



Leadership is a tangible and intangible link that underpins organizational readiness at all levels of warfare. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Seth Cohen)

# A Force Management Approach to Counterproductive Leadership

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**N**CO Leadership is a tangible and intangible link underpinning organizational readiness at all levels of warfare. Readiness is the Army's ability to provide forces and capabilities within the scope of assigned missions in support of combatant commanders (CCDRs) to meet national objectives outlined in strategies like the National Defense Strategy (NDS) (Department of the Army [DA], 2024).

Engaged and effective NCO leadership builds readiness and supports organizational effectiveness (Harris et al., 2023). But counterproductive leadership destroys readiness (Williams, 2019).

According to Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, Army Leadership and the Profession (2019), counterproductive leadership is ongoing leader actions

that undermine unit effectiveness by contradicting one or more of the leader's attributes and competencies and does not align with Army values.

Counterproductive leadership at lower echelons below the brigade destroys organizational effectiveness and readiness, which cripples CCDRs' aim to achieve strategic ends.

The Army must apply operational psychologist and Career Long Assessments: Athena (CLA: Athena) (Beaty, Pitts, & Wolfe, 2023) to inform semi-centralized and centralized NCO promotions and apply the changes through organizations, training, and policy.

## Background and Context

One could argue that counterproductive leadership is an unavoidable military operational hazard based on

performance pressure and the toxic triangle connecting inputs to leadership and culture from leaders, followers, and the environment. Although it gained traction in modern times, counterproductive leadership is not new in the military profession.



U.S. Army Col. Paul Bonano, 13th Armored Corps Sustainment Command's deputy commanding officer, explains the importance of understanding what counter-productive leadership is during a leaders time training session. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Terron Williams)

Legendary leaders in military history who meet modern definitions of counterproductive leadership include General Patton, General Sherman, and General Pershing. In an occupation prioritizing results and performance with little value assigned to intrinsic values and characteristics, it is no surprise that history codifies these leaders as effective.

A deeper historical analysis of counterproductive leadership showed that the Army tolerated or ignored counterproductive behaviors as early as World War II but changed its position in the last 20 years (Piellusch, 2017).

In 2003, the Secretary of the Army charged the Army War College with taking a holistic look at poor leadership behaviors and their impact on the force.

The study found alarming results revealing destructive leadership behaviors like bullying, self-serving, arrogance, and lack of empathy. Despite publishing the findings in multiple military journals, attention to the topic fell flat at the start of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) (Zwerdling, 2014). Later, emerging GWOT readiness implications required the Army to refocus on counterproductive leadership.

From 2009 through 2010, the Army conducted a research survey titled Center of Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL), targeted at counterproductive leadership.

Behaviors named in the report showed a systemic issue with destructive leadership consistent with the 2003 War College study (Shufelt & Longenecker, 2017).

In 2012, the Army formally addressed counterproductive leadership based on targeted studies data by codifying it into official regulation. At the time, it coined the behaviors as toxic leadership.

To further prioritize eliminating toxic leadership from its formations, the Army launched CAL: Athena to educate leaders on how their seniors, peers, and subordinates viewed their leadership style. Only the rated individuals received feedback, so they could prioritize self-development to correct deficiencies (Zwerdling, 2014).

Since the Army added it to ADP 6-22, the term toxic leadership changed to counterproductive leadership, and the definition expanded. Added modifications included elaboration on counterproductive behaviors (DA, 2019). Senior leaders changed the regulation to bring education and awareness to specific behavior patterns so Soldiers could accurately identify

counterproductive leadership.

Through these programs, candidates undergo a psychology assessment and 360-degree survey to inform the decisions made by panel members (Pilgrim, 2020). These interventions target higher echelons of leadership but do not account for the behaviors in the lower and broader echelons of leadership directly impacting readiness.

Recent Inspector General reports highlight that, despite interventions, counterproductive leadership is still a significant problem (DA Inspector General, 2024).

## Problem

Current and historical statistics shed light on the horrific reality that counterproductive leadership corrupts the Army profession.

More than 80% of Soldiers report observing counterproductive leadership, and an alarming 20% reported being subordinate to one (Flak, 2024). While 20% is not a substantial number in a smaller population, this number carries a different value when applied to an end strength of more than 400,000 Soldiers.

Manning is a significant component of organizational readiness and the Army's ability to provide optimal end strength to commanders. It must effectively retain and recruit Soldiers to meet the desired end strength.

According to a 2009 study, 24% of Soldiers planned to leave the Army because of counterproductive leadership. To show the impact on manning readiness, if the Army

has 400,000 Soldiers in its formations, 24% is 96,000, approximately four Army divisions not available to support operational plans (Flak, 2024).

Equally important to manning readiness is recruiting. Counterproductive leaders degrade the Army's reputation and reduce recruiting efforts. Out of the pool of available young people for service in the Army, 57% report they believe military service would damage them psychologically, with counterproductive leadership cited as a contributing factor (Ring, 2022).

Additionally, counterproductive leadership creates an organizational culture of low commitment and dissatisfaction with workplace goals and performance.

As it festers, it evolves into deviant behaviors, which carry the potential to break down unit cohesion and cause poor ethical decisions leading to disciplinary actions, leading to decreased unit effectiveness and readiness. Also tethered to effectiveness is Soldier physiological health and resilience (Flak, 2024).

The consequences associated with counterproductive leadership also stretch to financial readiness. Empirical research on the financial burden of counterproductive leadership in the Army is inadequate and requires further study.

However, in a Military Review article titled *The Cost of Tolerating Toxic Behaviors in the Department of Defense Workplace*, Kenneth Williams (2019) superimposed relative anecdotal evidence of civilian organizations onto the Army.

His research and calculations showed a severe fiscal impact on the force. Using 2018 end strength manning numbers, he presented an annual cost of more than two billion dollars because of destructive leadership behaviors (Williams, 2019).

The collection of impacts to readiness caused by counterproductive leaders generates a capability gap for commanders, which can be overcome through the Army Capabilities Integration Development System (ACIDS) process.

## Solution

A nonmaterial solution to detect and correct NCO destructive behaviors appeared as an output of the ACIDS' area, needs, and solution analysis of the readiness capability gap due to counterproductive leadership (USAWC, 2021).

While the Army's intent is correct, they target the wrong NCO population, which allows these behaviors to grow for an average of 18-20 years before they're exposed.

Organizational psychologists' evaluations and CLA: Athena assessments can provide objective perspectives and holistic feedback to inform promotion board recommendations. Targeting lower echelons of leadership through feedback mechanisms correct NCO counterproductive behaviors before they become habitual.

For years, operational psychologists provided feedback for assessment and selections for organizations in conventional and special operations forces. This feedback informs assessment members on the values, character, and potential future issues, and offers a predictive analysis of candidates' organizational impact.

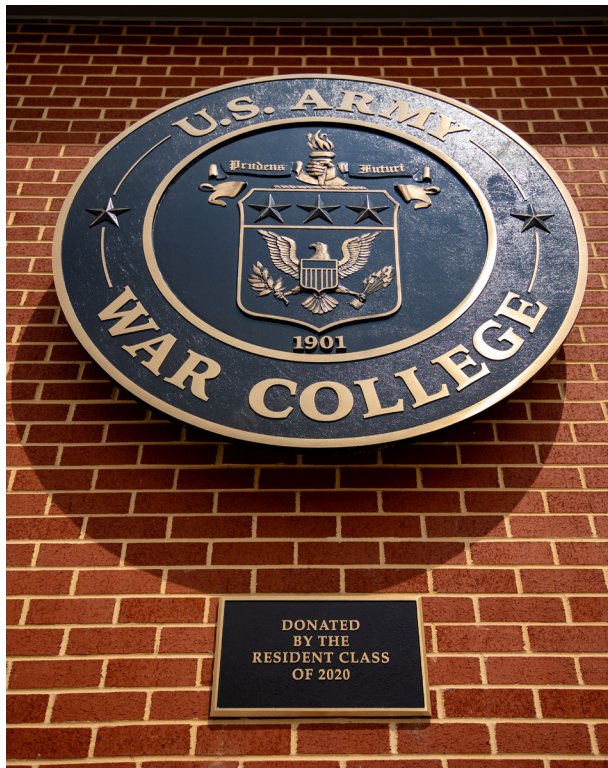


Gen. George S. Patton. Legendary military leaders who meet modern definitions of counterproductive leadership include Generals Patton, Sherman, and Pershing. In an occupation prioritizing results and performance with little value assigned to intrinsic values and characteristics, it's no surprise that history codifies these leaders as effective. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress)

When applied to the semi-centralized and centralized NCO promotion levels, the psychologists and CLA: Athena assessments provide similar data showing current or future counterproductive tendencies to inform board members' decisions (Kennedy, 2023).

Board members can use feedback from the CLA: Athena assessments to inform NCO promotion decisions. These assessments also provide holistic feedback on how evaluated Soldiers are perceived.

This assessment provides board members the NCO or NCO candidate's demonstrated characteristics and style as seen by seniors, peers, and subordinates. Both assessment results are not decisions themselves but serve to inform and help advise their decisions.



In 2003, the Secretary of the Army charged the Army War College to take a holistic look at poor leadership behaviors and their impact on the force. The study found alarming results that revealed destructive leadership behaviors like bullying, self-serving, arrogance, and a lack of empathy. (U.S. Army photo by Christopher Fincham)

CLA: Athena assessments also provide feedback NCOs can synthesize to coach and mentor NCO or NCO candidates. This solution to overcome the capability gap caused by counterproductive leadership requires changes applied to organizations, training, and policy for successful implementation.

## Organization

Applying operational psychologist assessments involves adding operational psychologists to all Army brigades. Beyond phase one of the force management process, executing this change requires the rest of the five phases.

Through the designing and developing phases, key players make recommendations on creating or modifying unit Table of Organization/Equipment (TOE) to accommodate additions.

Additions include personnel and operational equipment to support the psychologist team. Once approved through the Total Army Analysis (TAA) and Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) processes, phase five documents all modifications in operational and training units (USAWC, 2021).

Cost is a vital part of this change during the force management authorizations phase. Based on salary,

bonuses, licensing costs, and benefits, it amounts to approximately \$103,151 per entry level psychologist. Not included is the potential for student loan forgiveness, which averages around \$200,000 per individual (Kennedy, 2022).

Other cost estimates include psychologist and assessed Soldier manhour costs, facility space and assessment equipment, and administrative supply costs. Organizational changes account for a portion of the implementation; however, this solution also requires training.

## Training

This intervention has a training requirement necessary to reach multiple NCO audiences. As the primary focal point, operational psychologists need periodic recertifications, licensing, and continued education to support relevancy in their field. Civilian academia is the primary venue for this training; however, the Army medical component can augment training. Psychologists training costs vary by level and venue but are expensive.

Providing training opportunities on assessment feedback for board members and immediate supervisors of assessed NCOs is essential to this solution's overall effectiveness.

Both audiences need to understand how to analyze feedback. For board members, it focuses on how to read the data to support promotion potential decisions for junior and senior NCOs.

Immediate supervisors, from team leaders to command sergeants major, oversee coaching, mentoring, and developing subordinates. These NCOs will receive training in applying coaching strategies to correct or sustain behavior tendencies outlined in feedback reports.

The last target population is the entire Army at all echelons. The primary aim is to create micro-training programs synchronized with formal education or unit training on counterproductive leadership and behaviors.

Training outputs lead to increased behavior awareness and the ability to identify counterproductive leadership in the NCO and others, which provides increased accountability and aid development. Training bears a significant resource and manhour cost when applied to the total Army. To communicate and document the solution and changes, the Army must update current policies.

## Policy

Strategic messaging across the force is necessary to implement the solution thoroughly. The Army may use policy to communicate it and its changes. Required policy updates center on the promotion board process and evaluation criteria, as well as the assessment's role in informing promotions. Policy updates will also message training requirements for each respective population.

As mentioned, policy communicates compliance. Policy updates will mandate accountability to all



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changes and inform commanders of their roles within the TOE adjustments, promotion process, and training compliance.

It is difficult to calculate the fiscal cost tied to policy changes and execution. However, the relative costs to doctrinal updates can provide insight into potential budget considerations. On average, changes to Army doctrine equate to a range of \$150,000 to \$200,000 in collective costs (Henry, 2012).

TAA and PPBE processes planners need to account for these associated costs during larger force management process (USAWC, 2021). As the Army modernizes to meet emerging global challenges, refocusing their approach to eliminating counterproductive leadership earlier in NCOs' lifecycle will produce significant benefits.

### **Synthesis and Impact to the NCO Corps**

Adding operational psychologists' evaluations and CLA: Athena assessments to the NCO promotion system through the force management process provides the necessary tools to identify and eliminate counterproductive leadership and cultivate a supportive culture for healthy leadership.

NCOs' healthy leadership and influence provides a positive impact to their subordinates, expanding

beyond individuals and touching the organization and Army institution. The true value of the recommended changes rests in the translation of feedback into leader development and coaching.

For example, in the event a battalion promotion board chooses not to recommend a specialist for promotion based on assessment feedback, the Soldier's team and squad leader have targeted needs to coach the Soldier through development.

NCOs who operationalize their subordinates' feedback to cultivate healthy leadership build competence, character, and commitment. This coaching creates NCO self-awareness, collaboration, transparency, and sincerity (Chang, 2022). When NCOs invest in their subordinates' development, they drive a commitment to grow.

Shifting from counterproductive leadership improves the organizational climate and culture. Team and squad leaders have a direct impact on their Soldiers' quality of life and daily activities.

Through healthy leadership, they foster confidence, pride in the organization, accountability to ethical standards, and build cohesive teams, which translate into a dynamic and effective organization poised to win on a complex stage (Harris, 2024).

Additionally, addressing counter-productive tendencies through assessments directly correlates to

unit readiness. These strategies produce positive NCO leadership habits that build their subordinates' adaptability and mental resilience to overcome operational challenges and support mission success (Talley et al., 2020).

If the Army uses these assessments to identify and shift NCOs from counterproductive to healthier habits, they boost talent acquisition in the force (Greco, 2020).

As commanders operationalize the NDS to support the nation's objectives, the Army must be ready when called upon. Counterproductive leadership destroys readiness and reduces operational efficacy. However, by implementing assessments to drive the NCO promotion system, the Army can improve Soldier well-being, unit climate, and talent management to dominate in any operational environment. ■



To further prioritize eliminating toxic leadership from its formations, the Army launched CAL: Athena to educate leaders on how their seniors, peers, and subordinates viewed their leadership style. Only the rated individuals received feedback, so they could prioritize self-development to correct deficiencies (Zwerdling, 2014). (U.S. Army photo by Jennifer Mattson)

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