



Staff Sgt. Shannon Knorr, Headquarters and Headquarters Company 1st Battalion, 211th Aviation Regiment, and 1st Sgt. Bryan Smethurst, first sergeant HHC 1-211 AR of the Utah National Guard, conduct an end-of-tour counseling session in Kunduz province, Afghanistan, on Nov. 18, 2012.
(Photo by Sgt. Duncan Brennan)

The New NCOER And The Need For Graduate-Level Counselors

By Sgt. Maj. William E. White Jr.

The United States Army Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps

Rating officials face significant opportunities and challenges as part of the Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report system update, which begins Jan. 1. Both the opportunities and challenges stem from the fact that U.S. Army Human Resources Command will be tracking rater tendencies and constraining senior rater profiles. This increased accountability will help focus the target group for promotion and increase the percentage of strong NCOs selected for the next rank. It will also be a mammoth leadership challenge, specifically for senior raters who will carry the burden of informing the majority of NCOs during their Annual Performance Review that they are not the “Most Qualified” NCO in their peer group. To achieve the potential benefit, we rating officials must accept the challenge before us — to do our jobs better and make our Army

stronger. Leaders must begin laying the foundation for success now, and the key to that success is simple: effective counseling.

Consider these three facts: Inflation of NCOERs has been the accepted standard for years; the NCOER is not the problem, but rather the rating officials’ execution of the evaluation; senior raters have not previously been required to conduct counseling.

These are not easy facts to face. But, as leaders, we must step back from the situation and view it objectively. From a purely logical perspective, in any group of NCOs, only one can be the best. However, the inflation of NCOERs over the years has led to far too many NCOs receiving “1 and 1” ratings, which AR 623-3 defines as “the cream of the crop and ... a recommendation for immediate promotion.” We have taught ourselves and our young NCOs that

only a “1 and 1” is acceptable and, therefore, far too few of our NCOs are being honestly and accurately assessed. Not every NCO is the cream of the crop. Not every NCO deserves a recommendation for immediate promotion. If senior raters were already executing noninflated reports based on consistent counseling, there would be no reason to implement a constrained senior rater profile because senior raters would be self-regulating.

The lack of self-regulation, resulting in consistently inflated NCOERs, has led to systematic regulation: the constrained senior rater profile. Under this new system, which limits senior raters to no more than 24 percent of evaluations assessed as “Most Qualified,” 76 percent of rated NCOs will now only be “Highly Qualified” (or “Qualified” or “Not Qualified”) on their evaluations. This will be the first time that many NCOs are told they are not the best among their peers. That will be a hard pill to swallow for many, even if they know deep down that the NCO to their left or right is usually one step ahead of them. Effective counseling is the best remedy leaders have to address this situation.

Counseling by the book

We already have Army doctrine and regulations providing leaders with guidance regarding performance counseling. The current NCOER system requires raters to counsel rated NCOs quarterly. The new system requires senior raters to counsel the rated NCOs at least twice during the rating period.

ATP 6-22.1, The Counseling Process, states, “Counseling at the beginning of and during the evaluation period ensures the subordinate’s personal involvement in the evaluation process.” The primary purpose of quarterly counseling, as defined in AR 623-3, is “telling the rated NCO how well he or she is performing.” These definitions are fine minimum standards, but effective counseling is far more important than enforcing a subordinate’s “personal involvement” or cataloguing a list of tasks completed or not.

ATP 6-22.1 outlines the basic structure for counseling. Anyone in position to senior rate a NCO should already understand the four stages of counseling, the various types of developmental counseling and the three basic skills required of a counselor. One section of this ATP, however, provides important information that our new NCOER system will likely make critical for counselors.

With at least 76 percent of NCOs now assessed as less than “Most Qualified,” counselors will need to understand “Addressing Resistance.” Traditionally, resistance to counseling has been a situation associated with negative performance or disciplinary counseling. In the case of laying the foundation for success with the new NCOER, counseling resistance may become a more frequent issue to face, and as the ATP states, that resistance may come from either the counseled individual or the leader conducting the counseling.

The subordinate’s resistance is easy to foresee. More than a few NCOs will be resistant to the idea that they are not being evaluated as “Most Qualified.” This will lead to some resistance from the counseled NCO, but our current inflated NCOERs should indicate that some resistance to counseling will also come from leaders.

The leaders’ resistance may stem from a hesitance to be completely honest about their assessment of an NCO. Every senior rater would like to think that he or she is consistently providing honest assessments, but if this lack of forthright assessment didn’t exist, there would have been far more NCOs receiving 3s or even 4s on the current NCOER.

Senior raters owe it to their Soldiers and to the long term health of the Army to provide honest and specific evaluations of a rated NCO’s potential. Though we leaders are charged with developing our subordinates to the limits of their potential, we are not responsible for ensuring that all our subordinate NCOs get promoted. This false notion, however, is alive and well. Quite often, when a rating official executes an honest evaluation that assesses an NCO at less than “Among the Best” and “1 and 1,” the rated NCO is surprised by the less than stellar rating and feels betrayed by his or her leader. If a rating official conducts regular effective counseling, however, there is no reason for the rated NCO to be surprised.

Counseling beyond the book

When an NCO has just been told, perhaps for the first time, that he or she is not “Most Qualified” for promotion, one of the first things he or she will want is an answer to some version of this question: “How do I change your mind?” or “How do I get ‘Most Qualified?’” or “What did ‘Joe’ do that I haven’t?”

The answer is, there is no clear answer. The training materials for the new NCOER explicitly state that most NCOs will be rated “Highly Qualified.” Senior raters will no doubt find they have to make a hard choice between two or more competent and fully qualified NCOs. When assessed against the standard of duty performance, the two NCOs may appear virtually equal, with similar experience and results during the rating period. It will be up to the senior rater to decide who is the most qualified, and that will probably come down to small details and a subjective assessment of the NCOs’ comparative potential. In short, there is no way for a senior rater to provide a checklist of items for a “Most Qualified” rating.

Instead of providing a checklist, rating officials must be prepared to clearly define the performance standards against which the NCOs they rate are being assessed, but this is only a first step. The act of senior rating — considering an NCO’s potential — is more subjective. At some point, senior raters will have multiple NCOs who perform exceptionally well against the performance standards. This is when a senior rater must make a subjective comparison between NCOs to identify the “Most Qualified” among a

pool of “Highly Qualified” NCOs. Senior raters must be prepared to “own” their assessments and use the NCOER counseling to mentor subordinate NCOs. This ownership begins and ends with honest and effective counseling.

Leaders at all levels must mentor raters and subordinate leaders on effective counseling. The emphasis here is on effective counseling. Leaders and Soldiers should not be satisfied with counseling that does little more than provide a list of tasks to be accomplished or a list of deficiencies to be overcome. Certainly counseling has to address the standard quantifiable subjects such as Army Physical Fitness Test performance, schools attendance, primary duty performance assessments and individual qualifications, but more than this, counseling has to address the intangible elements that traditionally set the great NCOs apart from the good ones. The importance of initiative, determination, resilience, lifelong learning and broadening opportunities, to name just a few, must be part of the mentorship an NCO receives in counseling.

Most importantly, counseling should be a frank, two-way discussion between the counselor and the NCO that includes the NCO’s strengths and weaknesses and how those strengths and weaknesses manifest themselves in the performance of daily duties. This requires a balanced discussion involving both positive reinforcement of what an NCO is doing well, along with candid feedback about where the NCO needs to improve. The leader must also listen to the Soldiers and their perception of their own performance, strengths and weaknesses in order to fully understand their developmental needs. Having had that two-way discussion, the leader can then focus on mentoring the subordinate on ways to emphasize strengths to minimize or mitigate weaknesses and providing resources and opportunities to the counseled NCO to directly address those weaknesses.

Of course, the subordinate NCO also has a role to play. The best mentorship in the world is wasted on an NCO who does not want to accept constructive criticism and seriously consider how to apply it to grow. These NCOs exist throughout the Army and are the ones most likely to be upset and vocal when they find they are among the 76 percent rather than the 24 percent. Frankly, NCOs who consistently refuse to accept and

apply counseling provided to them should be rated “Not Qualified.” Refusal to seek and apply constructive criticism is a failure of the Leader Attributes “Character” and “Intellect,” and the Leader Competency “Develops,” and should not be assessed as “Qualified” at any level.

It is critical that we all recognize that counseling requires preparation on the part of the counselor and the individual counseled. This preparation and counseling require a commitment to consistently make the time. Time is a leader’s most precious resource, and a leader’s time should be prioritized for those activities that only the leader can do and which provide a high payoff when the leader uses his or her time for that activity. Counseling must be a leadership priority.

Effective counseling is a consistent dialogue between leader and Soldier that provides mentorship, direction, coaching, development and, perhaps most importantly, trust on both sides. Ultimately, this is where the NCOER process transitions from an administrative responsibility to a leadership function. With coordinated effort among raters and senior raters to produce honest NCOERs supported by frank counseling and dedicated mentorship, the NCOER process becomes a real tool for leader development and enhancement of potential. Long-term dedication to this effort will benefit the Army exponentially as we grow a more competent and potential-laden NCO corps. If the next generation of leaders maintain a dedication to mentorship and counseling, they will be capable of propelling the Army further than the current generation can conceive, and that will be the measure of our success.

All the ideas above are quickly summarized in the words of retired Col. Joe Buche, who said, counseling “is not designed to make you feel good about yourself. It is designed to help you improve your performance and therefore feel good about yourself. ... Graduate-level leaders listen to counseling and use it as they approach the future. Amateurs leave counseling sessions [complaining] about their boss. Decide to which group you wish to belong and act accordingly.”

Let us, as an NCO Corps and as leaders, decide to be graduate-level counselors who build graduate-level leaders for the future of our Army. ■

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