



As Army leaders and mentors, the responsibility to guide and support our Soldiers through thoughtful, empathetic counseling is not just a duty but a privilege that can leave a lasting impact on Soldiers' careers. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

Resilience Through Counseling

Empowering Soldiers for Lifelong Success

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How might one conversation change the trajectory of Soldiers' careers and lives? Soldiers often overlook this question, yet the answer reveals profound insights into their personal and professional development.

This article investigates the connection between counseling and Soldiers' careers. It explores how counseling and support pave paths to success in

challenging environments. It seeks to shed light on this vital yet unexplored aspect of Army life by drawing on the authors' counseling and leadership experience. The article further explores counseling's lasting impact as a tool for overcoming change and as a cornerstone in building resilient, adaptable, and successful military careers.

Background

Because of the job's inherent nature, being a Soldier requires intense dedication, discipline, and sacrifice. Soldiers continuously face a variety of obstacles and challenges in today's dynamic military landscape. Some may seem overwhelming as Soldiers learn to navigate and adapt to the complexities of military life early in their careers, including being away from family and friends for the first time. This is a time where they also search for meaning and purpose in their service.

The levels of dedication and commitment from every Soldier in the formation varies; some are highly motivated with a strong commitment, while some are compliant.

Establishing a strategic support system, such as counseling and coaching, is one of the most critical leadership and professional development responsibilities (Department of the Army, 2024). It provides the bedrock and framework for targeted discussions and goal setting, fostering a solid commitment to the mission and fellow teammates. It also deepens the stake for those already highly motivated and committed.

Leaders must be prepared to lead both of these types of Soldiers. Developing a strategic support system such as counseling and coaching, one of the most critical leadership and professional development responsibilities (Department of the Army, 2024), is essential as it provides the bedrock and framework through targeted discussions and goal setting; fostering a solid commitment to the mission and fellow teammates and deepening the stakes for already highly-motivated, committed Soldiers.

While leaders acknowledge the importance of counseling and coaching, we've witnessed more occasions of lackluster application rather than inspiration throughout our careers.

Counseling and coaching are twofold; leaders must be passionate about how they counsel their junior Soldiers and approach each opportunity with the same enthusiasm, genuine care, and level of commitment expected of their followers.

When leaders counsel and coach with passion, they set the tone, establish a personal stake in their Soldiers' development, and empowers them to become confident in solving issues on their own, becoming more self-reliant.

Effective counseling in the military is a critical tool for developing resilient and capable Soldiers and fostering an environment where personal growth, strong commitment, and open communication are pivotal for long-term readiness.

Building Trust in Leadership



Staff Sgt. Lionel Hunter, right, promotes Sgt. Nathaniel Hendrix from Cpl. to Sgt. during his promotion ceremony on Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Sept. 14, 2022. Hendrix asked Hunter to promote him as Hunter was one of Hendrix' first mentors in the Army. When leaders counsel and coach with passion, they set the tone and establish a personal stake in their Soldiers' development. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Daniel Hernandez)

This can prove challenging for leaders; Soldiers come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and not all will respond in the same way. For example, some Soldiers may have a keen sense of self-pride or independence, making them hesitant to share their thoughts or ask for guidance. Additionally, they may have had negative experiences with leadership or authority figures, hindering their willingness to connect or trust their leadership. Leaders must understand this and deliberate on how they can earn their trust.

Soldiers face a wide range of challenges and obstacles, such as:

1. **Physical Challenges:** The Army landscape often involves physically demanding situations such as extreme weather conditions, rough terrain, and carrying heavy equipment.
2. **Mental and Emotional Stress:** A high-stress environment, risk of injury or death, and the impact of combat can lead to mental health issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, and depression.
3. **Separation from Family and Loved Ones:** Long deployments and assignments away from home can strain personal relationships and lead to feelings of isolation.

Soldiers must manage each challenge effectively through specific training, resilience, and support.

Leaders must be proactive and make it a point to be authentic, transparent, and approachable. They must prioritize active rather than passive listening and focus on effective communication when approached.

Modeling these behaviors fosters an environment that cultivates mutual trust and respect among all team mem-

bers. Developing these values early in Soldiers' careers builds cohesion and confidence that extends past the immediate team and creates a culture that breeds committed versus compliant Soldiers throughout the unit.

When we were young Soldiers and junior leaders, some of us clearly remember the difference in our levels of commitment and motivation when there was mutual trust and respect between us and our leadership.

As a result of routine counseling and day-to-day coaching, the sense of value and leader reliability only improved our confidence. It boosted morale, leading to increased performance and the desire to excel and exceed standards consistently.

The best leaders generate a sense of commitment that encourages subordinates to go above and beyond the bare minimum (Department of the Army, 2019). All of this is possible with engaged leadership practicing engaged, effective, and open communication, which paves the way for lifelong success.

Open Communication

By using effective communication, leaders can create an atmosphere where their Soldiers feel comfortable sharing thoughts, concerns, and ideas.

Practical communication skills can help Soldiers master the art of having difficult conversations, make their views heard, and earn the respect of their peers and leaders alike (Robison, 2021).

Developing these skills leads to better problem-solving, which in turn leads to better decision-making. A climate rich with trust, respect, and open communication fosters a culture of transparency, overall reducing a lack of standards and discipline.



Sgt. 1st Class Lajuane Lee, left, senior culinary management NCO, 35th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, mentors Spc. Jordayne Bogle, a watercraft engineer assigned to the 35th CSSB, on the proper ways to maintain food within health codes in support of Yama Sakura 85 at Camp Sendai, Japan, Dec. 11, 2023. The best leaders generate a sense of commitment that encourages subordinates to go above and beyond achieving the bare minimum. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Ashley Xie)

When young Soldiers feel valued and are part of a culture of trust, respect, and open communication during their early years, they're more likely to embody these same values as they advance through the ranks. Soldiers who learn to communicate effectively, openly, and respectfully early on are more likely to embody the Army values and set a positive example as they take up the mantles of leadership.

Fostering an Environment for Growth

When leaders don't routinely provide effective counseling and coaching, their Soldiers' chances of achieving early success toward their personal and professional goals significantly decrease, which could have career-lasting implications.

Counseling allows leaders the one-on-one time necessary to discuss past and current performance and build on potential and future performance. They should use this time to highlight strengths and weaknesses, plan goals, and establish clear expectations.

They should encourage subordinates to set personal goals. When Soldiers set goals and develop a plan to achieve them, they're better able to prioritize, focus their attention, and apply the appropriate amount of effort necessary to avoid burnout and mental fatigue (Department of the Army, 2019).

Developing Resilient and Capable Soldiers

Giving Soldiers resilience guidance also helps them be self-aware and better able to recognize negative thought patterns. Self-awareness is critical for understanding one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and triggers. It enables them to manage stress more effectively, adapt to changing situations, and make informed decisions under pressure.

By recognizing their emotional responses, Soldiers can employ coping strategies more effectively. Additionally, self-awareness fosters better interpersonal relationships and communication, which is vital in the Army's team-oriented environment. It equips Soldiers with the tools to navigate challenges personally and professionally, contributing to their resilience.

Resilience support systems in the context of counseling Soldiers, enhance their ability to cope with and recover from challenges, stress, and trauma. The goal is to teach Soldiers, their families, and all members of the organization skills that enable them to become mentally tough and develop the ability to bounce back from adversity.

Leaders can teach Soldiers techniques to manage impulses and emotions. Self-regulation techniques help maintain composure in

challenging situations. Counseling helps Soldiers develop a toolkit of mental skills that promote resilience. This not only aids them in coping with current challenges but also equips them with the lifelong skills they'll need to handle future adversity, both in and out of Army life.

Commitment

In counseling, commitment plays a significant role in its effectiveness. When individuals are committed to the counseling process, they are likelier to be open and honest, actively participate, and apply the strategies and skills learned.

Commitment fosters a trusting relationship with the counselor, which is crucial for meaningful progress. It also shows the willingness to confront and work through challenges, leading to more sustainable and profound growth. Commitment to counseling is a crucial determinant of how successful the counseling will be.

Committed Soldiers are intrinsically motivated. Their desire for change or improvement comes from within. They take responsibility for their actions, decisions, and progress; they don't just rely on the counselor but work proactively toward their goals. They are open to exploring their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, even when they make them uncomfortable. The focus is on profound, meaningful change. They're interested in understanding and addressing root causes, not just symptoms.

Compliant Soldiers may follow the counselor's suggestions but without engagement. Their participation is more passive. Their motivation is usually external, such as fulfilling a requirement or pleasing someone. They depend heavily on the counselor to guide them and make

decisions for them, showing less personal initiative. They may avoid delving deeper into their issues. They focus more on quick fixes rather than understanding the reasons behind them. The changes made during the counseling these individuals are usually short-lived, since they don't fully internalize or understand.

In counseling, the goal is often to move from compliance to commitment because committed individuals are likelier to experience significant, lasting change. Leaders can facilitate this by building a solid alliance, setting collaborative goals, and empowering Soldiers to take an active role in their counseling journey.

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, our exploration into the realm of counseling highlights the indispensable role it plays in shaping Soldiers' careers and lives. Far from being a mere formality, counseling as a pivotal element in fostering resilience, adaptability, and personal growth.

As we've shown through the stories and the data, effective counseling can be transformational, equipping Soldiers with the tools and mindset necessary to navigate the complexities of Army life and beyond.

As Army leaders and mentors, the responsibility to guide and support our Soldiers through thoughtful, empathetic counseling is not just a duty but a privilege that can leave a lasting impact on Soldiers' careers. Let us embrace this opportunity to influence positivity, understanding that the effects of our words and guidance can resonate far beyond the confines of immediate interactions. ■

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