

Be a Better Mentor

by LTC Allen Trujillo

To succeed on today's modern battlefield, the Army must continue to recruit, employ and retain the very best Soldiers. In addition, the Army must continue to improve its diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to make sure that the right person, with the right knowledge, skills and behaviors takes the right job at the right time.¹

Army senior leaders play a critical role in these initiatives and processes through their mentorship of Soldiers.² As the Army modernizes a wide range of talent-management processes, there is an excellent opportunity for senior leaders to improve the way they mentor officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and Department of the Army civilians.³ To modernize our mentorship processes, senior leaders must deliberately make themselves available to become mentors for high-performing subordinates across the Army.

What is mentorship?

The Army Profession and Leadership Policy (Army Regulation (AR) 600-100) defines mentoring as “the voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience characterized by mutual trust and respect. Mentoring extends beyond the scope of chain-of-command relationship and occurs when a mentor provides the mentee advice and counsel. Assessment, feedback and guidance are critical within the mentoring relationship and must be valued by the mentee for growth and development to occur.”⁴

As a result, AR 600-100 implies that mentees are ultimately responsible for establishing and maintaining a relationship with their mentor.

This implied responsibility is further explored in the article, *Mentorship: Understanding a Leader's Investment*, where the author argues a commonly accepted belief that “while true mentorship entails a commitment by both the mentor and the mentored, the selection of a mentor is determined by the Soldier; it cannot be based on position, rank or military occupational specialty.”⁵

Joseph Kopser also supports this position in *Mentoring in the Army: Not Everybody Gets It*, where he states that mentees must “work to maintain the relationship as it progresses. Mentors will distinguish themselves from acquaintances as time passes. It is your responsibility [as the mentee] to maintain the relationship.”⁶

Therefore if successful mentorship occurs when mentees maintain a relationship with mentors they choose, senior leaders can improve their role in this process by deliberately making themselves available to a wider audience than just those assigned to their immediate organization. It is the **duty of the mentor** to make themselves available, and it is the **responsibility of the mentee** to establish and maintain the relationship.

How are mentors chosen?

Generally speaking, mentees choose mentors they “know, trust and feel genuine loyalty toward.”⁷ More specifically, mentees choose mentors they have worked for or seen in a professional setting. Unless there is a deliberate process in place, mentees rarely select mentors outside of this limited scope because they don't even **know** anyone else is even a possibility. Therefore improving the pool of mentors a mentee has to select from will improve the likelihood a high-performing subordinate can find the right mentor.

If we are serious as a profession about identifying, promoting and retaining the most talented people, senior leaders must make a conscious, deliberate effort to engage with and make themselves available to high-performing subordinates across the Army. To build the “mutual trust and respect”⁸ required for the mentoring outlined in AR 600-100, it is essential for senior leaders to leverage formal and informal interactions to build the relationships required to truly get to know the high-performing Soldiers, NCOs and officers in their respective fields.

How can senior leaders improve the way they mentor?

Identify and advocate for high performers in your organization. The first step senior leaders must do in the talent-management process is clearly identify the top 5 percent to 10 percent of performers within their organizations.

During formal and informal interactions, it is incumbent on senior leaders to understand the personal and professional goals of each high-performing subordinate as well as the knowledge, skills and behaviors that will potentially make them successful in future jobs.

Senior leaders must understand their top performers will not always choose to be their mentees; however, it is the professional duty of senior leaders to create opportunities for high-performing subordinates to select the best possible mentor for their personal and professional goals. Senior leaders must advocate for these individuals to their higher headquarters as well as to other senior leaders in similar organizations.

Although the Assignment Interactive Module 2.0 move cycles are the most logical place for senior leaders to advocate for high performers, they should not be the only time high-performing subordinates are being discussed. Senior leaders should always be looking for opportunities to give their high-performing subordinates access to other potential mentors across the Army.

Identify high performers across the Army. Once senior leaders clearly understand the high performers in their organization, they must deliberately seek out high performers across the Army. Although this seems like an impossible task, branch managers at Human Resources Command (HRC) regularly compile this type of information to give senior leaders an accurate assessment of the Soldiers, NCOs and officers across various organizations.

Another method for senior leaders to identify top performers is to engage peers and superiors across the Army. Once a senior leader determines a list of high-performing subordinates, it is essential to develop a plan on how to formally or informally engage these top performers.

Direct engagement. The easiest way to engage a high-performing subordinate is to make direct contact. Direct engagement can be described as a point-to-point email, a phone call or an in-person meeting at a predetermined location. In a direct engagement, it is important for the senior leader to clearly articulate to the high-performing subordinate that this meeting, phone call or email is the first in a series of potential engagements aimed at building a professional relationship.

The high performer should also understand that the senior leader is making himself or herself available as a potential mentor. The initial goal of a direct engagement is to get to know each other; the long-term goal of a direct engagement is a potential mentor-mentee relationship.

Virtual leader engagements or newsletters. Another option for senior leaders to engage high-performing subordinates is through virtual leader engagements or newsletters. Similar to direct engagements, senior leaders send high performers emails or phone calls and invite them to participate in a virtual leader engagement or periodic newsletter. These virtual leader engagements and newsletters can cover any relevant topic in the profession.

However, the main goal of the interaction between senior leaders and high-performing subordinates should be that the senior leader is making themselves available as a potential mentor. The initial goal of virtual leader engagements or newsletters is to provide an avenue for high performers to make direct contact with senior leaders; the long-term goal is for senior leaders and high performers to get to know each other and develop a potential mentor-mentee relationship.

Official visits and/or in-person leader-professional-development (LPD) seminars. Senior leaders should also consider using official visits or professional conferences as a venue to engage high-performing subordinates across the Army. As senior leaders plan temporary-duty travel to conduct official business, they should allocate a portion of their allocated time to visit with high performers at the temporary-duty location.

Similar to direct engagement, virtual leader engagement or newsletters, official visits and LPD seminars should begin by notifying a high-performing subordinate that a senior leader plans to visit them during their travels. If this option is not feasible, senior leaders could also directly invite high performers to an in-person LPD seminar or social event during their visit.

The initial goal of meeting during official visits or hosting an event is to provide the opportunity for high performers to make direct contact with senior leaders. As previously mentioned, the long-term goal is a potential mentor-mentee relationship.

Other options. There are many ways for senior leaders to reach high-performing subordinates. These options include, but are not limited to, all forms of social media and social-networking sites. If senior leaders choose to use alternate methods to reach high performers, the most important thing to remember is to make an initial connection as direct as possible.

What's the next step?

Role of the senior leader. Once a senior leader signals to a high performer that he or she is available as a potential mentor, senior leaders should make periodic contact to remind the potential mentee that they still have a vested interest in their future development. In addition to maintaining periodic contact, senior leaders should also continue to advocate for their high performers to other senior leaders across the Army as well as to the branch managers at HRC.

Role of the high-performing subordinate. If a Soldier is ever contacted by a battalion-level leader or above outside their chain of command, the Soldier should do everything he or she can to get to know the senior leader. Treat these formal or informal engagements as an opportunity to grow personally and professionally, and keep an eye out for the cues that encourage direct communication. In the end, the Soldier is ultimately responsible for maintaining the mentor-mentee relationship.

Conclusion

Since 1775, the U.S. Army has been successful due to the people who comprise its formations. The Army's success can also be attributed to the professional military education for its officers and NCOs. As the Army modernizes our talent-management processes, it is essential for senior leaders to update the way they mentor high-performing subordinates. As GEN James C. McConville has previously said, "We are in a war for talent, and we're going after the best and brightest ... and we are going to do what it takes to keep them in the Army."⁸

Senior leaders have the potential to take action and improve the way they mentor high-performing subordinates. With the advent of new technologies and the ease of communication across the globe, senior leaders must make a deliberate effort to identify high performers, make direct contact with them and clearly make themselves available as a potential mentor.

Senior leaders must also advocate for high performers inside and outside of their direct organizations. High-performing subordinates exist everywhere in the Army; it is up to senior leaders to get to know as many of them as possible and then advocate for the best Soldiers for the right job, at the right time ... even if they're not a subordinate who has previously worked for them.

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Notes

¹ Devon Suits; "Talent management will lead Army's push to diverse leadership, says CSA"; Army News Service; March 15, 2021; https://www.army.mil/article/244233/talent_management_will_lead_armys_push_to_diverse_leadership_says_csa.

² Everett Spain, Gautam Mukunda and Archie Bates, "The Battalion Commander Effect," *Parameters*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2021.

³ Thomas Brading; "Chief of staff: Most signature systems to be fielded by 2023, people still No. 1 priority"; Army News Service; Oct. 13, 2021; https://www.army.mil/article/251126/chief_of_staff_most_signature_systems_to_be_fielded_by_2023_people_still_no_1_priority.

⁴ AR 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*; Washington, DC: Department of the Army; April 2017.

⁵ MSG Leslie Renken; “Mentorship: Understanding a Leader’s Investment”; *One Leader to Another Volume II*; U.S. Army Command and General Staff College; 2015, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2017/December/Mentorship/>.

⁶ Joseph Kopser; “Mentoring in the Military: Not Everybody Gets It”; *Military Review*, November-December 2002.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ AR 600-100.

⁹ Suits.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armor brigade combat team

AR – Army regulation

CSA – Chief of Staff of the Army

HRC – Human Resources Command

LPD – leader professional development

NCO – noncommissioned officer

USMA – U.S. Military Academy