



U.S. Army Soldiers test out the upcoming Soldier and Leader Development Tool at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Oct. 6, 2020. The new tool will help the flow of developmental counseling by allowing the Soldier to make a self-assessment. (U.S. Army photo by Audrey Chappell)

# Counseling and Leader Development in the Digital Age

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**C**urrent operational environments are defined by uncertainty and chaos. To create adaptable leaders with a foundation in *Army Values* and *Warrior Ethos*, leader development must include modern counseling methods aligned with organizational and institutional goals. According to *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession*, “Counseling is central to leader development. Counseling is the

process used by leaders to guide subordinates to improve performance and develop their potential” (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 8-3).

The counseling process is one of the most important aspects of an NCO’s responsibilities to their subordinates and is central to their career and leader development. To create Soldiers ready for the future battlefield, counseling and leader development must evolve to encompass the

digital age. The U.S. Army should create an interactive counseling experience that embraces technology and data-driven metrics to properly develop future leaders comfortable operating in ambiguous environments.

## Current State

In 1974, the Army published *Field Manual (FM) 22-101: Leadership Counseling* to codify the importance of counseling and basic counseling techniques (Department of the Army, 1974). It has since evolved and been expanded upon in modern doctrine, but the techniques and analog (hard copy) storage methods remain similar. Hard copy documentation, stored in a filing cabinet, locked in an office, is not interactive in nature and does not easily produce unit-wide data to improve the leader development of Soldiers. So why do we continue with the same archaic methods when there is current technology available to establish an online interactive counseling experience that captures data-driven metrics?

## Performance Gap

There are two problems with current counseling techniques: high operational tempos (OPTEMPO) and a lack of interactivity in the counseling process.

Between training cycles and deployments, a high unit OPTEMPO can reduce the time necessary to thoroughly mentor and counsel Soldiers. These factors have the potential to create a “check the box” mentality, where time and patience are severely limited by operational demands. Without enough time allotted for counseling,

leaders may miss opportunities to create trust with their subordinates, or worse, miss warning signs for needed mental health intervention, especially after long or multiple deployments (Lieberman, 2018).

The second problem is a lack of an online interactive function in counseling. Conducting developmental counseling should be intuitive and accessible for Soldiers and leaders. Soldiers in the digital age are comfortable using technology and should be encouraged and enabled to use it to guide their own leader development (Patel, 2017b). If session data was available online, it would be accessible for Soldiers to review and improve upon at any time.

## Desired End State

The desired end state of counseling and leader development is an interactive experience allowing Soldiers and leaders instant access to counseling and other leader development tools while providing data-driven metrics to measure progress. Expectations can be reinforced instantly, goals can be updated or reviewed anywhere, and counseling can essentially take place anytime, even on deployment or during a global pandemic.

In conjunction with accessibility, an online database/platform would be able to produce data-driven analytics and contain a leader development dashboard showing trends and patterns to aid in professional development. In this way, ownership of the leader development experience is shared between the leader and Soldier. According to *Army Techniques Publication 6-22.1: The Counseling Process*, “To be effective, counseling must be a shared effort” (Department of the Army, 2014, p. 1-1).

Sergeants and staff sergeants lacking counseling experience can leverage this technology to gain experience while ensuring counseling is aligned with organizational and institutional goals and objectives. NCOs will benefit from the emphasis on values, attributes, and competencies, while young Soldiers will benefit by being indoctrinated in the *Warrior Ethos, Army Values*, attributes, and competencies from day one of service. The immersive nature of an interactive counseling experience will reinforce the Army Leadership Model and enable leader development at all levels. Technology can bridge the experience gap and create daily, weekly, and monthly learning moments or goals for Soldiers and leaders, especially the digital natives of Generation Z (Patel, 2017a). Additionally, an interactive technological element can have a positive impact on a unit’s culture because it enables discussion and allows it to be captured digitally and learned from immediately.

DEVELOPMENTAL COUNSELING FORM					
(For use of this form, see ATP 6-22.1; the proponent agency is TRADOC)					
<b>DATA REQUIRED BY THE PRIVACY ACT OF 1974</b>					
<b>AUTHORITY:</b>		5 USC 301, Departmental Regulations; 10 USC 3013, Secretary of the Army			
<b>PRINCIPAL PURPOSE:</b>		To assist leaders in conducting and recording counseling data pertaining to subordinates; facilitate leader and Soldier professional development.			
<b>ROUTINE USES:</b>		This DoD Blanket Routine Uses set forth at the beginning of the Army's compilation or records notices also apply to this system.			
<b>DISCLOSURE:</b>		Disclosure is voluntary			
PART I – ADMINISTRATIVE DATA					
Name (Last, First, MI)		Rank/Grade	DoD ID number	Date	
Organization	Organization	Position	Name and Title of Counselor		
PART II – TYPE/PURPOSE OF COUNSELING					
Type of counseling	Comments: <a href="#">Event – Performance – Professional Growth</a>				
PART III – ATTRIBUTES					
<b>CHARACTER:</b>					
<a href="#">Army Values</a> (comments mandatory for all “N” entries)					
	YES	NO		YES	NO
Loyalty (LO)			Integrity (IT)		
Duty (DU)			Personal Courage (PC)		
Respect (RE)			Empathy (EP)		
Selfless Service (SS)			Warrior Ethos (WE)		
Honor (HO)			Discipline (DI)		
<b>COMMENTS:</b>					

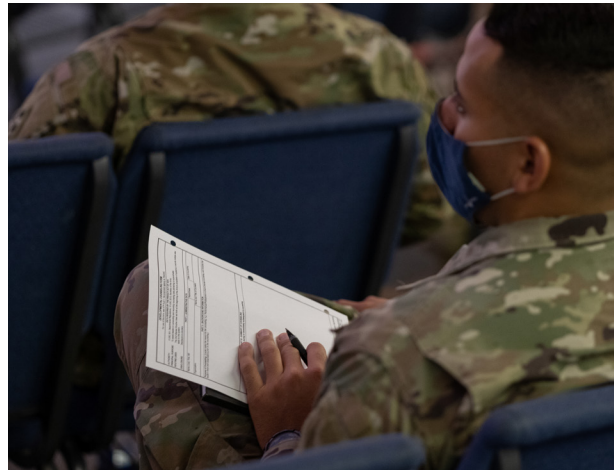
An example of a proposed developmental counseling form. (Graphic courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Craig Collins)

The ability to measure completion of goals, track progress of objectives, and meet organizational and institutional expectations can accelerate the leader development of Soldiers at all levels. The desired state is that performance counseling is continuous and rooted in the Army's institutional goals and creates leaders who are flexible, adaptable, and agile with the skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes to accomplish any mission (Department of the Army, 2020). This desired state also supports Mission Command as it generates a common understanding and trust across the formation, necessary for a decentralized command in the future fight (Department of the Army, 2019a).

## Solution

The solution to producing an interactive counseling process that provides Soldiers with the ability to access and conduct counseling sessions at any time or location can be accomplished by revising the developmental counseling form to an online version that incorporates elements of the DA Form 4856, Cadet Command Form 156-4A-4 (Blue Card), and a Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report.

The platform for this new counseling statement should be the Army Career Tracker (ACT); however, it would need to be modified to include an application that can be downloaded to a handheld device. Accessibility is vital to ensure the widest use of the system and with the proliferation of hand-held devices such as mobile phones, an app presents the ideal solution. A computer-based ACT platform should still be available and have increased functionality (such as linking readiness metrics from Army Knowledge Online) while protecting personally identifiable information, but an app with a secure login should be developed that works in concert with the ACT site. The proposed app should include a metrics function and a dashboard that can track historical counseling ratings and comments based upon the redesigned counseling statement. The metrics function could draw from bullet comments and show trends and patterns leaders could use to monitor and guide the



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Blake Brunais, an infantryman assigned to 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, participates in a class on counseling techniques at Fort Carson, Colorado, Oct. 28, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Daniel Parker)

leader development process of their units. This, along with the redesigned counseling statement, would propel leader development into the digital age.

## Conclusion

Maximizing and developing every Soldier must be a priority for the U.S. Army and must evolve to address the uncertainty of the modern battlefield by embracing technology and cultivating the strengths of today's digital native generations. Doing so will prepare them to be agile, adaptable, and flexible while operating in any domain. "Leader development is fundamental to our Army—leader development is the deliberate, continuous, sequential, and progressive process—founded in Army values—that grows Soldiers and Army Civilians into competent and confident leaders capable of decisive action" (Department of the Army, 2015, p. 1-1). By embracing technology, the Army can accelerate the leader development process and create modern Soldiers capable of meeting current and future threats. ■

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