

# Professional Military Education

## *Mentoring Has Value When Your Soldiers Want for Experience*

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U.S. Army

**C**ounseling, coaching and mentoring are three vitally important leader development activities for maintaining excellence and professionalism among the Army's officers, NCOs and civilians. Each activity serves a different purpose. Counseling allows subordinates to receive constructive feedback from their supervisors to improve duty performance. Coaching is how leaders guide their subordinates toward achieving higher levels of knowledge and skills. Mentoring is for more transformational purposes, accelerating the development of professional expertise, maturity, and conceptual and team-building skills. Together, these activities help leaders grow professionally and personally while preparing them for positions of increasing responsibility.

Unfortunately, in practice, counseling, coaching and mentoring (CCM) compete unfavorably for time against all other unit training and readiness requirements. For example, a 2015 study by U.S. Army War College professors Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras described how leaders routinely make false statements about meeting mandatory performance counseling requirements.

Also, the application of CCM in doctrine assumes that all leaders by virtue of their positions have the skills and knowledge to be effective counselors, coaches and mentors. This may be true for counseling, when the supervisor has the experience, training and skills to properly assess performance. Being a leader and being a coach or mentor, however, require vastly different skills. These skills become even more specialized at higher levels. In the public sector, executive coaching has become a commercial enterprise unto itself.

Army Doctrine Readiness Publication 6-22 *Army Leadership* says, "The best development opportunities often occur on the job." Nevertheless, if job assignments do not afford op-

portunities to systematically develop soldiers as prescribed or help leaders become more effective counselors, coaches or mentors, what can be done? The answer lies in adapting professional military education to be a venue for conducting CCM. A renewed emphasis should be placed on CCM through the professional military education system.

We propose a three-step process: building a cadre of certified coaches, allocating appropriate time in professional military education curricula and instituting standards similar to those used in the executive coaching industry.

### **CCM in Military Education Now**

Currently, professional military education programs treat CCM as subjects to be taught, less so as activities exercised within the educational environment. Counseling is the most practiced, as instructors (whether military, civilians or contractors) regularly provide feedback to their students or trainees on skill development, knowledge acquisition, and inculcation of professional norms and values. The quality of counseling can vary significantly among faculty, however, since instructors are chosen foremost for their experience and subject matter expertise.

Coaching and mentoring, on the other hand, are very limited. Although desired, sustained coaching or mentoring relationships between instructors and students during and after educational experiences tend to be the exception and not the rule. As with leaders in the field in operating and generating forces, professional military education instructors also face significant administrative and reporting requirements. In addition, civilians hired as professors under Title 10 (such as at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the U.S. Army War College) are required to maintain rigorous aca-





Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Angelo of the 10th Mountain Division, center, mentors soldiers at Fort Drum, N.Y.



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demographic research and publication standards apart from teaching.

Professional military education programs at all levels are also under pressure to cram additional subject material into their curricula, further crowding out faculty time and energy to devote to coaching and mentoring. Recent examples include mandated requirements to incorporate cultural awareness, combat sexual harassment and assault, embed operational design, and introduce Mission Command. Given the fixed duration of these education programs, each new validated requirement presents program directors with difficult decisions on how to satisfy them in the formal curriculum.

Another factor limiting CCM in professional military education is measurement. It is easy to measure performance of the delivery of subject material and identify student progress through tests, oral presentations, papers or other evaluative activities. It is far more difficult to objectively measure the effects of CCM that tend to manifest themselves over time. In particular, the transformative effects of mentoring may not be perceptible until a specific incident allows its revelation. At intermediate and senior levels, professional military education programs are accredited and resourced based on alignment of skills and knowledge taught against prescribed standards. Cognitive, behavioral and social development does not lend it-

self to objective measurement in the same way, and therefore CCM compete less favorably for resources.

### CCM Need Roots

If CCM are to be invigorated across the Army, then there is a choice of whether their foundation belongs in the operational domain, as currently suggested within the doctrine, or in the institutional domain through education. The latter option presents greater opportunity for success. Among the expectations of professional military education is the moral and ethical development of soldiers as members of the Army profession. This development enables the roles of senior leaders as professional stewards. Thus, educational institutions should serve as centers of excellence in the art and science of CCM.

Scholarship on professional education at both entry and executive levels consistently espouses three intertwined lines of effort oriented on identity, knowledge and skills, mirroring the Army's BE-KNOW-DO philosophy. Given that skills and knowledge are already well-addressed in the extant educational system, now is the time to concentrate on the identity dimension—the BE—within the Army's educational programs.

In parallel to the participation in the formal curriculum, professional military education students should undergo a professional apprenticeship under a trained and qualified coach and mentor. As appropriate, students in intermediate-level and senior service colleges are coached or mentored through the transformation from tactical to organizational and then to strategic leadership. Such focus can change the way the students think about themselves and their profession, thereby enhancing values and ethics, building resilience, and making sense of Marshall Goldsmith's admonition, "What got you here won't get you there."

Unlike the formal curriculum, where skills and knowledge acquired are managed using Bloom's Taxonomy in the cognitive domain, this professional apprenticeship might instead use Bloom's affective domain or other more subjective form

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of measurement. Also, the coaching relationship would follow the students back to the force for a period of time until the student has fully transitioned.

Coaching and mentoring should no longer be an assumed collateral duty for military instructors but a principal function for those who have been appropriately trained and certified to be coaches. Of course, all instructors would continue to counsel their students, but coaching responsibility would be formalized. Current measures of performance and effectiveness used in the coaching industry could be adapted for professional military education to ensure validated metrics for quality coaching. In addition, longitudinal surveys would help determine both effectiveness of coaching and mentoring relationships over time and include improving CCM skills of Army leaders.

### Overcoming Challenges

Arguably, it will be very challenging to transform professional military education in the present budgetary environment, which prevents adding personnel or resources. The changes to professional military education would have to be accomplished locally, likely through short-term experimentation and organizational restructuring as we have seen recently at the U.S. Army War College and the National Defense University. This challenge can be overcome, however, given the proper incentives and current emphasis in the human dimension of leader development by the Army leader.

The second challenge is cultural with the Army's bias toward systems analysis approaches to managing human endeavors. While espousing character development, the practice of professional military education remains governed by empirical measures that are more suited for skills and knowledge. We see an analogue in the recent adoption of design as the method for addressing complex, ill-structured problems. Inculcating the design methodology within Army culture involved letting go of reliance on quantifiable but questionable measures for assessing the situation and making decisions, and instead learning to

qualitatively frame both environment and problem to develop more suitable and feasible operational approaches.

In fact, the challenge of bringing CCM to the forefront of the professional military education experience is perfectly suited for a design approach to changing both process and culture. The gap between the current and desired states is straightforward: CCM is not practiced in accordance with doctrine. The operational approach involves three steps, which can be exercised in localized experiments or broadly across the Army.

The first step is to build cadres of professional coaches across professional military education institutions. By bringing in subject matter expertise and requiring some instructors to be appropriately certified, the Army can build the capacity to provide quality CCM to students. Over time, the cadre should develop expertise tailored to the specific needs of the officers, NCOs or civilians attending the schools.

The second step is to appropriately allocate time throughout an educational institution for CCM to take place. The initial emphasis should be on coaching, which has more universal applicability across all students than mentoring, while counseling is already adequately exercised and requires less attention. Meanwhile, coaching represents a skill that is crucial for leaders in developing their subordinates in the field.

The third step is to incorporate the proper industry standards for coaching and rigorously assess the process. The lessons appropriately derived for our military context should eventually lead toward a certification standard for professional military education institutions that would be comparable to those of the formal curriculum—for example, the standards of Joint Professional Military Education Phases I and II.

In addition, the eventual ability to assess the performance of leaders as coaches and mentors throughout the Army will provide helpful information back to the professional military education community for refining the CCM program. It will be important to avoid taking a one-size-fits-all approach, though. Officers, NCOs and civilians will have different CCM requirements based on rank, specialty and other factors, so CCM must be adaptable and student-focused.

Implementation of these steps will demonstrate the Army's commitment to the human dimension of leader development and adherence to the standards of professional conduct. Through demonstration by example of professional military education institutions, leaders throughout the Army would place greater emphasis on developing their subordinates, ensuring they have the adaptive and cognitive skills to face the complex and ill-structured environments the Army faces today and in the future. ★

*Instructor Sgt. 1st Class Allen Schwerdt engages soldiers in a Master Resiliency Training class at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.*



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