

Mentoring, Coaching, and Counseling: Toward A Common Understanding*

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“It is only as we develop others that we permanently succeed.”

- Harvey Firestone

In the classic case of Abbott and Costello’s comedy act, “Who’s on First,” both Abbott and Costello are speaking the same language and using the same words, but there is little understanding of each other and the message that they are really trying to convey. Sometimes, you can feel the same confusion when talking with colleagues about how to help our junior leaders develop. There is a justifiable problem in finding a common definition or understanding of the words we hear tossed around during such conversations: mentor, coach, and counsel. These terms mean different things to different people between services and are even changing in Army doctrine. Each of these words has a descriptive definition wherein the word labels an individual as having a certain role, e.g., a mentor for your career, the coach of the football team, or the school counselor. In addition, each of these terms also has an action definition describing functions a person performs, e.g., providing counsel and guidance to develop professionally is to mentor, instructing and teaching plays to the football team is to coach, and giving advice is to counsel.

Recently, the meanings of these words have been evolving in military doctrine as each of the military services attempts to define these terms in light of their application within the profession of arms. The U.S. Army has taken a hard look at leader development, resulting in changes in the definitions of these terms in the new leadership doctrine. Perhaps the biggest change is in how the Army views the function of mentoring. To help us gain clarity in what these terms should mean to us, let’s take a look at each of them, starting with mentoring.

MENTORING

One of the challenges in discussing mentoring is that there is a difference when people use “mentor” as a verb and use “mentor” as a noun. When referring to mentoring subordinates versus the individual who is a mentor to another, there is the tendency to combine the descriptive and action meanings of mentor. Mentor comes from Greek mythology and is the name (Mentor) of the wise and trusted counselor whom Odysseus chose for his son Telemachus. The new Army leadership doctrine defines mentoring as “the voluntary developmental relationship that exists between a person of greater experience and a person of lesser experience that is characterized by mutual trust and respect.”¹ This definition is much more in line with the less inclusive view of mentor as a noun and refers back to the person, Mentor.

The Army’s leadership field manual, FM 6-22, captures this change in leadership doctrine and further expounds upon mentoring relationships. A key point highlighted in FM 6-22 is that mentoring is not confined to senior-subordinate relationships, but may also be found between peers and “notably between senior NCOs and junior officers.” This distinction expands the mentoring relationship beyond one of rank, but it also focuses on the aspect of a mentor as one with more experience helping to develop someone else based on their developmental needs. This change in doctrine shifts the emphasis of the action of mentoring from an inclusive view of a leader serving as the wise and trusted counselor for every soldier in the command to the view of a leader as a person who is a wise and trusted counselor to an individual, such as Mentor was to Telemachus. As indicated in the memorandum from the Army senior

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¹ This view of mentor comes from the memorandum entitled, Leaving a Legacy through Mentorship, 1 Jan 2005, signed by F.J. Harvey, Secretary of the Army, GEN Peter J. Schoomaker, Chief of Staff of the Army and Kenneth O. Preston, Sergeant Major of the Army.

leadership, this shift in doctrinal definition does not abrogate the responsibility of every leader to develop their subordinates, but instead adds a responsibility for each leader to open their time to be a mentor to a selected few leaders.

The establishment of a personal nurturing relationship with another professional soldier promotes an environment of leadership development within the Army. Such relationships strengthen not only the individuals involved, but significantly contribute to the improvement of the profession of arms. Research on the next generation of leaders in the Army indicates that the generation entering the armed forces takes a significantly different view of life from the previous generation, sometimes referred to as Generation X. The soldiers entering the force today come increasingly from the “Millennial” Generation. Compared to the mid-career leaders in the Army that come mainly from Generation X, the Millennials are more trusting and are more team-player oriented. They “appear receptive to advice, willing to work hard, and extremely focused on accomplishment.”²

With a generation entering the force that welcomes advice and is motivated to work hard towards goals, perhaps mid-career Army leaders may need to approach leader development differently than they have experienced during their careers. The Army in its new doctrinal approach to mentoring is not mandating a program or requiring each officer to be assigned a mentor. Rather, the new approach reflects the preferences of soldiers as identified in the Army Training and Leader Development Panel (ATLDP) report. The intent of the mentoring program is to foster voluntary relationships, which usually extend outside the chain of command, with an experienced and trusted person. Mentoring within the chain of command has potential detrimental outcomes for the organization. In fact, it may be best to not develop a close, exclusive mentoring relationship with those directly under your supervision since this could easily foster a perception of favoritism or cronyism among those in your command with whom you do not share as close a relationship.

Within the Army the term mentor is used much differently than it was in the past. Even between the military services there is a difference in use of the term mentoring. For example, the Navy views mentoring as formal or informal, but most effective when conducted as a voluntary relationship between a subordinate and an experienced superior, not their first or second level supervisor. In the Navy program "mentoring links employees with experienced professionals for career development. A mentor facilitates personal and professional growth in an employee by sharing the knowledge and insights that have been learned through the years." The Navy mentee selects their mentor based on their developmental needs. The mentor oversees the career development of another, usually junior, person.³

In the United States Marine Corps they have taken a much more formal and mandatory approach to mentorship requiring all Marines to be mentored by the Marine senior to them in the chain of command. The Marine Corps Mentoring Program casts a mentor as a role-model, teacher, guide, and coach. The Marines define mentoring as encompassing all aspects of development in a Marine's life, not just duty performance. The importance they place on this program reflects in the Commandant's guidance that the skills and effectiveness of a leader as a mentor are to be considered when completing fitness reports.⁴

² As summarized in Leonard Wong, *Stifling Innovation: Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today*, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2002) 5.

³Department of the Navy, *Mentoring Program Handbook*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Navy, 2005). (available from Navy Knowledge Online (NKO)).

⁴Message, ALMAR 008/06 142030Z FEB 06, Commandant of the Marine Corps, Subj: The Marine Corps Mentoring Program; available from www.USMC.mil/ALMARS; Internet; accessed 17 May 2006.

Air Force Instruction 36-3401, 1 June 2000, defines a mentor “as a trusted counselor or guide” and further directs that, “The immediate supervisor or rater is designated as the primary mentor (coach, guide, role model, etc.) for each of his or her subordinates.” We can see from these excerpts that the Air Force and the Marines view mentoring as a function of the direct supervisor. The designation of the supervisor as the mentor of all of his subordinates differs significantly with new Army leadership doctrine in FM 6-22, which states that mentorship is characterized by “the voluntary mentoring that goes beyond the chain of command.” Thus, when an Air Force, a Marine, and an Army officer discuss their responsibilities in leader development through mentoring, they may not fully understand what each other are saying since they are using the same word but with different meanings. More importantly, if you are supervised by an officer of another service, or supervise sister service members, you need to clearly understand what this means to the expectations you set for leader development responsibilities. These differing perceptions present yet another challenge to building the joint team.

COACHING

The use of the term mentoring in the Air Force and Marine Corps may be more in line with the Army’s use of the term coach. Confusion in use of the terms mentoring and coaching often arises due to the fact that “one of the functions of a mentor is to coach the protégé or mentee. But whereas mentoring uses many of the same techniques as coaching, mentoring involves going above and beyond.”⁵ A mentor, using the new Army doctrine definition, will not necessarily be in a position to observe the mentee’s daily performance and thus not be in a position to “coach” the mentee on task performance. However, the mentor should help the mentee develop a plan for professional and personal growth and to support the mentee in implementing that plan.

Army doctrine in FM 6-22 defines coaching as “the guidance of another’s person’s development in new or existing skills during the practice of those skills.” This manual goes on to list several steps in the coaching process: focusing the intent, clarifying self-awareness, uncovering potential, eliminating developmental barriers, developing action plans and commitment, follow up, and counseling. Once again, mentoring one’s subordinates could involve all to only some of those steps. The focus of mentorship is what occurs outside the chain of command. A mentor probably would not supervise specific skills or tasks, but should tend to look at the long-term development of the mentee through helping with self-awareness, uncovering potential, developing action plans, and following up. One method of following up is for the mentor to provide feedback to the mentee on their progress towards their goals. Here again we see what may be an overlap in actions between developmental functions.

COUNSELING

In FM 6-22, counseling is defined as “the process used by leaders to review with a subordinate the subordinate’s demonstrated performance and potential.” The Army, views counseling as a central function for developing leaders. “Focused on the subordinate, it produces a plan outlining actions that subordinates must take to achieve individual and organizational goals.” Three types of counseling are delineated: performance, event, and professional growth counseling. Event counseling focuses on helping a subordinate with a specific situation or event and could be associated more with coaching. On the other hand, performance counseling, which focuses on reviewing a subordinate’s duty performance during a specific period, could either be part of coaching or mentoring. Just to confuse the issue, professional growth counseling is an aspect of mentoring, but could be a part of coaching, depending on whether the focus is on personal or organizational goals. However, in the Army, raters have a responsibility to

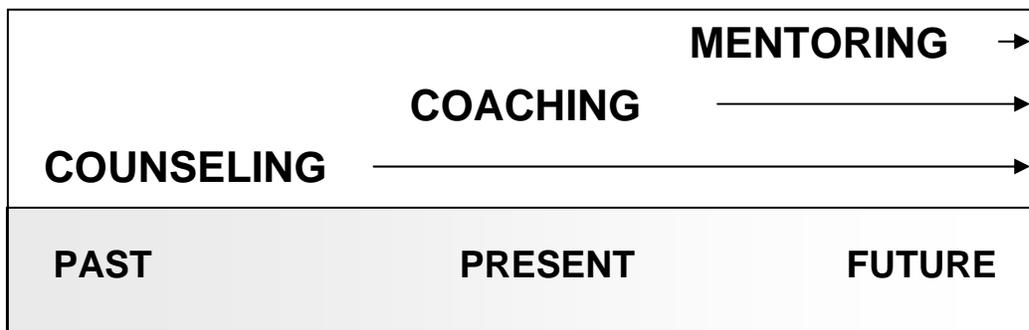
⁵ Florence M. Stone, *Coaching, Counseling & Mentoring: How to Choose & Use the Right Technique to Boost Employee Performance* (New York: American Management Association, 1999), 160-1.

conduct professional growth counseling of their subordinates. There is so much overlap in the three terms that one needs to take a bigger picture view of the intent behind each concept.

SUMMARY

At the macro level, FM 6-22 tells us that mentoring is “a future oriented developmental activity, focused on growing in your profession. It uses advice and feedback linked to the actual experience of the mentor.” Coaching “focuses on improving performance through skill-based training, motivation and feedback.” Counseling is given “in response to demonstrated performance, ranging from poor to exceptional.”

One way to view these terms is through their relationship in time. Mentoring looks at the future and at potential; coaching looks at the present and how to improve to a future state and is more skill focused; and counseling looks at the past and how to improve for the future. Counseling is part of coaching, and coaching is part of mentoring.



Another way to view these terms is in light of who is doing what to whom. Counseling is primarily conducted by raters with their subordinates. Coaching may be by a superior, but more frequently will be performed by a technical expert, teacher, etc. Mentoring is better left to someone of considerable experience, outside the chain of command. Yet another view would be from the object of the developmental interaction. Counseling would focus on demonstrated job performance, coaching would focus on performing specific tasks or skills, and mentoring would focus more on developing the capabilities and competencies required for future positions. There is overlap in the functions associated with each term, but each term has its place in leader development.

Mentor is often used in the sense of the verb to mentor, which is to give wise counsel and advice as one who is trusted. In FM 6-22 the Army clarifies the definition of mentor aligning it with the noun usage of mentor, a person who is a wise and trusted counselor. With this emphasis in the definition, leaders should not and cannot be a mentor to all of their subordinates. This responsibility is too time consuming and important for a leader to try to do so, especially when this relationship extends beyond the immediate supervisory role and beyond the chain of command. Taking this to extremes, the more people a leader supervises, the more potential the number of mentees could run into the hundreds and thousands over time. On the other hand, leaders have a coaching role with all their subordinates as well as the responsibility to counsel them on their performance and professional growth. Through their roles as coaches and counselors, leaders interact with subordinates providing a great opportunity to identify a potential mentor and to identify a future mentoring relationship which could last a career and possibly beyond.

CONCLUSION

When using the terms of mentoring, coaching and counseling, it is important to understand one's audience and the context in which the words are used, since these terms have different meanings to sister services, as well as confusion among Army leaders, especially with the change in emphasis in definitions and doctrine. As doctrine changes in the Army, we have a responsibility to understand the new doctrine and apply it within our own organizations.

Mentoring, coaching, and counseling are at the heart of leader development and are key instruments for improving organizations. Different people may approach the functions differently, but the desired end results are not that different. One of the key tasks of leaders is to develop subordinates, and they should apply their knowledge and experience to develop others outside their chain of command as appropriate. Effective leaders are committed to leader development as a critical part of making their organization better. Our challenge is to understand our various roles in developing leaders and to be able to explain them to those we work with, those we work for, and those who work for us so that the concepts of mentoring, coaching, and counseling become more than words.

- "Who is on first, What is on second, and I Don't Know is on third."
 - Abbott and Costello

