



Staff Sgt. Erica Myers, an Operations Advisor with 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade, mentors a Soldier from 1-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Nov. 10, 2020 during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 21-2 at Fort Polk, Louisiana. The rotation featured opportunities for SFAB Advisors to Advise, Support, Liaise and Assess from the Brigade down to Platoon level with 1-2 SBCT. (U.S. Army photo, 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade)

# Growing Tomorrow's Leaders

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**A** key challenge facing today's U.S. Army is rebuilding trust between leaders and Soldiers, and the Army and American people. That process won't happen overnight. Similar to apple trees, which take about 10 years from planting to produce fruit, developing trustworthy leaders requires time and effort. Building trust involves thousands of positive small interactions over time. As noted in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22: Army Leadership and the Profession, "Teams develop trust through cooperation, identification with other members, and contribution to the team effort," all of which are fostered as a team handles normal tasks, training events, and missions (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 5-8). As noncommissioned officers (NCOs), we need to plant the seeds today to grow a new generation of leaders ready to face future challenges.

## **Growing Leaders Who Are Not Afraid to Fail**

To provide good soil for growth, leaders need to be with their Soldiers, whether at the motor pool, range, or in front of a white board. The presence of leaders is critical and it's important they actively and consistently engage with their Soldiers. According to ADP 6-22, "Leaders build trust with their followers and those outside the organization by practicing the leadership competencies and demonstrating character, presence, and intellect. Leaders need to be competent, of good character, and fair and reliable to generate trust" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 5-8). Soldiers need to see these attributes and competencies in action to embrace and internalize them and become good leaders themselves.

More than just simply observing their leaders, Sol-

diers also need space to act — and fail — in a realistic, but risk-mitigated environment. Allowing for failure or success is important for junior leaders because they need “opportunities to practice leading others as often as possible” (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 6-1). While these opportunities come with risk of failure, they also provide moments to grow leadership competency. Subordinates will be more willing to exercise initiative if they believe their leader will accept and support the outcome of their decisions (Department of the Army, 2019). More Soldiers and junior leaders will be willing to take initiative if they’re allowed to make mistakes while breaking old processes and pushing the standard ever upward.

### Providing Challenging Opportunities

Soldiers need “multiple challenging and interesting opportunities to practice leadership with meaningful and honest feedback” (ADP 6-22, p. 6-1). Feedback from leaders and mentors during these opportunities is critical. As a former Basic Leader Course instructor, I know Soldiers crave honest feedback about what they did well and could have done better. Leaders need to break the old habit of only giving attention to deficiencies and failures. They should lay out things done well, things that need improvement, and solutions during counseling sessions.

All too often because of operational tempo or pressing timelines, counseling, especially a monthly performance review, does not happen as often as it should. For the apple tree to produce fruit – and subordinates to become effective leaders – they require care and nourishment. Underdeveloped leaders lack flexibility, adaptability, and resiliency to weather the storms of changing priorities and missions. In its 2020 report, the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee identified ongoing issues ranging from increased crime rates to sexual harassment due to leader inaction (Swecker et. al, 2020). This is a reflection of leaders not consistently engaging with or developing their subordinates.

### Provide Personal Counseling

Developmental counseling must be endorsed from the top down and shouldn’t just repeat the same informational “check the block” style month after month. Additionally, senior leaders must make time to personally counsel Soldiers, regardless of what the squad leader is doing. Squad leaders need to counsel their team leaders, despite what the platoon sergeant is doing, and so on. We owe it to our Soldiers to mentor them properly so they will mentor their future Soldiers properly.

Leaders should know each of their Soldier’s strengths and weaknesses, understand where the individual wants to be, and recognize what they can contribute to the organization. They owe it to their Soldiers to be fair and firm in their career advice, but also understand a Soldier may not be inclined to follow a designated career path. Not every Soldier is destined to be Sergeant Major of the Army; but nearly all Soldiers have the potential for that height – with help and support from their own strong leaders.

ATP 6-22.1 (2014) indicates counseling is “one of the most important leadership and professional development responsibilities,” helping junior leaders strengthen their weakest areas and reinforce their strongest to become more capable, resilient, satisfied, and better prepared for current and future responsibilities” (p. 1-1). Just as a tree takes years to grow, so does a Soldier’s leadership skillset. All leaders, new and experienced, should continue to develop themselves through new experiences, honest feedback, and personal and professional growth opportunities.

### Growing Tomorrow’s Strong Leaders

The Leadership Requirements Model (LRM) in ADP 6-22 provides a basis for recruiting, selecting, developing, evaluating, and cultivating tomorrow’s Army leaders (Department of the Army, 2019). Nurturing subordinates into strong leaders who aren’t afraid to fail is one of the pillars of the NCO Creed: “I will not forget, nor will I allow my comrades to forget that we are professionals, Noncommissioned Officers, leaders” (Department of the Army, 2020, p. vii). The best time to start growing tomorrow’s leaders is today. Grab a shovel and start planting those seeds. ■

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## References

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