



U.S. Army Soldiers test out the new and 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, in addition to leadership's evaluation. (U.S. Army photo by Audrey Chappell)

Creating a More Effective Tool for Army Counseling

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Counseling Soldiers can be one of the most rewarding aspects for leaders — and one of the most beneficial for individual Soldiers as they progress through their careers (Department of the Army, 2014; 2019; 2020). When counseled correctly, Soldiers overcome obstacles and grow into the leaders the U.S. Army needs. While a basic counseling structure is currently in place, improvements are needed to ensure counseling occurs at all echelons as well as long-term tracking for accurate career development.

Limitations with Current Army Counseling

Counseling affords a setting where leaders and sub-

ordinates build mutual trust, share understanding, and guide career development. But depending on a unit's size, training requirements, location of subordinate echelons, and operational tempo, providing regular counseling to individual Soldiers can be challenging. According to Army standards, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and other leaders must counsel Soldiers upon arrival to a new unit, then periodically for junior enlisted Soldiers and quarterly for sergeants and above. Counseling information is recorded on a Department of the Army (DA) Form 4856, or on an Army memorandum for record if more detail is needed (Department of the Army 2014). The counseling forms are kept locally — either on paper or computer.



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Pedro Leon (right) provides career advice and counseling to Sgt. Kareena Collins, Aug. 25, 2014. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Morgan Perry)

There are two basic issues with the current arrangement:

1. The Army does not have a consistent system to monitor how often counseling is done.
2. Counseling details don't transfer when a Soldier moves to a different unit or location.

How do commanders monitor and evaluate counseling conducted within their unit? Some perform lengthy and complicated on-the-spot counseling packet inspections. Others rely on retention statistics or unit command climate surveys that afford Soldiers an opportunity to comment on a unit's effectiveness and atmosphere.

The problem is that outside of physical inspections or questioning leaders and junior Soldiers, commanders have limited means to track counseling value and frequency. And while a fresh start for a Soldier can be good, commanders who receive new troops typically don't have access to information about previous performance issues that need to be addressed — or a positive heads-up about all-stars who will be force multipliers and future leaders. Most larger private companies maintain computerized performance and counseling records for their employees. The U.S. Army could benefit from doing the same. An Army-wide centralized counseling entry system would standardize processes across all formations and make previous counseling viewable to select leaders in new organizations.

A Digital Counseling Entry System

Rather than maintaining local paper-based records, the Army should adopt a digital counseling entry system (CES) similar to the Army's evaluation entry system (EES) with some variations. With EES, rating officials create NCO and officer evaluation reports covering

performance and potential — basically a Soldier's report card for a specified period (Department of the Army, n.d.).

Using this system, unit-level leaders would be able to track follow-up assessments as well as monthly, quarterly, and bi-annual requirements. A CES could even break down reports into four main categories: initial counseling, performance counseling, event-oriented counseling, and professional growth counseling. Unit command teams would have the ability to log into the system, inspect the delinquent items regardless of location, and follow up appropriately with identified individuals. At a minimum, first sergeants and commanders could review status of mandatory requirements then follow up with subordinate leaders if needed. Ideally, Soldiers

would be able to view their own counseling details, including goals and targets, in CES. Additionally, counselors would be able to see the information for up to 24 or 36 months with command team approval. When a Soldier is assigned a new unit identification code, the new command leadership could review a Soldier's previous counseling records and revisit earlier performances, plans of action, and assessments. With this added information, they could identify an effective path for continued development as well as remedial actions or sustainment plans, if necessary. It would also help ensure consistent practices across the Army.

Identifying and Addressing Issues

In addition to identifying previous issues, CES would help first sergeants and commanders recognize if a Soldier's once-superior performance has devolved, indicating possible hardships or challenges. If a reassignment or change of duty created stressors, leaders could proactively arrange for aid if required. Also, leaders could see if an individual's performance has improved over time, as well as evaluate a Soldier's capacity to adapt, overcome obstacles, and conquer adversity.

An Army-wide CES would be a great tool in the Army's continuing battle against Soldier suicide, helping to identify high-risk Soldiers. Having access to a Soldier's counseling history could illuminate exactly when a Soldier became high-risk. For an incoming Soldier with a history of underperformance, first sergeants and commanders could immediately create a plan of action instead of waiting weeks or months to fully understand the individual's needs and challenges. While the Army's usual practice is to give Soldiers a second chance after a setback, what if previous units had offered a Soldier multiple opportunities for self-improvement with little or no progress? Counseling information documented in CES would help gaining units act more

quickly to deal with underperformance or inappropriate behavior. Additionally, unit judge advocate general (JAG) representatives could review past performance to build a complete Soldier profile when recommending action.

Beyond opportunities to improve counseling, the CES would improve leaders' accountability for counseling their Soldiers. In addition, command teams at all levels could select a Soldier's file and review the developed approaches, assess the plan's feasibility, and provide feedback to the counselor if needed. In the case of an ambiguous write-up, a first sergeant could contact the counselor or counselee and request clarification. Feedback and accountability

would help improve both counseling and the counselor.

A Better Solution for a Better Army

No matter what your job, feedback is critical. By sharing information through a computer-based CES, Army leaders could help improve the quality of feedback provided through counseling, monitor whether counseling is done on a regular basis, and help ensure that performance plans and milestones are achieved. Appropriately sharing counseling information will create a positive command climate. And better feedback will shape better Soldiers and a better Army. ■

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