

# Mentorship: More than a buzzword?

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Master Sgt. Amber Chavez (left), logistics noncommissioned officer-in-charge, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), mentors a junior Soldier as she trains her in Army logistics at Fort Carson, Colorado. According to Chavez, mentoring and training Soldiers and possessing an inner drive to professionally improve every day are key components to success in the Army. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jorden M. Weir)

Army doctrine defines leadership as "the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization."<sup>1</sup>

Leadership and mentorship are connected, and quality mentorship occurs naturally from engaged leadership. To be a quality mentor, you must understand the qualities, attributes, and different aspects of leadership.

### **The Army Mentorship Program**

Mentorship has a history tracing back to Greek mythology. Mentor, a friend of Odysseus, served as an adviser to Telemachus. Mentorship in the Army is "a voluntary and developmental relationship that exists between a person with greater experience and a person with less experience."<sup>2</sup>

The program "Leaving a Legacy through Mentorship," developed in 2005 by Secretary of the Army Francis J. Harvey, the Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, and Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston, encourage mentor/mentee relationships. *The Army Mentorship Handbook* accompanies the memorandum..

The Deputy Chief of Staff G-1 website (<http://armyg1.army.mil/HR/leadership/>) describes the Army Mentorship Program as "a voluntary, web-based program that encourages mentorship beyond the chain of command." Soldiers and their spouses, veterans, retirees, Department of the Army civilian employees, and contractors with access to the Army Knowledge Online (<https://www.us.army.mil/>) portal "may seek mentors or mentees through the use of the online mentorship resources and references, guidance, tools, chat forums, and a searchable profile server. Mentoring is a powerful tool that can help build competence, leadership skills, self-awareness, and morale."<sup>3</sup>

### **Will Someone Please Mentor Me?**

As a drill sergeant in 2012 for A and C Troops, 5th Squadron, 15th Cavalry Regiment, Fort Benning, Georgia, I began to seek guidance from peers, superiors, and fellow professionals. By using the mentoring tools on the Army Career Tracker (<https://actnow.army.mil/>) website, I was able to create a foundation of solid goals through mentors whose opinions I value and who exhibit successes, accomplishments, and professional conduct. The mentors I chose were within the chain of command, noncommissioned officer support channel, and leaders within ACT. Others fill roles identified as both a leader and mentor. Some were in the same unit, while others were from outside the organization, but still provide substantial professional and personal guidance.

From 2014 to 2017, while assigned to 3rd Brigade Combat Team "Rakkasans," 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), as a platoon sergeant, I chose leaders and mentors using ACT again. This time the mentors included; platoon leaders, fellow platoon sergeants, the first sergeant, and other first sergeants, as well as the squadron and brigade command sergeants major. The inputs I selected were goals management, leader selection, mentor selection, and individual development plan.

My takeaway, using ACT lacks interaction and falls short on requirements. For example, there is no requirement for the mentors to provide the mentee with feedback. The ACT tool to initiate a mentoring relationship fell short most of the time even though I diligently filled in goals completed.

In a mentoring relationship, both sides must be open to the introduction of new and relevant information, and where this engagement thrives is through the sharing of knowledge, challenges, or lines of questioning from conversations and other types of interactions. Because I did not receive the exchanges I hoped for, I felt my efforts were futile.

### **How is This Supposed to Work?**

Perception and lack of enforcement are killers of initiative when it comes to the mentorship program. How others perceive a relationship can cause trepidation and inhibit an individual's commitment level. The fear of how others may view an association coupled with the freedom needed to communicate are contributing factors too. These factors limit what I believe the Army desired to create in 2005, which might have been to create rewarding interactions between experienced NCOs and young Soldiers looking for insight and advice.

In my experience, the notion that the mentoring relationship is voluntary is flawed. Merely selecting an individual does not create the groundwork for "getting a mentor." With this in mind, I researched information to compare the Army Mentorship Program to similar initiatives from the other service branches. In an article written for the Military Review titled *Mentoring, Coaching, and Counseling Toward A Common Understanding*, ([http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20150831\\_art012.pdf](http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20150831_art012.pdf)) by retired Col. Jim Thomas and retired Lt. Col. Ted Thomas, Department of Command and Leadership staff members at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, identified aspects of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force programs:

"... the Navy's policy views mentoring as formal or informal but most effective when conducted as a voluntary relationship between a subordinate and an experienced superior—not the first- or second-level supervisor. The Navy program links employees with experienced professionals for career development."<sup>5</sup> In this program, the mentee selects a mentor based on personal developmental needs. In turn, the mentor shares experiences and recommendations to develop the mentee both personally and professionally.

"... the U.S. Marine Corps has taken a more formal and mandatory approach to mentorship, requiring all Marines to be mentored by the Marine senior to them in the chain of command. The Marine Corps mentoring program casts a mentor as a role model, teacher, guide, and coach."<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that the Marine Corps has applied its mentorship program to all aspects of a Marine's life, rather than just work performance. The USMC program also factors a leader's effectiveness as a mentor into his or her evaluation.

"... Air Force Manual 36-2643, *Air Force Mentoring Program*, defines mentors as "advisors and guides who share knowledge, experiences, and advice in helping mentees achieve their career goals."<sup>7</sup> This manual emphasizes that the key to the mentoring process is the direct involvement of commanders, directors, and supervisors in the development of their people.

### **How the Army Says It Should Work**

Mentorship remains a relevant leadership tool, but it seems the NCO Corps misses the mark in this area. NCOs must lead their Soldiers by employing a concept known as servant leadership, sharing their influence while prioritizing the needs of their subordinates and guiding their development. The servant leadership principles of foresight, persuasion, stewardship, and commitment to growth are all inextricably linked to mentorship.

Additionally, the Army leadership requirements model evaluates NCOs on their demonstrated attributes of "Intellect," "Leads," and "Develops." Intellect requires NCOs to display mental agility, innovation, interpersonal tact, and expertise, all of which involve the application of foresight and persuasion. The Leads attribute asks that NCOs lead others by communicating and building trust. Meanwhile, the Develops attribute requires our stewardship of the profession while developing others and creating a positive environment. The Leads and Develops attributes possess the same requirements defined in the principles of stewardship and commitment to growth. The structure of servant leadership and elements of the leadership requirements model are connected and dependent upon one another. Therefore, NCOs should be proficient at mentoring to fulfill the expectations placed upon them as leaders.

## Army Training Circular TC 7-22.7: *Noncommissioned Officer Guide*

([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN6002\\_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN6002_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf)) correctly identifies a proper and productive mentor/mentee relationship. When addressing roles, responsibilities, and relationships, it states:

"The officer/NCO relationship is not created by a strict set of rules, policy or procedures; it is based on mutual respect, communication, trust, commitment, and devotion. The officer/NCO relationship benefits officers at all levels, but especially junior officers. The relationship established during junior officer development will have a lasting impact on those officer's opinions, respect for, goodwill, and confidence in Noncommissioned Officers for the rest of their careers."<sup>4</sup>

Soldiers can and should select a mentor from outside their immediate chain of command or support channel. The *Army Mentorship Handbook* echoes this sentiment with three points to consider when choosing a mentor:

1. Someone outside your chain of command
2. Someone who is, ideally, two ranks above the Soldier seeking mentorship
3. Someone in the same service branch, occupational field, or military occupational specialty, and career program<sup>8</sup>

An officer or NCO from outside the same small unit can provide objective, non-personal advice or recommendations and remove concerns of going against platoon or company standard operating procedures, policy, or guidance. This approach to mentorship would accomplish what the Navy, Marines, and Air Force aim to achieve with their respective program goals.

In writing this paper, I sought insight from two mentors: 1st Lt. Matthew Wester and Mr. Cameron Wesson. After sharing my ACT experiences with 1st Lt. Wester, he said:

"The problem with [the] ACT, the program is not user-friendly, and it is another matter for leaders to remember to do in their already too busy days; therefore, the mentorship created (if any) is not genuine. Mentorship cannot be forced; it is naturally formed between professionals who have an interest in each other's experiences, knowledge, and futures."

Mr. Wesson also contributed as a sounding board for ideas and helped me to formulate objective views on the subject. His comments and questions spurred personal reflection and thought development, and encouraged critical thinking, which is the objective of mentorship.

## **Conclusion**

A concern with the Army Mentorship Program is that it is executed primarily through the Army Career Tracker website, and while the ACT can be a useful tool, it is only an aid to leadership not a replacement for. Mentorship is more beneficial if conducted in the same fashion as involved leadership, which is most effective when carried out face-to-face. That is when sincere and honest conversations happen between people who care about their craft and profession.

## Notes:

1. U.S. Army, *Army Leadership*, ADP 6-22 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, August 2012), 1, accessed April 2, 2018, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/adp6\\_22.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/adp6_22.pdf) ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/adp6\\_22.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/adp6_22.pdf)).
2. U.S. Army, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, AR 600-100 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, April 5, 2017), 6, accessed April 2, 2018, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN3758\\_AR\\_600-100\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN3758_AR_600-100_FINAL_WEB_.pdf) ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN3758\\_AR\\_600-100\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN3758_AR_600-100_FINAL_WEB_.pdf)).
3. U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff G-1 website, "Leadership Policy" page, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://armyg1.army.mil/HR/leadership/> (<http://armyg1.army.mil/HR/leadership/>).
4. U.S. Army, *Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, TC 7-22.7 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, April 7, 2015), 83, accessed April 2, 2018, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN6002\\_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN6002_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf) ([https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN6002\\_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN6002_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf)).
5. Col. (ret) Jim Thomas and Lt. Col (ret) Ted Thomas, "Mentoring, Coaching, and Counseling: Toward a Common Understanding," *Military Review* 95, Number 4, July-August 2015, accessed March 10, 2018, [http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20150831\\_art012.pdf](http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20150831_art012.pdf) ([http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20150831\\_art012.pdf](http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20150831_art012.pdf)).
6. Col. (ret) Jim Thomas and Lt. Col (ret) Ted Thomas, "Mentoring, Coaching, and Counseling."
7. Col. (ret) Jim Thomas and Lt. Col (ret) Ted Thomas, "Mentoring, Coaching, and Counseling."
8. U.S. Army, *Army Mentorship Handbook* (Rosslyn, VA: Headquarters, Department of the Army, Deputy Chief of Staff G-1, January 1, 2005), 8, accessed April 2, 2018, <http://www.armycounseling.com/download/Mentorship%20Handbook.pdf> (<http://www.armycounseling.com/download/Mentorship%20Handbook.pdf>).