



Professional growth counseling is a time-tested technique for motivating Soldiers to reach their potential as leaders. (Graphic by NCO Journal)

Leader Development Through Professional Growth Counseling

By Sgt. 1st Class Stephen J. Love

Headquarters, First Army

Effective leaders work to leave an organization better than they found it, and expect other leaders to do the same.¹ Many noncommissioned officers want to develop their Soldiers for future leadership opportunities but struggle with where to start. As NCOs, we often forget the role we play in leader development. [Training Circular 7-22.7](#), Noncommissioned Officer Guide, states, "Every Soldier has a sergeant, and every Soldier deserves a leader who is a capable trainer, is trustworthy, is genuinely concerned for their health and welfare, and develops them to be the leaders of tomorrow."² One way to accomplish this is through counseling.

There are three categories of developmental counseling: event, performance and professional growth. All three are vital to leader development, but most NCOs

tend to focus on "lighting a fire" under their Soldiers instead of "lighting a fire" within them. As NCOs, we should have the same urgency when preparing an event counseling session for something positive as we do something negative.

Professional growth counseling is a helpful tool for motivating Soldiers to reach their potential as leaders. According to [TC 7-22.7](#), professional growth counseling is a deliberate, continuous, sequential, and progressive process grounded in character and Army Values.³ This process can be challenging, which is why it is essential to have an approach that provides assistance and ensures purpose and productivity.

The Center for Creative Leadership's Handbook of Leadership Development defines ACS as Assess, Chal-

lenge, and Support.⁴ and is the framework that will help you navigate your professional growth counseling sessions.

Assessment

The assessment is the first step and establishes the performance baseline, highlighting strengths and developmental needs. Using the leadership attributes and competencies outlined in the Army Leadership Requirements Model found in [Army Doctrine Publication 6-22](#), Army Leadership, will help frame this discussion.

A proper, honest assessment will motivate Soldiers to close their developmental gaps. It should include information and resources to assist them. According to the *Handbook of Leadership Development*, "assessments enhance the power of leader development because the assessment process, whether formal or informal, helps people fully understand their situation and become motivated to capitalize on the learning opportunities available to them."⁵

Throughout my career, I have had many supervisors and signed many initial counseling statements. However, I have never received assessments for professional development. I could have benefitted from them during those counseling sessions. Initial counseling sessions tend to focus on an expectation of performance and conduct.

Assessments take the balance of a Soldier's assignments, previous jobs, and training record along with strengths and weaknesses to determine where they are from a developmental standpoint. They help us uncover developmental areas, hidden potential and even previously undiscovered flaws and blind spots.

Challenge

Challenging situations or tasks stretch our capabilities and develop our capacity, forcing us out of our "comfort zone." The *Handbook of Leadership Development* points out that feedback which confirms strengths or training in skills already mastered does little for development. It also identifies comfort as the enemy of growth and continued effectiveness.⁶

Challenging Soldiers can cause them to question their aptitude in particular skills or approaches to leadership. When challenging Soldiers to develop them into leaders, you want to create new capacities and help them evolve their understanding beyond the organizational level. In the profession of arms, it is vital that we for us to developmentally and professionally challenge Soldiers before life or limb are in danger.

Likewise, tests do not always have to mean placing Soldiers in new or unfamiliar situations. It could be setting a difficult goal or as simple as designing a training event. The challenging part is making them do it from scratch. Have them create the plan and products. This forced learning will challenge and develop them at the same time.

Challenge also comes in the form of conflict. If you have been an NCO longer than a day, you probably have a couple of lessons learned from dealing with demanding issues. Being involved but making your NCOs work through these issues will help develop understanding, perspective and sometimes empathy.

Asking Soldiers how they formed an opinion or took a specific approach to challenges helps shape their leadership capacity. Challenging Soldiers creates a situation where strengths and weaknesses are exposed.

My earliest and most successful challenges came in the form of a sergeant first class I once knew and, because I do not want to embarrass him, will name "John Smith." Now retired, he grew up an Iowa farm boy and had the work ethic to match. I remember he used to carry around a little aerial photo of his home in his wallet, Smith Farms. Every once in a while, he would ask me, "Hey, Love, did I ever show you a picture of Smith Farms?" He was very proud of his early life on the family farm and the principles he learned. He had various mottos or sayings he would utter, usually after demonstrating how he could outwork everyone, such as, "Engineered by God" or "I'm rugged like my F-150."

Though he had his flaws, he was a significant influence, and he continuously challenged me, even if I did not know it at the time. When we finished the day's work, we would sit around, and he would point out things that could have been done differently and ask, "Did you ever think about that, Love? Huh?" He used to drive me crazy with this, but I soon realized he was not criticizing me, he was challenging me to better myself.

Support

The developmental effect of their experiences is most effective with support, which allows Soldiers to navigate the success and failures they experience while developing as leaders, highlight strengths and weaknesses, and help realize growth potential.

Providing support lets Soldiers handle challenges with confidence. The level of support needed varies on developmental needs. It is crucial to understand the individual competence and commitment level, as this will help you determine the level of support needed.

Smith knew all he had to do was give me responsibility and I would do my best to deliver. When I completed a task, he would say something like, "Good job, Love. I would've done it better, but not bad. Have I ever shown you a picture of Smith Farms?"

I knew he was not being critical, but instead was making me consider whether I could have done a better job. The thing about Smith and leaders like him is they challenge us to go beyond our abilities and inspire us to be better Soldiers, leaders or mentors.

Regardless of Soldiers' developmental needs, NCOs need to be the primary source of support. The *Handbook of Leadership Development* suggests this assistance comes from the ability to listen to their stories of struggle, identify with challenges, suggest strategies, provide resources, reassure in times of doubt, inspire renewed effort, and celebrate even the smallest of victories⁷

Effective leaders leave an organization better than they found it, by developing the leaders of tomorrow.⁸ I challenge NCOs to research leader development or use a framework like assess, challenge, and support as a guide to purposeful professional growth counseling. Soldiers are the Army's most valuable resource and

maximizing human capital through professional growth counseling requires an investment from NCOs.

If you would like to learn more about this topic, I recommend consulting these additional references: [Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22](#), Army Leadership and [Army Techniques Publication 6-22.1](#), The Counseling Process. ■

The NCO Journal is a forum for discussions about NCO professional development, and we want to hear from you! Share your experience and knowledge with your fellow Soldiers. Visit our website and review our [Submission Guidelines](#). The next article we publish could be yours!

Notes

1. U.S. Army, Army Leadership, ADRP 6-22 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, August 2012), para 7-1
2. U.S. Army, Noncommissioned Officer Guide, TC 7-22.7 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, April 7, 2015), page ix.
3. Noncommissioned Officer Guide, TC 7-22.7, page ix.
4. Ellen Van Velsor, Cynthia D. McCauley, and Marian N. Ruderman, *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,

- 2010), 4-12.
5. The Center for Creative Leadership *Handbook of Leadership Development*, 4-12.
6. The Center for Creative Leadership *Handbook of Leadership Development*, 4-12.
7. The Center for Creative Leadership *Handbook of Leadership Development*, 4-12.
8. Army Leadership, ADRP 6-22, para 7-1.



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