

Counseling in the Operational Domain:

A Vital Component to Platoon Leadership

LTC KIRBY “BO” DENNIS

Leader development is achieved through mutually supporting efforts across three domains — the institutional, operational, and individual. While it is generally agreed that no domain is more or less important than the others, performance and developmental counseling is most prominent in the operational domain — and it must remain so. More pointedly, I contend that developmental counseling in the operational domain is the most important and meaningful form of leader development. In his October-December 2018 *Infantry Magazine* article “The Lost Art of Developmental Counseling,” SFC Daniel Signore discusses this critical topic — and does so sensibly, as counseling is a subject that warrants continuous consideration and attention.¹ With this in mind, I offer the following advice to platoon leaders — a cohort that is critical to promoting a culture of counseling within our formations.

1. Don’t Treat Counseling as a Negative Interaction

Oftentimes, we immediately think in negative terms when we hear the word “counseling.” While an individual’s past performance failures and weaknesses are certainly fair game for any professional discussion, the tone of counseling sessions should generally be positive and centered around future successes. With this in mind, an effective counseling technique is to speak to your audience about their areas of weakness through the lens of potential. In his article, SFC Signore’s thesis is that effective counseling can unlock potential — and he is exactly right. Importantly, I am not arguing that performance counseling should not highlight areas of weakness; on the contrary, I firmly believe that leaders benefit from direct feedback on individual deficiencies. The manner in how you communicate these deficiencies is critical though, and effective counselors must learn how to speak to areas of weakness in a way that motivates their audience to embrace the feedback and set out to make improvement. Easier said than done, right? Not really! If you are a company commander, you have insight on what makes a successful first sergeant, so use this as counseling material for your platoon sergeants — who are generally aspiring to serve at the next level. Similarly, as a platoon leader, you have firsthand knowledge on what makes a platoon sergeant effective in his duties, so provide this to your squad leaders during counseling sessions — who are generally trying to succeed and be future platoon sergeants

themselves. To be sure, each counseling session will be tailored to a specific subordinate’s performance and potential, and a variety of techniques will undoubtedly be employed. However, a leader’s ability to link performance to potential and speak in terms that motivate are important skills that will enhance the counseling experience for all involved.

2. Adopt a Training and Combat Mentality to Counseling

As a young platoon leader, I learned that in order to effectively maneuver my platoon during training and in combat, I had to clearly communicate to my squad leaders in both the planning and execution phases of an operation. As a battalion commander 16 years later, this remains the case — as my platoon leaders inherently understood the value of forging strong tactical relationships with their squad leaders. After all, the squad leader is charged with ensuring the success of the breach, support by fire, and assault — so clear communication and shared understanding is critically important. At the same time, however, many of my platoon leaders did not necessarily view their daily (or non-tactical) relationships through the same lens. In short, platoon leaders should view their “counseling relationship” with their squad leaders in the same manner as their “tactical relationship” — just without the radio. If this mindset is adopted, I believe that the tenets of mission command — clear communication, shared understanding, and mutual trust — can be realized in all environments.

3. Consider Your Philosophy and Make Counseling a Battle-Rhythm Event

Meetings, field training, and physical training (PT) dominate our outlook calendars, not to mention the dozens of other events that demand time and attention. If executed properly, you will likely get a calendar reminder for a counseling session at least once a week. SFC Signore argues that counseling should be executed on payday activities, which is one technique to ensure counseling is executed through a deliberate battle-rhythm event. Regardless of the eventual schedule that is adopted, a platoon leader should ask a few questions regarding his counseling philosophy. Do I counsel team leaders in my platoon? If so, how often? How will my formal counseling sessions for squad leaders differ from my daily interactions

so that it has the most meaning and impact? Do I counsel my weapons squad leader differently than my other, more junior squad leaders? How often do I counsel my platoon sergeant? What time of day and month do I counsel to ensure that my time is protected? I could go on and on, but the simple point is that thought must be given to your counseling philosophy and “battle rhythm.” If one does the math, platoon leaders likely have eight to 10 NCOs in their platoon to counsel on a monthly or quarterly basis. While effective counseling should not be defined by a specific length of time, I have personally found that it takes at least 90 to 120 minutes per counseling session to achieve a level of dialogue that is meaningful to both the counselor and the counseled. With these conservative estimates in mind, platoon leaders should plan to devote nine to 12 hours each month in some form of counseling environment with their subordinate NCOs. If we devoted this much time to any other event in our professional lives, we would most assuredly plan and resource it properly. In the end, counseling is one of the most important things we do as professionals — just like live-fire exercises and PT. Therefore, ensure you devote the right amount of time to executing this mission and make it a battle-rhythm event.

4. Approach Counseling from a Position of Confidence

My experience tells me that ineffective counselors struggle with issues of confidence, and as a result, they tend to avoid the mission of counseling all together. Undoubtedly, confidence can take time to develop; however, the mission of counseling begins immediately upon assuming platoon leadership duties. Simply stated, effective counseling that is confidently delivered is the product of deliberate preparation. The legendary Arthur Ashe stated, “One important key to success is self-confidence. An important key to self-confidence is preparation.” Ashe’s insight should resonate with leaders of all ranks, but particularly our company-grade leaders navigating the thorny issues associated with leadership. There are numerous preparation techniques to employ, among them are asking your first sergeant for insight prior to counseling, discussing strengths and weaknesses of your squad leaders with your platoon sergeant, taking time to write down and think about your own observations, and developing a theme for each counseling session. Stumbling into a counseling session without proper preparation is not only a waste of time, but it sends tacit signals to subordinates that their development is not a priority. Don’t make this mistake — take the time to prepare for one of your most important missions as a platoon leader.

5. Ask Subordinates for Feedback on Your Performance

GEN Colin Powell once said, “There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.” As leaders and counselors, we should solicit subordinate feedback at times to become more effective, and as GEN Powell noted, learn from our own failures. Generally speaking, professional feedback is delivered through a

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top-down approach, but we shouldn’t constrain the forms or sources of feedback we need to receive. At the end of a counseling session, I encourage leaders to solicit feedback from subordinates on their own performance — a simple technique that invests subordinates in the conversation and demonstrates a level of professional trust between the two parties. Moreover, asking subordinates to verbally communicate professional shortcomings to their superior is a herculean request — but make no mistake, it is a form of development that the subordinate will benefit from. Professionally communicating areas of weakness underpins the learning culture that makes the Army profession so strong, which is most evident in the Army’s after action review (AAR) process. Platoon leaders who have executed a Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation certainly understand this, as the AAR is the centerpiece to every unit’s CTC experience. So if we rightfully take AARs so seriously as it pertains to organizational performance, shouldn’t we do the same for our own personal performance? Subordinate feedback can be incredibly powerful and beneficial — so ask for it.

Counseling is the foundational event for professional development — and it must be delivered through a program that aims to not only identify weakness and deficiency but also pinpoint strengths and positive leader attributes. Effective counseling is a skill that requires practice and repetition, much like learning doctrine or improving physical fitness or public speaking. Indeed, an effective counselor can positively impact generations of Soldiers, and as such, is an aspect of our professional lives that demands our attention and energy.

Notes

¹ SFC Daniel Signore, “The Lost Art of Developmental Counseling,” *Infantry Magazine* (October-December 2018), https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2018/OCT-DEC/pdf/12_Signore_Counsel.pdf.

LTC Kirby “Bo” Dennis is an Infantry officer currently assigned to the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson, CO. Most recently, he commanded the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. The 2-12 IN recently returned from a nine-month tour in Afghanistan.