



When I finally read [DA PAM 600-25, U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide,] it was like a 155mm round went off next to me — it got my attention. (Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Kirk)

# The Army Tells You What to Do — Just Listen

*By Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis R. Kirk*

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**A**s a leader, I'm regularly approached by Soldiers and other leaders frustrated about navigating the promotion system. The most common questions I hear are: "My NCOERs are good, so why is my OML [order of merit] number so bad?" or "What do I need to do to get promoted?"

If you've had similar questions, professional growth counseling with Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 600-25, U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide, will make advising Soldiers on how to earn promotion more focused.

## Professional Growth Counseling

Many NCOs come to me after board results are published, frustratedly saying, “Sergeant Major, I’m doing everything I can, but I’m still not getting promoted.” One of my typical first questions is, “What did you and your leader come up with in your last professional growth counseling session?” Often, they didn’t have a meaningful counseling session, or they didn’t receive a counseling session at all.

I’ll be honest, I didn’t truly understand or appreciate the power of focused counseling as a subordinate and young leader. I treated counseling sessions as “just another box to check.” But, over time, I realized how powerful counseling sessions can be, especially when they’re done with preparation and intention.



Read the Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 600-25, *U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide*, study it, and use it to help yourself and your fellow Soldiers to succeed. (Graphic by *NCO Journal*)

Of the three types of counseling in the U.S. Army, the most underused is professional growth counseling, which involves a leader sitting down with you, making eye contact, communicating exactly what you’re doing well, areas for improvement, and steps you need to take to get to the next level.

Professional growth counseling helps you set a roadmap to success. In my command, it is now mandatory for all Soldiers, NCOs, and leaders to receive this kind of counseling once a year, separate from any other type of counseling.

As an NCO corps, we need to do a better job counseling our subordinate Soldiers. We execute the counseling as if it’s a “checkbox” to remain compliant with monthly and quarterly counseling, or we simply conduct them for promotion-board purposes.

Leaders routinely check in on their subordinates’ professional growth and guide them on what it takes to progress in their careers. Officers have us beat in this and we need to catch up.

## The Forgotten Guide: DA PAM 600-25

Another question I ask Soldiers seeking my advice on promotions is, “What does DA PAM 600-25 and your proponent guidance say?” Unfortunately, most have never read it.

Full disclosure, I didn’t read it until I was a staff sergeant!

When I finally read it, it was like a 155mm round went off next to me — it got my attention. The pamphlet lays out exactly what the Army expects from you at every rank, such as the competencies and attributes you need to demonstrate.

Additionally, it covers topics like key development time, military/civilian education, and physical fitness. It’s not your typical technical manual; it’s practical advice. In it you’ll find exact guidance on what you need to accomplish to be most qualified (MQ), highly qualified (HQ), and qualified (Q). I can’t emphasize this enough: DA PAM 600-25 is your blueprint for promotion.

When I shared the pamphlet with my Soldiers and conducted NCO professional development (NCOPD) sessions about it, I noticed a sense of empowerment. Soldiers began to take ownership of their careers.

Mainly, it became clearer to Soldiers that promotion isn’t just about time in service or doing your job well but earning a promotion because you are ready for the next level of responsibility.

You must show you’re not just a good Soldier but that you’re a leader who can guide and inspire others and influence them to reach their full potential. It should be used in professional growth counseling sessions, along with Soldiers’ Career Management Field (CMF) board supplement, both of which can be found on the Army G1 website in the Resources section (<https://www.army.mil/g-1>).

Read the DA PAM 600-25, study it, and use it to help yourself and your fellow Soldiers to succeed.

## Key Schools That Make You Stand Out

Early in my Army career, I was fortunate to have great NCOs who were committed to developing their Soldiers. They pushed me toward opportunities like Ranger School and Airborne School, giving me the mentorship and training I needed to achieve early success.

Not every Soldier has leaders who will guide them step by step.

Later in my career, guided by DA PAM 600-25, I committed to earning my associate degree, followed by my bachelor’s degree. When I arrived at the Sergeants Major Academy, I looked around and saw that many of my fellow infantry Soldiers wore the same badges and attended the same schools, and many also had bachelor’s degrees as well. I knew that if I wanted to keep advancing, I had to do something to set myself apart. So, I went to night school and earned my master’s degree.

If you’re serious about getting promoted, you need to go above and beyond. To be Most Qualified (MQ) across any MOS, the pamphlet and the NCO Evaluation

Board Supplement clearly state that earning your Ranger Tab and Expert Infantry, Soldier, or Field Medical Badges (E3B) will set you apart from your peers.

Ranger School is one of the toughest leadership courses the Army offers; earning the coveted Ranger tab shows you have the mental and physical toughness to lead in the most challenging environments.

When members on a promotion board see you're Ranger qualified, they know you've proven yourself in ways few others have. It's not just about the tab; it's about the skill you gain and the respect you earn.

The Expert Badge is another way to demonstrate your commitment to excellence. It proves you mastered your warrior tasks and drills, and it shows you're willing to put in the work to be the best.

It's not easy to earn, and that's the point. The Expert Badge sets you apart as a Soldier who takes pride in his or her craft and is ready for greater responsibility. E3B is the best individual training event Soldiers can attend. Determine what school(s) you need that will help you attain "MQ," advocate for yourself, and set yourself apart from your peers.

## What You Need to Do to Get Promoted

So, what does it take?

1. Know Your Job Inside and Out: Technical and tactical proficiency is non-negotiable. You need to be the subject matter expert in your MOS.
2. Be a Leader, Not Just a Follower: Promotions are about leadership potential. Show you can take charge, make decisions, and mentor others.
3. Don't Be Afraid to Fail: If you're afraid to fail, you'll never know what you can truly accomplish. Embrace the challenges, learn from failures, and crush it next time.
4. Invest in Your Development: Professional Military Education (PME), certifications, and additional training aren't just nice-to-haves, they're essential. Always seek opportunities to grow.
5. Stay Physically and Mentally Fit: The Army demands and deserves excellence, and that includes your physical and mental readiness. Use the Army's resources and lead by example. Always Be Ready!



Over time I realized how powerful counseling sessions can be, especially when they are done with preparation and intention. (Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Kirk)

6. Attend Key Schools: Ranger School and earning your Expert Badge are two of the ways to stand out. They show you're willing to push yourself to the limit and master the skills that make you a better leader and Soldier.

7. READ DA PAM 600-25!

8. Winning Matters: Surround yourself with Soldiers who'll push you to train harder and be better. Competition breeds excellence.

## My Challenge to You

Here's my challenge to every Soldier reading this: Take ownership of your career. Don't wait for someone else to tell you what you need to do. Seek out professional growth counseling, read DA PAM 600-25, and start working on the areas you need to improve.

Push yourself to attend the hard schools that will make you Most Qualified for promotion and a better leader and Soldier. Promotions aren't just about being in the right place at the right time, they're about being the right person for the job.

I've seen Soldiers transform their careers by taking these steps. I've seen them go from frustrated and stuck to confident and successful. I know you can do the same. The Army needs leaders who are ready to step up, take charge, and make a difference. Are you ready? ■



Of the three types of counseling in the U.S. Army, the most underused is professional growth counseling. Leaders sit down, make eye contact, communicate exactly what the individual is doing well, areas for improvement, and steps to take to get to the next level. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Daniel Parker)

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His most recent assignments include brigade command sergeant major, 1st Battalion, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 7th Infantry Division; and battalion command sergeant major, 4th Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard). He has served in three combat deployments and four operational deployments.

Kirk earned a bachelor's degree in management from American Military University and a master's degree in management from Excelsior College.

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