals and self-discovery.	Cultivation	ATP 6-22.1 is more aligned but still mentor-tasked; needs more flexibility and attention to mentee's evolving needs and direction.	Mentor adapts roles (challenger, connector, etc.); success depends on listening and emotional intelligence.
<b>Collaborative</b>	Mentee works more independently; mentor acts as advisor or role model.	Separation	ATP 6-22.1 overlaps with Kram but lacks intentionality around emotional/structural separation, which can fracture the relationship.	Prepare early for separation to preserve long-term mentorship value.
<b>Confirmative</b>	Mentee seeks insights into policy and people; mentorship subtly transitions.	Redefinition	ATP 6-22.1 often neglects the need to redefine the relationship; when done poorly, leads to confusion or disconnection.	Redefinition should be intentional; done right, it creates friendship and continued growth.

(Table by author)

growth. For example, the first stage is prescriptive, in which the mentor “focuses on providing detailed information to the mentee.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Kram’s developmental phases of initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition highlight the mentee-led, growth-oriented, and mutual nature of a mentorship. The initial phase in a mentoring relationship should prioritize trust building and understanding the mentee. Furthermore, the conclusion of a mentoring relationship is not emphasized in Army doctrine. It can lead to fractured relationships while hindering the building of a mentoring culture in the unit. The ATP overlooks the crucial early steps of boundary setting and developing an adaptable, mentee-led approach, which requires emotional intelligence from both the mentor and mentee. The table provides a comparison of the phases of mentorship.<sup>13</sup>

Given that our doctrine is out of alignment with scientific literature, how can we adapt and overcome

to accomplish the mentoring mission? We can work to become dynamic mentors. Dynamic mentoring is intentional, human-centered, adaptive, and reciprocal. This proposed framework helps leaders and individuals across echelons understand how to implement mentorship into our daily lives. Dynamic mentoring is guided by four characteristics: clarity, curiosity, challenge, and co-elevation. A dynamic mentoring mindset complements Kram’s established mentorship phases of initiation, cultivation, separation, and redefinition.

### **Clarity—Before, During, and After Your Mentoring Relationship**

Clarity demands clear thinking in purpose, roles, and definitions. The mentor and mentee come to the relationship with clarity in what they are looking to get out of the relationship, clarity in who is (predominantly) the mentor and who is the mentee, and clarity

in how they wish to proceed, rules of engagement, and break contact criteria (what happens when one moves away). Focusing your first several sessions on establishing clarity will pay dividends as you move from initiation to cultivation; if you do not know what you want to harvest, how can you tend the field appropriately?

Sometimes, the mentee is clear on what they want to achieve from their mentorship, and it's easy for the mentor to use SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-focused) goals to chart the course for the mentee. However, sometimes, as a mentor, you get the person who does not know exactly where they want to go—they are interested in going “that way.” For these individuals, you can use the author's DUMB (discover, understand, master, blend) goal framework.

- **Discovery** is about setting the mentee off to explore a topic. For instance, this could involve tasks such as having the mentee watch lectures, read books, or interview individuals to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. The goal of discover is for the mentee to discover more information and build a broad knowledge of the subject or area of interest. Discovery leads to understanding.
- **Understanding** occurs when the mentee becomes a novice in the new field of knowledge, enabling them to explain various aspects of it. Understanding focuses on context, purpose, and the nuances of the discovered knowledge. As understanding builds, comprehension grows, and the mentee begins to master the topic.
- **Mastery** builds on understanding and begins the refinement process. Context and nuance have applicability, and the mentee can turn this knowledge into skills. Mastery comes with repetition to ensure the mentee has mastered the new knowledge and skills. All of this converges at the point of blending.
- **Blending** occurs when the mentee integrates these skills and knowledge into their lives, whether through daily practice or by incorporating them into a system.

The objective of DUMB goals is not to achieve a quantitative mark but to learn, adapt, and integrate new knowledge holistically into the mentee's life. Within DUMB goals, a mentor can help establish SMART goals, especially in the mastery and blending portions of learning.

## Curiosity—Does Not Kill the Cat, Curiosity Drives Success

*There are diminishers in life and there are illuminators. Diminishers make you feel invisible, unseen, and insignificant ... But illuminators are the opposite. They seem to light up others just by paying attention to them. They see people deeply. They make them feel heard and understood.*

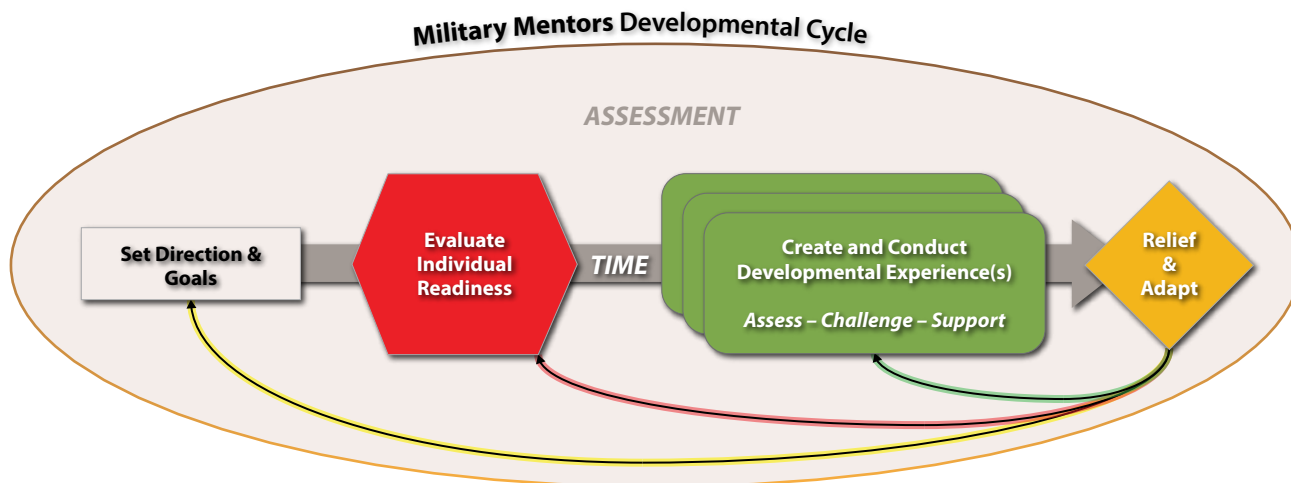
—David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*<sup>14</sup>

The start of a mentoring relationship is exciting; remember back to your first mentorship, sitting down with a mentor and the feeling a mix of nerves, excitement, and curiosity. If we adhere to the Army's “prescriptive” methodology for the first stage, we lose the mentee quickly. Instead, as we build clarity, we should seek to be curious, deeply curious. A dynamic mentor asks more questions than give answers, listens more than talks, and works to understand their mentee. By establishing boundaries and confidentiality early on, you create an open, trusting relationship and exchange with your mentee. Seek to understand your mentee's goals, fears, values, and potential. As you seek a deep understanding of your mentee, you build the foundation of trust, allowing you and your mentee to experience transformation. As David Brooks says, be an illuminator by focusing on and seeing your mentee deeply.<sup>15</sup>

## Challenge—There Is No Growth Without Challenge

As discussed in the clarity section, it is essential to understand the direction your mentee wants to take. As you build trust through curiosity, you can fine-tune your approach by understanding their current needs. Doing all of this requires time, patience, and work by both members of the mentorship. However, the reward is more than worth it as you identify exactly how to challenge your mentee, educate them, and challenge them to the edge of their comfort zone. As a mentoring relationship is long-term, that is, greater than six months in duration, the cycle of growth can happen several times. A great framework for challenging your mentee is the military mentors developmental cycle (shown in the figure).

The mentoring pair sets direction and goals (DUMB and SMART) as they both gain clarity. We evaluate individual readiness through curiosity. We challenge ourselves by creating and conducting



(Figure courtesy of Military Mentors)

**Figure. Military Mentors Development Cycle**

developmental experiences. This requires smaller cycles of assessing the mentee’s current state, challenging them to grow, supporting their growth, and then assessing their new state. Challenges can take several forms, including growth or stretch assignments or tasks, educational pursuits (such as reading this great article on dynamic mentoring and discussing it), journaling and reflection prompts, and more. The idea is to tailor the challenge to the mentee.

### Co-Elevation—Mentoring Pairs Rise or Fall Together

Part of challenging your mentee is opening doors that may otherwise be locked to them. A common misconception in mentoring is that the mentee automatically has access to the mentor’s network. I argue that this should not be the case, but instead the mentee should earn access to the network by taking on roles, projects, and opportunities. Done correctly, this allows the mentorship to become a mutual growth journey. As the mentor learns from the mentee’s new experiences, they do not feel obligated to share their network with a mentee who has not earned their trust and access. Co-elevating each other throughout the mentorship facilitates the reciprocity that helps distinguish a mentorship from teaching, coaching, and counseling.

### The Dark Side

Mentoring is not without perils; you can mess up a mentorship! Mentorship executed poorly hinders

growth, erodes trust, and reinforces counterproductive behaviors. Dynamic mentoring compels us to be intentional and act with humility, which means we want to avoid the common pitfalls of mentorship. Fortunately, we will cover these so you can mentor forward with confidence.

First, the opposite of dynamic mentoring is static mentorship. Static mentorship occurs when you develop a template and apply it to each mentee, failing to consider the most essential member of the relationship—the mentee—which we would argue is not mentorship but coaching or teaching. While there is merit to a structured approach to mentorship, the prescriptive, persuasive, collaborative, and confirmative stages from ATP 6-22.1 fail to meet the mentee where they are and then build *their* path to success. Instead, these stages set conditions for the mentee to follow the mentor and grow along the mentor’s path.

As we have iterated already and learned in *Star Wars*, cloning is a pitfall of mentorship and not to be done.<sup>16</sup> Beginning a mentorship with a prescriptive framework can lead to cloning, as the mentorship is focused on what the mentor knows and where they’re going. Rather, as mentors, we need to nurture, guide, and empower our mentees in a cultivating or developmental relationship, not a directive relationship.

Part of nurturing, guiding, and empowering involves sponsorship; however, sponsorship can turn into patronage if we stop being intentional about our actions. Patronage occurs when the relationship becomes

transactional, with the mentee receiving advancement or opportunities in exchange for loyalty. An example can be when the mentor becomes too involved in the mentee's advancement and crosses professional and/or ethical lines. A case study of sponsorship gone wrong is evident when Gen. Charles R. Hamilton of Army Materiel Command was relieved of command for improperly influencing a subordinate's placement on the Army's Battalion Command Selection List.<sup>17</sup> Sponsorship remains merit-based as the mentee completes a stretch assignment or additional duty and grows into opportunities based on potential and performance, not loyalty or favors.

The Army must strive for a higher form of mentoring grounded in shared trust, professional stewardship, and ethical leadership. Becoming dynamic mentors is the most efficient way for Army leaders to steward the profession, decrease counterproductive behaviors across the force, and retain the best and brightest for continued service.

## Implementation

**Tactical level.** At battalion and below levels of leadership, mentorship must become embedded in the culture of the organization rather than being an ad hoc relationship that some leaders excel at. Here are three examples to assist in changing your unit's culture:

- **Link mentorship to regular counseling.** The more junior our ranks, the more regularly they should be counseling. We should adopt a similar quarterly counseling approach for mentorship. This does not mean direct-line leadership becomes your mentor, but instead the company or battalion could build the first Monday of the month into a "Mentorship Monday." During Mentorship Mondays, everyone has a designated time to meet with their mentoring partner for an hour.
- **Encourage peer mentorship.** Too often the new lieutenant believes they need the battalion or brigade commander as a mentor to be successful. This can frequently be detrimental, given the fifteen-to-twenty-year generational gap, as senior commanders had a completely different junior officer experience. Instead, the lieutenant should look to other lieutenants or captains for initial mentorship. As the lieutenant gains experience, their mentorship network can expand and grow up the ranks to

include junior and senior field grades. The larger the hierarchical gap, the more sponsorship and advocacy are likely to occur, and the less likely the tactical development of skills and job proficiency is.

- **Be public about mentorship.** If your unit is too busy to participate in Mentorship Mondays, at least include the dates of your mentorship sessions on your public-facing calendar so that your subordinates, peers, and superiors know that mentorship is a priority in your life, not just a great talking point. You do not have to say who your mentoring partner is but you should disclose that you are mentoring someone.

### **Institutional professional military education.**

The Army does not have the time to omit mentorship education from our professional military education. The Army's institutional domain requires reform to focus on common, critical skills that enable standardized leadership across formations while allowing commanders to teach tactics, techniques, and procedures for military occupational specialties. First, the Army should focus on developing education for junior noncommissioned officers, junior warrants, and junior commissioned officers. These young leaders need to learn and practice interpersonal dynamics skills so that, the first time they counsel someone on a tough subject, they are not dealing with someone who may be facing judicial or nonjudicial punitive actions. Part of teaching interpersonal skills includes mentorship:

- At the junior levels (Basic Leader Course, Warrant Officer Basic Course, Basic Officer Leader Course), the Army could teach junior members how to be effective mentees and focus on the skills and expectations of a good mentee.
- At their midgrade levels (Advanced Leader Course, Warrant Officer Advanced Course, Captains Career Course), the Army can focus on training them to become effective mentors and engage in productive mentoring conversations.
- At the field grade levels (Senior Leader Course, Warrant Officer Intermediate Level Education, Intermediate Level Education), the Army can focus on building and sustaining a mentoring culture in their units and evaluating the effectiveness of their unit's mentoring culture.

**Operational/strategic leadership.** Change does not occur without top leadership's buy-in. This means

the force needs to recognize that mentorship is an integral part of senior leaders' lives, involving discussions about their mentors and the impact they have had on their careers and personal lives. This consists in setting criteria and finding ways to evaluate your subordinates on mentorship, which includes an entire "develops" block. What do you put in that block? Speaking to, modeling, evaluating, and holding others accountable for mentorship not only integrates mentorship into the culture but also shows that mentorship is a core leadership competency.

Dynamic mentoring is simple, not easy. Integrating dynamic mentoring into your organization will not only transform your organization but, more importantly, will also transform the lives of those you lead.

## The Mission: Mentor Forward

The Army is at an inflection point. Our surveys, including DACES, DAES, and AJOC's Army Experience, send a clear message to Army leaders: junior members of the force do not lack potential, propensity to serve, or commitment to serve—they lack developmental opportunities. Burnout, disengagement, and attrition are not caused by operations but by a lack of mentorship. The data shows us that soldiers stay when they feel seen, valued, and invested in. ***Mentorship, when done correctly, is the most effective lever leaders have to retain, grow, and empower the force.*** Dynamic mentoring is not a new doctrine or philosophy, but a modern framework grounded in clarity, curiosity, challenge, and co-elevation. Dynamic mentoring works because it's human, and we can scale it across the force. ■

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## Notes

1. US Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1 (Personnel), memorandum, "Army Junior Officer Counsel Charter," 13 June 2025, 1.
2. US Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1 (Personnel), *Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES): Fourth Annual Report* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2025).
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4. AJOC, *Army Experience Survey*.
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8. Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling-Coaching-Mentoring* (US Government Publishing Office, February 2024), 59.
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13. Kram, "Phases of the Mentor Relationship."
14. David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (Random House, 2019), 259–61.
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