



Staff Sgt. Terrence Grant, career counselor of 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, shows a Soldier how to properly complete retention forms Oct. 24, 2017 at Fort Stewart, Ga. Career counselors provide individual job counseling to Soldiers, which includes holding retention interviews, determining re-enlistment eligibility, and discussing additional military career options. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Ian Thompson)

# Developmental Counseling

## The Lost Art

*By Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Signore*

Platoon Sergeant, 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii

**W**hen you hear the words *developmental counseling*, what comes to mind? Do you view the upcoming session as a "check the block" requirement from a laundry list of tasks. Do you often find yourself copying and pasting the same verbiage and bullet points from Soldier to Soldier? Or maybe, when you finally get around to conducting the session, it's executed more as a formality, with the supervisor talking at the subordinate, rather than encouraging two-way communication.

Many are guilty of power grinding through monthly counselings. Along with the ever-increas-

ing operations tempo today's Army faces, as leaders, we're responsible for ensuring several tasks get accomplished in a short amount of time. However, short-changing developmental counselings is not the best leadership approach for making your session effective. This will result in failing to develop your subordinates, which then fails to develop the larger Army. Learning to listen during a counseling session, and developing a plan together will increase the engagement, collaboration, and respect between supervisor and subordinate (Fouts, 2018).

Ancient armies have long realized the positive impact performance counseling has on their Sol-

diers. The book, *Leadership Lessons from the Ancient World: How Learning from the Past Can Win You in the Future*, closely examines the leadership examples of ancient rulers. For example, the Roman Army was considered the backbone of the Roman Empire and one of the fiercest fighting forces in world history, placed a heavy emphasis on leadership development (Cotterell, Low, & Shaw, 2006). Military training and discipline were stringent. Leaders focused on identifying gaps in performance, then used creativity and common sense to develop their Soldiers.

Why is counseling a lost art? First, let's be clear that the intent for writing this article is not to make people counseling experts, but to bring back awareness to the importance that counseling plays in a Soldier's career and personal development, while also giving leaders some tools to make their counseling sessions more effective. "Counseling is the process used by leaders to review with a subordinate the subordinate's demonstrated performance and potential," (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014, p. 7).

Retired Gen. Colin Powell, and former National Security Advisor, once said, "Leadership is about going above and beyond what science and management says you can accomplish," (2003, para. 13). Most of us are familiar with what the Army Study Guide says about counseling and how its purpose is to discuss performance and potential with subordinates (Army Study Guide, 1999-2018). We know how to fill out a Department of the Army Form 4856. But the *art* of the counseling, is not just in reviewing a subordinate's performance, but in unlocking their potential.

We must realize that the whole counseling process starts with communication. Genuine communication builds trust. But two-way communication is the essential element of any counseling session. According to Melinda Fouts, Ph.D., in a 2018 *Forbes* article, "It's about mental awareness and being present in the moment. When you are talking mindfully, you are conscious of the words you choose. You think before you speak and make a conscious decision to use your best communication in a respectful manner, even if it's a difficult situation" (para. 4). This allows leaders to share information about goals, issues Soldiers are currently facing, and other key points of discussion arriving at an end-state where both parties can reach an agreement about what's best for the Soldier's development.

The following are helpful tips for conducting a productive counseling session:

#### 1. Find a Good Location

Communication is the key to a productive session, and it would be difficult to communicate effectively with multiple distractions around, for example, loud noises, people walking by, etc. Something as simple as sitting a subordinate down in a quiet setting shows them that you're serious about making a connection and are truly there to help (Jackson, 2012).

#### 2. Schedule Counselings

If we value counseling sessions, then we need to ensure we set aside time for these sessions to take place. Schedule them on days your unit does *payday activities*. This helps because you're already in your dress uniform and tactical training is unlikely to occur. Second, both parties present a professional appearance, which coincides well with setting the right atmosphere.

#### 3. Ask Open-Ended Questions

Amy Adams at *The Muse* recommends including 6 – 10 open-ended questions in a counseling to help the counselee reflect on their performance and goals (n.d., Ask Your Employees to Prep section, para. 2). If a subordinate is allowed to develop their own conclusions, they are more likely to follow mutual solutions.

#### 4. Identify Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

This adds relevance and productivity to the session and gives you and your subordinate the feeling of working towards mutual goals. Revisit those goals during future counseling sessions and document your findings in the assessment portion. If you're having trouble identifying goals and benchmarks, refer to a career map. For more detailed guidance, reference *Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-25*.

#### 5. The "I Agree" Box Enigma

The "I agree" box in part III of *DA Form 4856*, session closing, states whether the subordinate agrees or disagrees with the plan of action (TRADOC, 2014, DA Form 4856). The space provided underneath is their opportunity to provide why they disagree. Their signature constitutes that they understand the plan of action, not necessarily that they agree with it (they had their opportunity to annotate this earlier). I've seen on many negative counselings where the leader has written "Soldier refused to sign" on the signature block after the Soldier disagreed with the information above. This should not be the case given the purpose of the signature block. The leader should communicate to the Soldier that their signature does not constitute conformity, but rather an understanding of the plan and what is required of them as the



Sgt. 1st Class Danielle Vaccaro, a career counselor for Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, 4th Infantry Division, points to a document and explains reenlistment options to Sgt. Eric Glassey, a public affairs operations noncommissioned officer, HHBN, 4th Inf. Div., at Kandahar Airfield, Oct. 10, 2013. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Antony S. Lee)

person being counseled.

For example, if the plan of action states, “Hand write a 350-word essay on accountability on standard paper due by tomorrow no later than 5 p.m.,” the subordinate may, for some reason, disagree with this believing that the punishment is too harsh and check the “I disagree” box; however, they will sign stating that they understand what was assigned.

#### 6. Type the Counseling in Real-Time

Too many counselings are pre-typed and give off the appearance of a standardized formality. Copying and pasting previous bullets will increase the chance of your counseling looking “cookie-cutter” and that you don’t actually care about your subordinate’s development. The RallyPoint (2017) website recommends that while you’re talking to your subordinate, document their performance, identify goals, and plan for their future while typing it on the spot. Then, review it with them, and afterwards have them digitally sign and save it to a folder for you to print later.

This is a proven method that works well for building trust. If you need more room, utilize a continuation counseling in the format of a memo or another sheet of paper and attach it to the DA Form 4856.

#### 7. Have the Counseling Packet Present

Remember, counseling sessions are also about being proactive in identifying issues. Ensure that you have your Soldiers’ Leave and Earning Statement (LES), Soldier Record Brief (SRB), work order requests, Soldier issues, Record of Emergency Data (DD Form 93), etc. present so you can review these documents and identify potential problems before they arise. This is also an opportunity to look through the counseling packet and update information to include the assessment portion on the previous month’s counseling.

Don’t forget to review family information to ensure nothing has changed. For example, at foreign duty stations, whether or not the Soldier’s spouse is command-sponsored is important and something that the command needs to know. Is the recently married Soldier receiving the correct Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH)? What is the status on the work orders you requested for your single Soldier(s) in the barracks? Is all personal vehicle information up to date? These are a few questions to ask at every session to ensure the well-being and personal readiness of your Soldiers.

## Conclusion

Development comes in many forms and counseling is an important part of it. If you follow the above strategies, it's going to make your counseling sessions smoother, and help your Soldiers become more atten-

tive. The more time we take to mentor subordinates, the more we're investing in our future as an Army. It's up to us to show the younger generations the blueprint for success when counseling their Soldiers. ■

---

## References

- Adams, Amy. (n.d.). A first-time manager's guide to performance reviews. *The Muse*. Retrieved from <https://www.themuse.com/advice/a-firsttime-managers-guide-to-performance-reviews>
- Army Study Guide. (1999-2018). *Army Board Study Guide*. Retrieved from [https://www.armystudyguide.com/content/army\\_board\\_study\\_guide\\_topics/counseling/counseling-study-guide.shtml](https://www.armystudyguide.com/content/army_board_study_guide_topics/counseling/counseling-study-guide.shtml)
- Cotterell, A., Lowe, R., & Shaw, Ian. (2006). *Leadership Lessons from the Ancient World: How Learning from the Past Can Win You in the Future*. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Fouts, M. (2018, June). How to become more mindful of your communication. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/06/05/how-to-become-more-mindful-of-your-communication/#5f6d3b841460>
- Headquarters, Department of the Army. (2014). *ATP 6-22.1, The Counseling Process*. Retrieved from [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/atp6\\_22x1.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/atp6_22x1.pdf)
- Headquarters, Department of the Army. (2015). *Da Pam 600-25*. Washington, DC, Washington, DC: Department of the Army.
- Jackson, Eric. (2002). Ten biggest mistakes bosses make in performance reviews. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2012/01/09/ten-reasons-performance-reviews-are-done-terribly/#15ca15395ee0>
- Powell, Colin. (2003, October 28). *Why leadership matters in the Department of State*. {Transcript}. Retrieved from <https://govleaders.org/powell-speech.htm>
- RallyPoint. (2017). *RallyPoint*. Retrieved from <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/what-are-your-pet-peeves-regarding-da-form-4856-and-2166-8-1-counseling-forms-and-sessions>
- TRADOC. (2014). Developmental Counseling Form [Da Form 4856]. Retrieved from <https://armypubs.army.mil/>



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>  
<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

