

# **A Pattern of Neglect: The Concerning State of Army Counseling**

**MAJ Tad Granai**

For some time now, many U.S. Army leaders have neglected their duties in conducting adequate, effective, and routine subordinate counseling.<sup>1</sup> The high tempo of training and frequent deployments since 9/11 have produced an environment of disregard that has brought the current Army counseling system to a near nonexistent state. A greater command influence and individual initiative are not enough to solve the counseling dilemma. It is essential to educate junior leaders and to implement a dynamic accountability strategy that would fix the current counseling system. The Army must act now.

The purpose of this article is three-fold. First, the commentary provides a doctrinal overview for historical context. Second, the article provides multiple case studies which offer a framework for the ongoing issues involving counseling. Third, the article makes suggestions that would assist in resolving current issues in the existing counseling system.

The Army understands the importance of counseling and has regularly published doctrinal references to aid leaders. In 1974, the Army published Field Manual (FM) 22-101, *Leadership Counseling*, which concentrated mainly on developing leader-counseling skills. The manual provided an exhaustive description on the “how to” of counseling while offering practical and role-playing exercises to enhance leadership capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, in 1999, FM 22-100, *Army Leadership*, became a primary resource for counseling. FM 22-100 had an entire appendix dedicated to counseling, which included leader responsibilities, the various types of counseling, and persuasive techniques. Both FM 22-101 and 22-100 provided a counseling framework for leaders.

In 2006, the Army published FM 6-22, *Army Leadership — Competent, Confident, and Agile*. The manual, particularly Appendix B, helped guide leaders through effective counseling.<sup>3</sup> Appendix B states, “Counseling is one of the most important leadership development responsibilities for Army leaders. The Army’s future and the legacy of today’s Army leaders rest on the shoulders of those they help prepare for greater responsibility.” Prominently listed in FM 6-22, Appendix B, is DA Form 4856, the *Army Developmental Counseling Form*. DA 4856 formalizes counseling and assists in the establishment of clearly defined expectations and plans of action for both the counseled and the counselor.

Today, Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, is the doctrinal manual on leadership and counseling. ADP 6-22 states, “Leaders have choices to make about developing others. Leaders choose when and how to coach, counsel, and mentor. Leaders have the freedom to place people in the best situation to maximize their talents. Then the leader provides resources the subordinate needs to succeed, makes expectations clear, and provides positive, meaningful feedback.” Clearly, the onus is on the leader in setting the requisite conditions in providing sufficient developmental counseling of subordinates. ADP 6-22 is the most recent in a long line of ever-changing counseling doctrine.

Currently, multiple tools exist to help the leader in performing effective counseling. The NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER) Support Form (DA 2166-8-1), the Officer Evaluation Report (OER) Support Form (DA 67-10-1A), and the Army Developmental Counseling Form (DA Form 4856) all provide opportunities for teaching, coaching, mentoring, and developing Soldiers and future leaders. The documents allow the leader to explain expectations of the counseled and “what right looks like” in order to succeed. Furthermore, Army Regulation (AR) 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System (ERS)*, details the importance and significance of counseling.

Specifically, the regulation states, “It is easy to speak of ‘getting an OER’ or ‘giving an NCOER,’ but proper leadership and counseling is more intensive than just writing an assessment. The difficulty involved in the evaluation process is it requires all members of the rating chain — the rated Soldier and his leadership — to ensure all the requisite developmental counseling is performed and that personal relationships are maintained.” AR 623-3 and the rest of the present-day counseling tools clearly support the Army counseling system.

Nevertheless, there is no single form, doctrinal manual, or regulation that alone creates a perfect system. It is a leader responsibility to make the Army counseling system a success. Having said that, effective counseling does not always have to take place using written documentation; verbal counseling is a powerful form of counseling conducted on a daily basis. The daily interaction between leader and subordinate builds a solid working relationship that can influence a junior Soldier’s growth. There are obligatory counseling sessions, such as for the OER and NCOER, but powerful and routine non-standard counseling can support a junior Soldier’s development and career progression.<sup>4</sup>

Today’s counseling shortcomings are nothing new to the Army. As early as 1965, Chaplain Irvin Marks published a monograph focusing on his concerns regarding Army counseling. Chaplain Marks described in-depth how chaplains and leaders should handle “ineffective Soldiers.”<sup>5</sup> In the article, he also delineated multiple recommendations for developing Soldiers to their fullest potential, which included the necessity for leaders to truly understand their subordinates as a means for guiding and conducting influential counseling. Also, in early 2012, COL Adam Roth, the deputy assistant commandant for the U.S. Army Engineer School, wrote an article focused on the “lost art of garrison” titled “The Delta: The Challenge of Leading Extraordinary People to Do Ordinary Things.”<sup>6</sup>

COL Roth highlights numerous instances showing outgoing Engineer School students never receiving proper instruction on how to conduct useful subordinate counseling. Years of neglect and misunderstanding have created an Army culture which has overlooked the critical nature of counseling.<sup>7</sup>

In September 2014, *Army* magazine published an article written by MAJ Melanie Kirchoff, which stressed a systemic failure in the current Army counseling system.<sup>8</sup> MAJ Kirchoff interviewed several field grade and general officers to gain senior leader opinions on the effectiveness of the Army counseling system. According to MAJ Kirchoff, the study showed that “the counseling system is underutilized, lacks candid evaluations, and is providing little guidance or follow-through on improvement programs. Coaching and mentoring are practically nonexistent.”<sup>9</sup> MAJ Kirchoff provides two recommendations for improving the quality of Army counseling.

First, and most importantly, she calls on greater command influence throughout the chain of command to employ the existing counseling structure. Second, MAJ Kirchoff believes leader training and the inclusion of counseling packets in organizational inspection programs (OIP) would improve the failing system. MAJ Kirchoff provides solid options for refining an Army counseling system in serious decline.

There are certainly things that the Army can do to improve its counseling record. Five potential solutions exist for revitalizing leader culpability. First, to assist in accountability, the Army could develop an online system to aid counselors, commanders, and leaders in tracking the who, what, where, when, and why of counseling through the use of Army Knowledge Online (AKO). AKO offers an efficient method for keeping leadership and Soldiers “on azimuth” with the standards generated by doctrine and in meeting counseling requirements. The use of a centralized system like AKO could benefit the Soldier, leader, and the Army, as it would alert Soldiers and supervisors of a scheduled or required counseling session. AKO could establish a system for the counseled to anonymously provide frank feedback on the value of the counseling session in efforts to improve the overall Army system. Moreover, AKO could categorize the

forms of counseling and note if a delinquency exists. Similar to the “My Medical” or “My Training” portion of AKO, the “My Counseling” section would serve as the administrative supporter to both the counselor and counseled as an online enabler.

Second, the Army could re-emphasize some of the ideas from the often forgotten “payday activities.” In the past, payday activities was a once-a-month garrison event which routinely included inspections of dress uniforms and barracks cleanliness. More importantly, however, payday activities regularly encompassed monthly counseling of Soldiers and subordinates. With the re-invigoration of payday activities, the Army could support and place the needed emphasis on scheduled counseling without creating any significant changes to a unit’s monthly battle rhythm. A return to a consistent implementation of payday activities would have the intended consequences of developing junior officers and Soldiers while reinstating a garrison tradition.

Third, as part of its NCOER and OEF process, it would behoove the Army to include a clear way of indicating that a Soldier received proper counseling (not just what is mandated) throughout the year. As MAJ Kirchoff recommended, counseling packets should be a routinely inspected item on an OIP.<sup>10</sup> In recent evaluation forms, such as the obsolete DA 67-9 OER, there was a requirement for the rater to indicate if an appropriate level of counseling took place. However, the Army failed to employ a system of “checks and balances” as it never verified if consistent counseling actually materialized.

MAJ Kirchoff’s argument for scrutinizing counseling packets during OIPs would not only help ensure that routine and personalized counseling transpired, but it would also promote a “culture of counseling” throughout the Army that would influence the next generation of Army leaders.

Fourth, unit leadership should incorporate “how to conduct effective” counseling sessions into their periodic leadership professional development (LPD) programs since counseling requirements impact both NCOs and officers. Through the conduct of LPDs, leaders at all levels provide the needed command emphasis on the importance of counseling. Using the LPD program to improve the counseling capabilities of all leaders would ensure a shared understanding of this vital responsibility while building “garrison” competencies required for developing future Army leadership.

Fifth, the Army must do a better job incorporating and expanding the art of counseling in the school house, starting in the Basic Leaders Course through captains career courses. As mentioned by Roth, junior leaders depart the school house lacking the requisite knowledge on how to conduct influential counseling of subordinates. To help solve this problem, the Army should immediately institute a greater academic emphasis on counseling at all junior leader schools.

By implementing these five recommendations coupled with those highlighted by Kirchoff, Roth, and Marks, the Army can make huge strides in repairing a defunct counseling system. Soldier improvement takes place over time through learning, training, observing, and experiencing the daily challenges of the Army. The Army counseling system synthesizes all of these aspects of leader and Soldier development through honesty and candor. However, almost 15 years of war and continuous conflict have put a dent in this important leadership responsibility. Commanders and leaders have allowed critical events like counseling to become a secondary task. To solve the crisis, this article recommends the enactment of five initiatives: a counseling tracker on AKO, an evaluation of counseling packets as part of a mandatory portion of OIPs, the revitalization of “payday activities” to normalize routine counseling, improving upon institutional counseling instruction, and the incorporation of counseling within the unit-level LPD program.

Counseling has become a lost art, which requires a mental paradigm shift to once again place this developmental function at the top of any leader’s priority list. There is an art and science to war which

should also be applied to the Army counseling system. In the case of leader development, the science of synchronizing counseling will support the artful essence of steady, but more importantly meaningful, one-on-one counseling for the most important asset the Army has to offer — the Soldier.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Melanie Kirchhoff, “Does the Army Promote Competence in its Officers?” *Army* 64, no. 9 (09, 2014): 24.

<sup>2</sup> Field Manual (FM) 22-101, *Leadership Counseling* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1974), i.

<sup>3</sup> Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), i.

<sup>4</sup> AR 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System*, B-3.

<sup>5</sup> Irvin Marks, “Counseling the Ineffective Soldier” (Monograph, Army Chaplain School, 1965), 21, accessed 7 March 2015,

[https://archive.org/stream/counselingineffe00mark/counselingineffe00mark\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/counselingineffe00mark/counselingineffe00mark_djvu.txt).

<sup>6</sup> COL Adam S. Roth, “The Delta: The Challenge of Leading Extraordinary People to Do Ordinary Things.” *Engineer* 42, no. 1 (January 2012): 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> AR 6-23-3, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Kirchhoff, 25.

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