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Having Difficult Conversations with Soldiers: Communication Skills Training for Junior NCOs

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The Army, like any organization, requires good communication to effectively function in the present and prepare for the future. From basic task instructions to tactical movement, drill and ceremony, and communicating commander's intent, leaders who communicate clearly and effectively are foundational to good order and mission accomplishment.

Effective communication requires technical skills, such as clarity and consistency, as well as interpersonal skills, such as contextual awareness, empathy, and adaptability — using the right words at the right time in the right way (Perkins, 2015).

Junior NCOs, early in their leadership careers, often feel unsure of what to say to their Soldiers when discussing sensitive topics such as poor job performance, family issues, substance abuse, and behavioral health concerns. They may not know what words will motivate their Soldiers to change their behavior in positive ways.

That uncertainty is further complicated by work environments that limit face-to-face interaction between

NCOs and their Soldiers. NCOs frequently lead and communicate with their Soldiers through texts and mobile messaging, eliminating opportunities to practice key interpersonal communication skills.

Talk Like a Leader (TLaL) is an evidence-based training program designed by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI) to equip junior NCOs with communication skills and strategies needed for collaborative, two-way conversations with their Soldiers about any topic and for motivating them to make positive behavior changes (Sanders et al., 2023).

The TLaL approach to NCO communication eases conversations by easing interpersonal friction and gaining Soldier buy-in. This article reviews the theoretical underpinnings of TLaL and how it may help junior NCOs across the force.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The TLaL training program is based on empirically supported theories and techniques with decades of real-world use and measured effectiveness in multiple clinical and counseling contexts. For example, one behavior change theory — coined by Prochaska and DiClemente (1986) as the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of behavior change — was developed to explain an individual's readiness to change a specific behavior.

Although originally developed for use by psychologists, the model provides an evidence-based framework that anyone can use to navigate conversations about behavior change.

It describes the process of change as occurring across five distinct phases:

- 1) Precontemplation Phase** — when an individual (in this case, a Soldier) doesn't intend to change a specific behavior and may be unaware that such a change could be beneficial
- 2) Contemplation Phase** — when the Soldier considers acting, recognizing the pros and cons of changing their behavior, but still feels ambivalent about it
- 3) Preparation Phase** — when the Soldier intends to change a behavior, takes small steps, and believes the change will be beneficial
- 4) Action Phase** — when the Soldier recently changed their behavior and intends to continue with the change

5) Maintenance Phase — when the Soldier has maintained the behavior change for a period and plans to continue it

Through TLaL training, NCOs learn to recognize where Soldiers are in the cycle of change on any issue (e.g., improving finances, health and fitness, or job performance; strengthening relationships with family and friends; or reducing behaviors that negatively impact readiness). This knowledge can inform their use of conversational techniques to initiate, encourage, or strengthen their willingness to change for the better.

Figure 1 presents the five phases of the model from the perspective of Spc. Phillips, a Soldier who lives well beyond his means since joining the Army. Initially, he

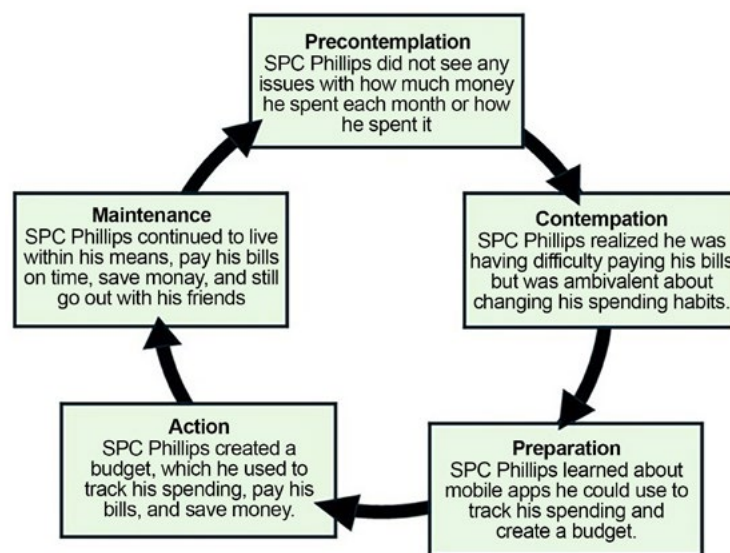


Figure 1. The five phases of the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) from the perspective of Spc. Phillips, a Soldier who lives well beyond his means since joining the Army. (Graphic courtesy of the authors)

didn't see an issue with how much he spent each month. He enjoyed modifying his car, going out with his friends several nights a week, and having the latest clothes and shoes (Precontemplation Phase).

Over time, Phillips realized he was struggling to pay his monthly bills. He was unable to pay his growing credit card bill two months in a row. Nonetheless, he hesitated to significantly change his spending habits (Contemplation Phase).

Staff Sgt. Barnett, Phillips' squad leader, noticed the Soldier was talking more about his finances and worrying about paying bills. He asked him how he was spending his money each month. At the time, Phillips had no idea, and he asked squadmates how they managed their finances. He learned about several apps he could use to track his spending and quickly create a monthly budget (Preparation Phase).



The Talk Like a Leader (TLaL) approach to NCO communication eases conversations by easing interpersonal friction and gaining Soldier buy-in. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Samantha Powers)

Eventually, with continued encouragement from Barnett, Phillips created a monthly budget that allowed him to manage his spending, pay his bills, and put money into savings each month (Action Phase).

During his monthly counseling with Barnett three months later, Phillips excitedly shared that he was continuing to live within his means. He was saving money and still doing things he enjoyed (Maintenance Phase).

It's important for NCOs to consider where Soldiers are in the change process when discussing their behavior and desire (or lack thereof) to change. If, as an example, an NCO instructs a Soldier in the Precontemplation Phase to change a behavior, that advice won't likely be well received nor motivating. That's because the Soldier doesn't intend to change the behavior and may not be aware that such a change could be beneficial.

It may be more effective for the NCO to talk to the Soldier about the potential benefits of change, thereby encouraging their Soldier to move toward the Contemplation Phase. If, on the other hand, an NCO recommends that a Soldier in the Preparation Phase change a behavior, that Soldier will likely be more open to the advice (because they are planning to change and see value in doing so).

Thus, using their understanding of where Soldiers are on an issue, NCOs can use appropriate techniques to encourage or foster change. Other Soldier-specific examples of the model can be found in ATP 6-22.1, Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring (DA, 2024).

Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing (MI) — an evidence-based, goal-oriented counseling method frequently used by therapists — builds upon the TTM model by focusing on “the language of change” to elicit and reinforce an individual's own statements about, and reasons for, changing their behavior (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). The foundation of MI is captured in four concepts collectively called “the Spirit of MI”:

1. Collaboration — the counselor (or in this case, an NCO) takes a cooperative approach to gain buy-in from an individual (a Soldier) approaching change, essentially navigating the change process with them (rather than directing them and telling them what to do)

2. Compassion — the NCO focuses on the Soldier's welfare and safety

3. Evocation — the NCO takes the position that Soldiers approaching change are the experts in their life and circumstance, and elicits the Soldier's input throughout the change process

4. Acceptance — the NCO sees the “whole Soldier,” by considering their situation, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses in the process of change

In TLAL training, NCOs learn to identify the language of change and, through small-group practical exercises, become more comfortable incorporating “the Spirit of MI” into the types of conversations they frequently have with Soldiers.

Practice is key, because the approach an NCO uses to encourage and support a Soldier’s change orientation depends on the phase of change the individual is in at that moment. (This can be challenging for many NCOs, since it deviates from the directive style of communication they frequently.)

MI has been effective in contexts from substance abuse treatment (where it originated) to weight management, mental health, medical, and other settings. Although implementations differ depending on topic area and setting, MI communication skills increase the likelihood that individuals will openly discuss the behavior changes they wish to make in their lives.

Additionally, the consistent use of MI skills creates interactions that build an alliance between the participants to work toward shared goals. That focus on collaborative goal setting naturally integrates with recent changes to the Army’s developmental counseling process.

Goal setting is frequently discussed in ATP 6-22.1, Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring (DA, 2024) as a key component of providing effective feedback to Soldiers. Given the evidence of the MI approach’s efficacy, applying it to the Army context could enhance junior NCOs’ interpersonal communication skills.

The Collaborative Approach

The primary challenge many NCOs face when using MI techniques is adapting to a collaborative approach to change. NCOs are often the primary problem solvers for their Soldiers and can be highly effective at doing so.

Though resolving issues for Soldiers may be the most direct route and the first response for many NCOs, often a direct solution isn’t available or feasible in certain situations (such as family and conduct issues). Those cases may require a collaborative approach that tackles these problems’ conflicting, interrelated dimensions.

The following principles form the basis of such an approach (Sanders et al., 2023):

- **Expressing Empathy** — building rapport with Soldiers and trying to understand their perspective

- **Rolling with Resistance** — looking for productive ways to redirect interactions when challenged by Soldiers

- **Developing Discrepancy** — helping Soldiers devise their own method for change (rather than directing or telling them how to)

- **Supporting Self-Efficacy** — enhancing Soldiers’ self-efficacy by affirming the change process to include developing a plan for change and the follow-through with that plan

The process of collaboration can take more time and energy than solving Soldiers’ problems directly. However, the skills they develop through the collaborative process are likely to generalize to other aspects of their life and help mitigate or prevent other issues they face.



Motivational Interviewing (MI) — an evidence-based, goal-oriented counseling method— builds upon the TTM model by focusing on “the language of change” to elicit and reinforce an individual’s own statements about, and reasons for, changing their behavior (U.S. Army photo by Audrey Chappell)

For instance, it may be easier for NCOs to give Soldiers a training plan to improve their run time, but teaching them to design their own training plan will encourage them to be more engaged and invested in the process of improving their fitness and the subsequent impacts on their Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) score.

TLAL provides effective means for NCOs to guide Soldiers through the process of managing personal

challenges through a collaborative approach that isn't available via other Army training.

For leaders used to a more directive leadership style, doing something “with” versus “to” someone can be difficult to master. For that reason, TLaL should be implemented at the junior NCO level, to allow these collaborative techniques to naturally become part of their leadership style while it is still developing.

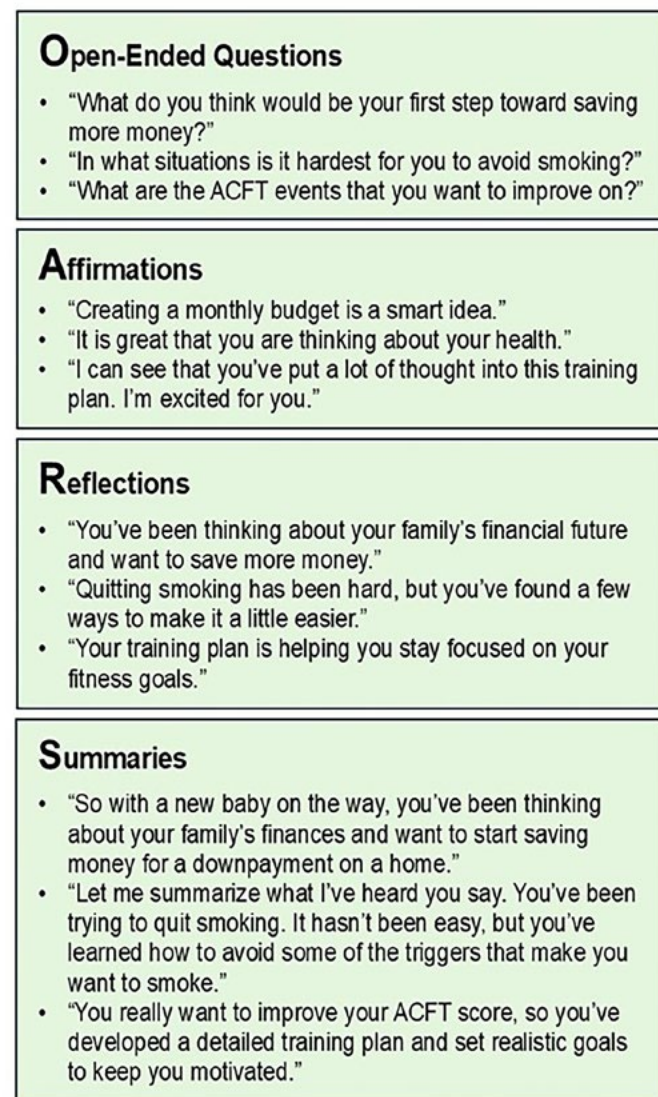


Figure 2. Real-world examples of questions and comments NCOs using OARS might make in conversations about saving money for a home, quitting smoking, and improving ACFT scores. (Graphic courtesy of the authors)

Guiding Soldiers via OARS Skills

TLaL training also emphasizes basic but critical skills and techniques, designed to shape conversations between NCOs and Soldiers in a manner that moves them toward change (without dictating or assuming the Soldiers’ intent).

These skills, frequently referred to by the acronym OARS, can be used in combinations and sequences as interactions unfold:

- **Open-ended questions** — asking questions that require Soldiers to elaborate in order to answer (i.e., questions that can’t be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” response)
- **Affirmations** — acknowledging their positive actions or traits to help them build toward change
- **Reflections** — repeating what Soldiers said in the NCO’s own words (like a short “back brief”) to demonstrate that the leader is engaged (ensuring the Soldier was heard correctly and understands how their words are interpreted)
- **Summaries** — reviewing the major points discussed to ensure Soldier and NCO are on the same page

Although the MI model makes use of other skills and techniques, TLaL training focuses on OARS because those skills are most relevant to junior NCOs and the types of conversations known to be most difficult for them to have with Soldiers.

Figure 2 presents real-world examples of questions and comments NCOs using OARS might make in conversations about saving money for a home, quitting smoking, and improving ACFT scores.

Training Design and Development

TTM and MI served as the foundation for TLaL, but the research team reviewed Army doctrine (e.g., ADP 6-22, Army Leadership and the Profession (DA, 2019)), reports, and publications to ensure new training would not conflict with preexisting training or guidance.

The team solicited feedback from NCOs and Army subject matter experts. They also partnered with academics recognized for their expertise in MI training to adapt key aspects of MI into an Army-specific and NCO-oriented context.

Regarding the training format, the research team’s goal was to use best practices from literature to include:

- Organizing training into frequent, short-duration sessions (as opposed to single, longer sessions)

- Including interactive, skills-based components such as coaching and feedback

- Encouraging positive reinforcement, specifically around trainees' ability to increase change talk

With those methods in mind, the team designed and developed materials for instructors and trainees. TLAL training is made up of six two-hour communication skills training labs, designed to focus on skill demonstration, identification, and practice.

The team also collaborated with the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence to develop a series of demonstration videos showing NCOs using MI techniques during developmental counseling.

One of the most important aspects of the TLAL program is its emphasis on embedded skills practice, both in the classroom and between sessions. Junior NCOs frequently report they lack opportunities to practice many of their required skill sets (Sanders, 2018).

With that in mind, TLAL was intentionally built to focus heavily on practice and in-session coaching to allow participants to think through using the skills in real time while using basic skills, having a conversation, or simulating a counseling session.

The TLAL curriculum includes tools, such as a "Very Useful Questions" reference, to support NCOs during the training and once they return to their units.

Understanding the theory and mechanics behind the techniques is important for mastery, but practicing the skills continually is needed to achieve the level of proficiency needed to employ them on a regular basis and in difficult or emotionally charged situations. Further, as NCOs become more familiar and comfortable with the skills, they are likely to incorporate them into their general style of communication.

To provide them with additional opportunities to use and become comfortable with TLAL communication skills, the research team collaborated with the Mission Command Center of Excellence to develop and integrate components of the TLAL curriculum into the Counseling Enhancement Tool (CET) (DA, 2023).

The CET is a practical, easy-to-use job aid designed to promote goal setting and guide junior NCOs and their Soldiers through real-world collaborative, two-way conversations for developmental counseling.

The CET consists of a leader form and a Soldier form that address performance across seven areas:

- 1) demonstrates tactical and technical proficiency
- 2) communicates effectively
- 3) exhibits effort
- 4) exhibits personal discipline
- 5) contributes to the team
- 6) exhibits fitness, military bearing, and appearance
- 7) manages personal matters

The CET creates a structured, nonevaluative opportunity for NCOs and their Soldiers to share observations, discuss expectations, and develop collaborative plans in these areas.



TLAL provides effective means for NCOs to guide Soldiers through the process of managing personal challenges through a collaborative approach that isn't available via other Army training. (U.S. Army Photo by Capt. Katharine Williams)

To identify strengths and weaknesses of the TLAL program, particularly aspects of the training requiring improvement prior to implementation, the team conducted a formative evaluation (Sanders et al., 2023).

Participants' reactions were extremely positive. More than 90% agreed or strongly agreed that the training was worth their time, taught them about effective communication, and equipped them with new skills they could apply on the job.

In terms of the impact of the training on participant learning, attitudes, and personal characteristics (e.g., self-monitoring and self-efficacy), results revealed that the training significantly improved the quality of their responses to reflective listening scenarios. Their responses included significantly higher levels of open-ended and probing follow-up questions (versus closed-ended questions).

TLaL training significantly enhanced participants' ability to take perspective and receive the perspective of others. This result included gaining a better understanding of their Soldiers and what motivates them.

Potential NCO Payoff

Content and concepts from TLaL have recently been incorporated into NCO professional military education (PME), such as the Basic Leader Course, and new leader development doctrine (ATP 6-22.1, Providing Feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring (DA, 2024)). But what does this mean for the day-to-day lives of junior NCOs?

In short, the benefit of learning effective communication skills is that junior NCOs will be more comfortable and effective in conversations and counseling sessions, especially those involving difficult topics. The application of these techniques can

enormously impact the situations they experience every day — and the skills can be applied in any setting, at work or at home.

One of the dimensions assessed in ARI's research to design and develop TLaL was accurate empathy (Sanders et al., 2023). Although empathy as a concept has grown in importance in Army leadership doctrine (e.g., ADP 6-22, Army Leadership and the Profession, DA, 2019; ATP 6-22.1, Providing feedback: Counseling–Coaching–Mentoring, DA, 2024), it isn't frequently addressed in PME.

A TLaL training goal was to enhance the empathy of the NCOs who completed the training. While the formative evaluation was unable to show significant gains in empathy, the trend was positive and likely hampered by sample size.

Qualitative data and anecdotal reports received by trainers during the training sessions indicated that many NCOs expressed increased awareness, concern, and responsiveness to other people's emotional states because of the training. So, while there wasn't sufficient data to show the effect empirically, there appeared to be a positive trend toward raising empathy through TLaL.

Participants noted that the use of the communication skills in TLaL training benefited NCOs beyond their



Though resolving issues for Soldiers may be the most direct route and the first response for many NCOs, often a direct solution isn't available or feasible in certain situations. (U.S. Army photo by KPfc. Minsung Kim)

day-to-day job duties. Participants reported the positive impacts these skills had on their personal lives. Through learning and practice for their NCO duties, they incorporated the skills into their general communication style and saw immediate benefits in their relationships with spouses, children, parents, and friends.

In fact, this was often the most directly observable impact on the lives of the NCOs who took the training. Although not a stated goal, this result wasn't unexpected. The skills in this package are applicable to almost any interpersonal interaction and are likely to positively impact readiness, especially in the personal, spiritual, and family domains.

For an organization as large as the Army, adequately addressing personal and family domains presents a challenge. So, this positive effect could fill a critical gap in readiness preparation. Future research will explore the impact of TLaL training on a variety of Soldier, NCO, and small unit-level measures.

Conclusion

Communication is integral to NCOs' effectiveness. However, junior NCOs and their superiors frequently express a desire to further develop their communication and counseling skills (Sanders, 2018).

To that end, ARI developed TLaL as a targeted training package — adapting empirically supported and real world-tested MI techniques to enhance junior NCO communication skills. It will likely take time before the effects on the NCO corps are realized to an appreciable level.

Ultimately, as TLaL communication skills spread into the NCO development trajectory, Soldiers should experience more responsive leaders and better communication throughout their service. This progress will, in turn, support readiness, development, and retention. ■



TLaL was intentionally built to focus heavily on practice and in-session coaching to allow participants to think through using the skills in real time while using basic skills, having a conversation, or simulating a counseling session. (Screen capture courtesy of authors)

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TLaL materials — including instructor content, a training guide and handouts for trainees, and demonstration videos — can be downloaded from the Center for Army Leadership (CAL) website: <https://usacac.army.mil/Organizations/Centers-of-Excellence-CoE/MCCoE/Center-For-Army-Leadership-CAL/Talk-Like-a-Leader>

The Counseling Enhancement Tool (GTA 22-01-003, CET-Leader Form and GTA 22-01-002, CET-Soldier Form) can also be downloaded there: <https://usacac.army.mil/Organizations/Centers-of-Excellence-CoE/MCCoE/Center-For-Army-Leadership-CAL/Updated-Counseling-Enhancement-Tool>

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The benefit of learning effective communication skills is that junior NCOs will be more comfortable and effective in conversations and counseling sessions, especially those involving difficult topics. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Staff Sgt. Jean-Baptiste Kanangwe)



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