

Developmental Counseling

A crucial component of effective leadership, developmental counseling is the most direct way NCOs can stimulate growth and improvement in Soldiers under their care. Through a collaborative effort, Soldiers can discover what they are doing right, what they are doing wrong and the areas they should focus for continued advancement.

While counseling is viewed by some as only a negative consequence, its intended purpose is to provide a constructive, two-way consultation regarding a Soldier's past performance and his or her potential for growth.

According to FM 6-22, *Army Leadership*, counseling should be a positive and continuous process that is focused not only on today's problem or issue, but also looks ahead to finding solutions and devising plans for a Soldier's professional development. Yet, without active participation from and dialogue with the subordinate, counseling becomes a one-way lecture that produces limited results.

Army counseling focuses on a particular event, one's performance or one's professional growth. Event-based counseling can result from an instance of superior or substandard performance, a crisis, reception into a unit or one's departure. Performance-based counseling is centered on reviewing past accomplishments and establishing future objectives. The purpose of professional growth counseling is to assist a subordinate in achieving organizational and individual goals.

For leaders to be successful counselors, they must view the counseling process as a shared endeavor that honors the roles, functions and limitations of both the counselor and the subor-



Sgt. Christopher Bucci counsels Sgt. Joseph Biggs during a role-playing exercise at the Fort Bliss NCO Academy in February.

dinate. Likewise, subordinates must be committed to improving themselves and be candid in their assessments. Five key characteristics for effective counselors to keep in mind:

PURPOSE: The reason for a counseling session must be well-defined up front. Leaders should not confuse a subordinate's issues with their own. Approach the process in an objective manner.

FLEXIBILITY: A counselor should tailor his or her approach to the needs of the subordinate and the relationship that needs to develop. A generic or one-

size-fits-all method will not work well.

RESPECT: Similarly, it is important to remember that subordinates are unique, complex individuals, each with a distinct set of values, beliefs and attitudes. These must all be taken into account for a counseling conversation to be productive.

COMMUNICATION: Ultimately, the goal of counseling is to establish open, two-way communication using spoken language, non-verbal actions, gestures and body language. Sometimes, a leader's non-verbal actions alone may be enough to convince a subordinate of support in a particular matter.

SUPPORT: Actions do speak louder than words. A leader's supportive measures during and after a session will help guide a Soldier through his or her issue.

Most important to remember is that counseling is a continual process, directed as much toward identifying and cultivating the potential within a counselee as it is toward reviewing performance. With the proper approach, it can be a powerful tool to achieve the leader's perennial goal of developing subordinates to one day fill the leader's shoes.



How to counsel: The 4-stage process

1 IDENTIFY THE NEED

Counseling is appropriate any time the need arises for a **focused, two-way communication** aimed at Soldier development. However, it may also be a requirement if the command deems it necessary.

2 PREPARE

Select a suitable **place and time** that will be free of distractions. **Notify the Soldier** well in advance to allow him or her to adequately prepare. **Organize and review** all pertinent information, and **plan** how you will conduct the counseling session.

3 CONDUCT

Open the session by explaining its purpose. **Discuss the issues** at hand, allowing the Soldier to do most of the talking. **Practice the counseling skills** noted in the box at right while attempting to build in the Soldier **an understanding** of the issue, its impact and opportunities for improvement. Together, develop a **plan of action** to achieve the desired results. Finally, **close and record the session**, summarizing its key points on DA Form 4856.

4 FOLLOW UP

The counseling process shouldn't end with the counseling session. Continue to support the Soldier via **teaching, mentoring** or by scheduling **additional sessions**.

EFFECTIVE COUNSELING SKILLS

To counsel effectively, NCOs must employ techniques that match the situation, their own capabilities and the expectations of their subordinate. As a counselor, you must consistently develop and improve your own counseling abilities by studying human behavior, learning the kinds of problems that affect your followers and developing your interpersonal skills.

What to do:

- ✓ **Eye contact:** Maintaining eye contact without staring helps show sincere interest. Occasional breaks are normal and acceptable; but, paper shuffling or clock-watching may display a lack of interest or concern.
- ✓ **Body posture:** A relaxed and comfortable posture helps put the individual at ease. However, a too-relaxed position implies a lack of interest.
- ✓ **Head nods:** Occasional head nodding indicates you are paying attention and encourages the individual to continue or elaborate.
- ✓ **Facial expressions:** Natural and relaxed expressions can put the Soldier at ease and enable him or her to speak in greater detail.
- ✓ **Verbal expressions:** Let the Soldier do the talking, while keeping the discussion on the subject at hand.

- ✓ **Non-verbal cues:** By watching an individual's actions, you can identify the emotions behind his or her words. Drumming on the table may indicate boredom; standing tall indicates self-confidence; making sarcastic comments indicates defensiveness.
- ✓ **Questioning:** Use this skill carefully. Too many questions can make a Soldier passive or defensive. Ask questions to obtain information or to get the Soldier to think deeper.

What not to do:

- ✗ **Dominate the conversation:** Talking too much and constantly interrupting indicates that you aren't actively listening and are uninterested in what the counselee has to say.
- ✗ **Make rash judgments:** Avoid stereotypes and prejudices; draw conclusions that are based on more factors than the subordinate's statement.
- ✗ **Lose emotional control:** Remain objective. Try to understand what the subordinate is saying and feeling while displaying empathy.
- ✗ **Ignore your limitations:** Army leaders cannot help everyone in every situation. Recognize your personal limitations and refer the Soldier to other resources when required.

