

The Lost Art of Developmental Counseling

SFC DANIEL SIGNORE

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When you hear the words developmental counseling, what comes to mind? Do you view the upcoming session as a “check the block” requirement from a laundry list of tasks? Do you often find yourself copying and pasting the same verbiage and bullet points from Soldier to Soldier? Or maybe, when you finally get around to conducting the session, it’s executed more as a formality, with the supervisor talking at the subordinate rather than encouraging two-way communication.

Many are guilty of powering through monthly counselings. Along with the ever-increasing operations tempo today’s Army faces, as leaders we’re responsible for ensuring several tasks get accomplished in a short amount of time. However, short-changing developmental counselings is not the best leadership approach for making your session effective. This will result in failing to develop your subordinates, which then fails to develop the larger Army. Learning to listen during a counseling session and develop a plan together will increase the engagement, collaboration, and respect between supervisor and subordinate.¹

Ancient armies realized the positive impact performance counseling had on their Soldiers. The book *Leadership Lessons from the Ancient World: How Learning from the Past Can Win You in the Future* closely examines the leadership examples of ancient rulers. For example, the Roman army, considered the backbone of the Roman Empire and one of the fiercest fighting forces in world history, placed a heavy emphasis on leadership development.² Military training and discipline were stringent. Leaders focused on identifying gaps in performance, then used creativity and common sense to develop their Soldiers.

Why is counseling a lost art? First, let’s be clear that the intent for writing this article is not to make counseling experts, but to bring back awareness to the importance counseling plays in a Soldier’s career and personal development while also giving leaders some tools to make their counseling sessions more effective. Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-22.1, *The Counseling Process*, states, “Counseling is the process used by leaders to review with a subordinate the subordinate’s demonstrated performance and potential.”

Retired Army GEN Colin Powell, a former national security advisor, once said, “Leadership is the art of getting people to do more than the science of management says is possible.”³ We know how to fill out a Department of the Army (DA) Form 4856. But the art of the counseling is more than just reviewing subordinates’ performance: it’s unlocking their potential.

We must realize that the whole counseling process starts with communication. Genuine communication builds trust. But two-way communication is the essential element of any counseling session. According to Melinda Fouts, “It’s about mental awareness and being present in the moment. When you are talking mindfully, you are conscious of the words you choose. You think before you speak and make a conscious decision to use your best communication in a respectful manner, even if it’s a difficult situation.”⁴

This allows leaders to share information about goals, issues Soldiers are currently facing, and other key points of discussion to reach a solution that’s best for the Soldier’s development. The following are helpful tips for conducting a productive counseling session:

Find a Good Location

Communication is the key to a productive session, and it is difficult to communicate effectively with multiple distractions around (for example, loud noises, people walking by, etc.). Something as simple as sitting a subordinate down in a quiet setting shows them that you’re serious about making a connection and are truly there to help.⁵



A career counselor (right) with the 4th Infantry Division explains reenlistment options to another Soldier in Kandahar, Afghanistan. (Photo by SGT Antony S. Lee)

Schedule Counselings

If we value counseling sessions, then we need to ensure we set aside time for these sessions to take place. Schedule them during payday activities. This helps because you're already in your dress uniform and tactical training is unlikely to occur. Second, both parties present a professional appearance, which coincides well with setting the right atmosphere.

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Amy Adams (n.d.) recommends including six to 10 open-ended questions in a counseling to help counsees reflect on their performance and goals.⁶ If subordinates are allowed to help develop their own conclusions, they are more likely to follow mutually agreed upon solutions.

Identify Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

This adds relevance and productivity to the session and gives you and your subordinate the feeling of working towards mutual goals. Revisit those goals during future counseling sessions and document your findings in the assessment portion. If you're having trouble identifying goals and benchmarks, refer to a career map. For more detailed guidance reference DA Pamphlet 600-25, *U.S. Army NCO Professional Development Guide*.

The "I Agree" Box Enigma

The "I agree" box in part III of DA Form 4856, session closing, states whether the subordinate agrees or disagrees with the plan of action.⁷ The space provided underneath is the subordinate's opportunity to provide why he/she disagrees. The subordinate's signature constitutes that he/she understands the plan of action, not necessarily that he/she agrees with it (the Soldier had the opportunity to annotate this earlier). I've seen on many negative counselings where the leader has written "Soldier refused to sign" on the signature block after the Soldier disagreed with the information above. This should not be the case given the purpose of the signature block. The leader should communicate to the Soldier that the signature does not constitute conformity, but rather an understanding of the plan and what is required of them as the person being counseled.

For example, if the plan of action states, "Hand write a 350-word essay on accountability due by tomorrow," the subordinate may disagree with this, believing that the punishment is too harsh and check the "I disagree" box. However, the Soldier will sign stating that he/she understands what was assigned.

Type the Counseling in Real-Time

Too many counselings are pre-typed and give off the appearance of a standardized formality. Copying and pasting previous bullets will increase the chance of your counseling looking "cookie-cutter" and that you don't care about your subordinate's development. RallyPoint recommends that while you're talking to your subordinates, document

their performance, identify goals, and plan for their future while typing it on the spot.⁸ Then, review it with them, and afterwards, have them digitally sign and save it to a folder for you to print later.

This is a proven and efficient method that works well in terms of communication and building trust. If you need more room, utilize a continuation counseling in the format of a memo or another sheet of paper and attach it to the DA Form 4856.

Have the Counseling Packet Present

Counseling sessions are also about being proactive in identifying issues. Ensure that you have your Soldiers' Leave and Earnings Statement (LES), Soldier Record Brief (SRB), work order requests, Soldier issues, Record of Emergency Data (Department of Defense Form 93), etc., present so you can review these documents and identify potential problems. This is also an opportunity to look through the counseling packet and update information to include the assessment portion on the previous month's counseling.

Don't forget to review family information to ensure nothing has changed. For example, at foreign duty stations, whether or not the Soldier's spouse is command-sponsored is important and something that the command needs to know. Is the recently married Soldier receiving the correct Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH)? What is the status on the work orders you requested for your single Soldier(s) in the barracks? Is all personal vehicle information up to date? These are a few questions to ask at every session to ensure the well-being and personal readiness of your Soldiers.

Conclusion

Development comes in many forms, and counseling is an important part of it. If you follow the strategies provided, counseling sessions may go smoother and help your Soldiers become more attentive. The more time taken to mentor subordinates, the more we're investing in our future as an Army. It is up to NCOs to demonstrate the blueprint for success when counseling Soldiers.

Notes

¹ Melinda Fouts, Ph.D., "How to Become More Mindful of Your Communication," *Forbes*, 5 June 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/06/05/how-to-become-more-mindful-of-your-communication/#5f6d3b841460>.

² Arthur Cotterell, Roger Lowe, and Ian Shaw, *Leadership Lessons from the Ancient World: How Learning from the Past Can Win You the Future* (West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2006).

³ Colin Powell, "Why Leadership Matters in the Department of State. 2003," (Speech given on 28 October 2003). Retrieved from <https://govleaders.org/powell-speech.htm>.

⁴ Fouts, "How to Become More Mindful."

⁵ Eric Jackson, "Ten Biggest Mistakes Bosses Make in Performance Reviews," *Forbes*, 9 January 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2012/01/09/ten-reasons-performance-reviews-are-done-terribly/#15ca15395ee0Jackson>.

⁶ Amy Adams, "A First-time Manager's Guide to Performance Reviews," *The Muse*. Retrieved from <https://www.themuse.com/advice/a-firsttime-managers-guide-to-performance-reviews>.

⁷ Department of the Army Form 4856, *Developmental Counseling Form*. Retrieved from <https://armypubs.army.mil/>.

⁸ RallyPoint (2017). Retrieved from <https://www.rallypoint.com/answers/what-are-your-pet-peeves-regarding-da-form-4856-and-2166-8-1-counseling-forms-and-sessions>.

SFC Daniel Signore currently serves as a platoon sergeant with the 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, HI.