



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Roy Pedersen, right, and Spc. Steven Nelson, both infantryman assigned to 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, conduct a counseling session at Fort Carson, Colorado, Oct. 6, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Daniel Parker)

Counseling: Blowing Your Stack or Keeping Your Cool

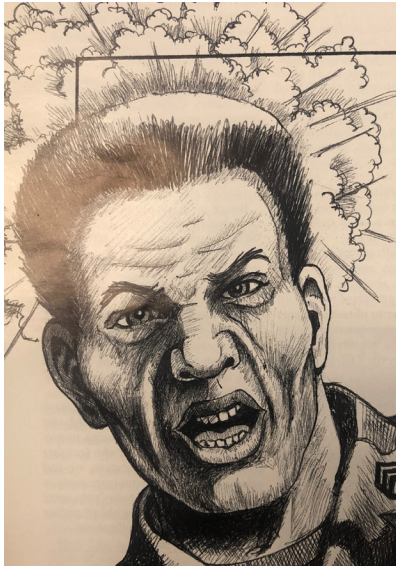
By Staff Sgt. John A. Sigmon

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There he sits, Pfc. Nerdnot, with his head down and his scruffy boots tracing a pattern back and forth on the floor. He isn't there for fun. He was 45 min. late for work again and even the ol' standby excuse of heavy traffic has worn thin. It's time for "the talk" – better known in Army circles as the counseling session – and you find yourself wondering how you're going to get through to him. Army Noncommissioned Officer Education System (now

known as NCO Professional Development System) courses and other institutions such as Instructor or Drill Sergeant Academies place a great emphasis on counseling. Rightly so. But there are a few principles I have discovered outside those institutions that may also be useful.

The first is *maintain dignity*. For you, it's a matter of "keeping yourself cool." You may feel like pouncing on the offender and tearing him limb from limb. Forget



Graphic by NCO Journal

it. If you have to get up, put on your coat, and go for a walk around the building. Or get a cup of coffee. Anything to get your thermostat and blood pressure within normal limits. No matter how angry you may be – and it’s ok to be angry – don’t reinforce the authority of your rank by a Mount St.

Helens stunt! The Army didn’t give you your stripes cheaply. Don’t cheapen them by acting like a child.

Maintaining dignity goes two ways. No matter what the pay grade, all of us have a certain amount of self-respect. There’s nothing wrong with Pfc. Nerdnott knowing you’re hot. But if you let your comments about shoddy performance cross over into shoddy person, everything you say from then on is null and void. The reason is simple. Deep down, most subordinates know when their performance is substandard. But most people don’t consider themselves substandard. Attacks on them personally violate their dignity, and with that damage, any positive results you might have gotten go right out the door. Keep cool. Maintain dignity!

The next principle comes from the writings of Solomon; reputedly the wisest man of all time. In his book of Proverbs, he laid down an axiom that is as valid now as then when dealing with an offender. He put it like this, “the ways of a man are right – in his eyes.” For no matter what the offense, most humans will find some way or the other to justify their misconduct. I call it the “Yes, but...” syndrome. It goes like this. Sure, Pfc Nerdnott admits he’s late for work. But, the traffic or the spouse or the first sergeant or his headache and so forth. See what I mean?

The NCO has to realize that it’s a rare subordinate who will just say yes and admit wrongdoing. So don’t let the protestations of innocence get to you. It’s natural. On the other hand, don’t turn a deaf ear to them. Because sometimes there really is a valid reason for the problem!

This leads directly into the next point, which echoes a great legal principle. It’s simple: *Every offender deserves his day in court.* Never invite him or her into the office, shut the door and sail into them before they can sit. Let them have their say, and hold your tongue! Let the transgressor have an opportunity to state his case. Let him state it fully. And one other thing – allow him to state it without inter-

ruption. Doing this will pay off big, because it will create the impression that you aren’t a cocked pistol, waiting to go off. He will perceive you as one who is not only fair, but an NCO who makes judgments on facts, not fury.

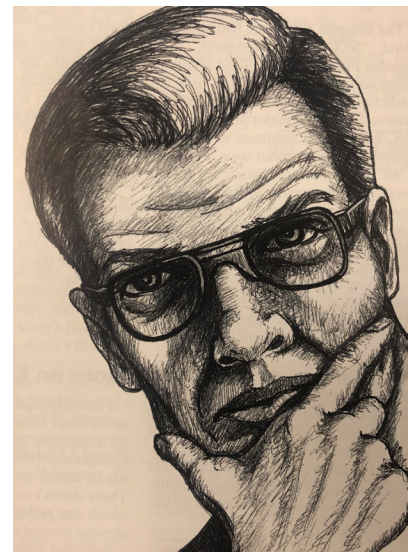
It’s also important to keep the *purpose vs. punches* principle in mind. No one denies “problem children can (as a Mississippian I know once said)...find where your goat is tied...” But remember the purpose of the counseling session! Simply put, it’s this: to turn a slacker in to a producer. Much as you might like to, this is not the time for you to verbally abuse the Soldier. Purpose, not punches.

Tips for counseling are not the only thing the Army has furnished us. Someone, somewhere, saw the wisdom of *documenting the session*, and consequently the DA Form 4856-R, General Counseling Form, was born (now known as [DA Form 4856: Developmental Counseling Form](#)). Use it, use it correctly and use it unflinchingly. It’s more than just a record of the event. It’s an unerring testimony of what was said, not subject to “...Well, I thought you meant...” or “...You never told me...” Used properly, the facts are all there in black and white, with signatures and the final outcome if corrections aren’t made. If improvements aren’t made, it’s legal evidence that cements your case.

Counseling, properly done, helps eliminate deadwood, encourages the fainthearted, and makes producers out of problem Soldiers. It’s a job whose primary positions are filled by NCOs of all levels. It’s “*NCO Business*.” If we’re going to get the job done in a day of reduced forces, it’s something we’re going to have to do and do well.

By the way, two months have gone by and Pfc Nerdnott now beats you to work. His sneer has been replaced by a willing smile, his boots gleam and his attitude shines. Don’t even think about just patting him on the back. Instead, do this: reach into your desk drawer and pull out a DA Form 4856-R. In a loud voice, call him into your office. Tick off the progress made. Tell him about what a great job he’d been doing and then get your Parker and put it on the form. Counseling isn’t just a negative action, it can be an official pat on the back too!

One last thing. When you told him to shape up, you closed the door. This time, leave it open. ■



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