

The Marine Corps Counseling Program: Useless without Accountability

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Subject Area Manpower

The Marine Corps Counseling Program:
Useless without Accountability

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*The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born - that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.*¹

*Warren Bennis, Ph.D.
Professor, University of Southern California (USC)
Founding Chairman, USC Leadership Institute*

Marine Corp Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1), Warfighting, describes modern warfare as fluid, filled with friction, uncertainty, disorder and complexity, and as "one of the most demanding and trying of human endeavors."² In order to achieve success in this demanding environment, the Marine Corps looks to its leaders to take action, make decisions, and guide their units to accomplish assigned missions. In order to achieve its maximum potential for success, the Marine Corps needs to make the maximum investment in its leaders. A key part of that investment is the development of Marine Corps company grade officers. Fresh to the unique requirements and demands of military leadership, lieutenants and captains alike need constructive and detailed counseling in order to assist them in reaching their maximum potential as leaders and war fighters. The current system relies totally on the discretion of individual commanders to perform counseling

¹ Bennis, Warren, Ph.D., *Brainy Quotes*, <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/warren_g_bennis.html> (05 February 2005).

² U.S. Government as represented by the Secretary of the Navy, *Warfighting*, 1997, (U.S. Government Printing Office), 3-19.

as directed. However, the current Marine Corps policies and directives fail to ensure consistent and uniform counseling and professional development of the Corps junior officer by not providing a quantifiable and inspectable process that holds commanders responsible for properly conducting this counseling. In order to ensure that all Marine Corps junior officers receive standardized and objective professional counseling that will assist them in realizing their full leadership potential, the Marine Corps should establish quantifiable counseling requirements and monitor their implementation.

Clarification of Counseling

The difference between developmental counseling and performance evaluation should be noted prior to further discussion. Developmental counseling is focused on future performance, accentuating those qualities, actions and behaviors that a superior wishes a subordinate to continue to display. Corrective guidance for past actions is given; however, this is framed in with a vision to the future, and not punishing for past behavior. Performance evaluation is an evaluation of a subordinate's actions against a standard during a specific time frame in order to record that subordinate's level of performance. The tool used in the Marine Corps to perform this task for Sergeants and above

is the Fitness Report (FitRep). The FitRep, by definition, serves to "reflect an assessment of performance of assigned duties and responsibilities against an understood set of requirements, capacity, and professional character."³ The FitRep is designed to be used as an evaluation tool prepared by a Reporting Senior (RS) to be utilized by Head Quarters Marine Corps to view an individual's performance. However, in practice, the FitRep is utilized by a Reporting Senior to provide developmental counseling to a Marine. While both developmental counseling and performance evaluation are similar in nature and complimentary processes, it should be noted that they are distinctly separate procedures, each with its own unique purpose.

Current Counseling Directives

Currently, there are three main counseling directives utilized by the Marine Corps: NAVMC 2795, USMC User's Guide for Counseling, MCO P1610.7E, Performance Evaluation System (PES), and MCO P1070.12K, Individual Records Administrative Manual (IRAM). NAVMC 2795 (and MCO 1610.20 which directs the use of NAVMC 2795) establishes a general timeline for grade appropriate counseling and provides helpful techniques and procedures for commanders to utilize during these counseling sessions. The PES goes a step

³ Headquarters, United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order P1610.7E*, 1998, 1-4.

further for Marines who rate fitness reports by directing the use of specific tools, such as the Marine Reported On (MRO) Work Sheet and Billet Accomplishment Work Sheet, in order to assist RSs with the evaluation of their Marines. The IRAM contains a volume of technical data specifically concerning the upkeep of a Marine's Official Record, some of which includes mandatory and recommended occasions for counseling. Occasions for counseling in the IRAM are usually directive and quantifiable in nature, in that there are often concrete products which must be created and submitted as a result of the action, such as a Service Record Book page 11 entry or a NAVMC 6105 entry. Each of the directives provides very practical and effective tools in the development of a unit counseling program. However, with the exception of the IRAM, there is no process which holds commanders accountable for actually performing the counseling outlined in any of the other directives. In an institution where the mantra "inspect what you expect" is used fervently by leaders at all levels, this lack of commitment to counseling is surprising.

Anecdotal Survey

In an informal, non-scientific survey (see insert) conducted of all students attending Expeditionary Warfare School in the Fiscal Year 05, the large majority of the

respondents (draw from across all major occupational fields) had not been formally counseled on either billet expectations and/or assigned duties upon assumption of their last billet. Once established in their position, these officers were not counseled on their billet or professional performance on a regular basis. Fifty-eight out of seventy-eight respondents had not received billet expectations or created MRO worksheets with their reporting senior. Fifty-two out of seventy-eight had not received counseling to identify their good and bad leadership qualities and actions of their performance. While obviously this survey does not reflect the state of the entire Marine Corps, it does highlight a potential problem with the current counseling program within the Marine Corps today and demonstrates that at least some commanders are not counseling their junior officers.

Insert 1

Survey questions and results		
Question	Yes	No
At your last command, were you given a written billet description/MRO worksheet by your RS?	20	58
Were you given a formal, follow up counseling after 90 days in your billet by your RS?	7	71
Were you routinely counseled, formally or informally on your billet performance by your RS?	25	53
Were you counseled every 90 days formally on your billet performance by your RS?	2	76
Do you feel that your RS spent an appropriate amount of time focusing on your professional/personal development?	28	50
In your experience, do you feel that the Marine Corps as a whole focuses an appropriate amount of effort to develop its junior officers?*	5*	65*

Do you have any other comments that you feel relate to the effectiveness, good or bad, of the current Marine Corps Counseling Program, specifically directed towards its junior officers?	Varied based on respondent
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*Total not in agreement with number of survey respondents due to individual responses.

EWS Survey Results from responding students

Recommendations for Improvement

In order to combat this lack of accountability for counseling, the Marine Corps needs to implement controls to ensure commanders are counseling their junior officers as directed. In today's Corps, it is easy for commanders to get by without performing required counseling, thereby leaving their subordinates to flounder in their quest for excellence. Too often, junior Marine officers are left to "figure it out by themselves" because of some level of assumed competence. This is a waste of the leadership and mentoring that our more experienced commanders can provide to our enthusiastic and driven cadre of junior officers. In order to hold commanders accountable, initial, follow-on, and quarterly counseling of company grade officers should be the subject of an official entry into the Unit's Diary and a part of every Marine junior officer's Officer Qualification Record. By making counseling entries similar to rifle range and physical training test (PFT) scores, the Marine Corps will ensure that commanders allot the time and resources necessary to accomplish this much needed task.

This gives the Marine Corps oversight to that the counseling is actually occurring, but not the content or substance of that counseling.

In order to ensure that commanders are not paying lip service to these counseling sessions and that these Unit Diary entries do not turn into mere paper work drills, it is recommended that separate Section F, Block 2 (Developing Subordinates) of the current Marine Corp FitRep be created for reporting seniors who are responsible for counseling company grade officers to provide more concrete and quantitative grading criteria (see appendix for recommended changes). By requiring Reporting Seniors of officers charged with developing subordinate officers to quantify and supervise at a detailed level the counseling program and practices of a subordinate commander, the Marine Corps will have a means by which to hold commanders accountable for performing this essential task.

Conclusion

The current system of counseling and feedback directed by the Marine Corps is a very efficient and effective process if commanders actually choose to put it into practice. However, since commanders are not currently held accountable for performing this task by the Marine Corps, it is left to the individual discretion of leaders. Too

often the many other demands of leadership and operations force junior officer counseling to the bottom of commanders' priorities. By refocusing the emphasis and focus of the Marine Corps counseling program and holding commanders accountable by providing concrete and inspectable processes for counseling, the Marine Corps will make a much-needed investment into its future. By doing so, the Marine Corps will ensure that its junior officers are developed to their fullest potential and that the Corps as a whole can reap the benefits of a more capable and profession company grade officer.

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Appendix

CURRENT SECTION F, BLOCK 2 OF THE FITREP

2. DEVELOPING SUBORDINATES. Commitment to train, educate, and challenge all Marines regardless of race, religion, ethnic background or gender. Mentorship. Cultivating professional and personal development of subordinates. Developing team players and esprit de Corps. Ability to combine teaching and coaching. Creating an atmosphere tolerant of mistakes in the course of learning.					
ADV	Maintains an environment that allows personal and professional development. Ensures subordinate participation in all mandated development programs		Develops and institutes innovative programs to include PME, that emphasize personal and professional development of subordinates. Challenges subordinates to exceed their perceived potential thereby enhancing unit moral and effectiveness. Creates an environment where all Marines are confident to learn through trial and error. As a mentor, prepares subordinates for increased responsibilities and duties.	Widely recognized and emulated as a teacher, coach and leader. Any Marine would desire to serve with this Marine because they know they will grow personally and professionally. Subordinate and unit performance far surpassed expected results due to MRO's mentorship and team building talents. Attitude toward subordinate development is infectious, extending beyond the unit.	N/A

MCO P1610.7E

RECOMMENDED SECTION F, BLOCK 2 OF THE FITREP

2. DEVELOPING SUBORDINATES. Commitment to train, educate, counsel , and challenge all Marines regardless of race, religion, ethnic background or gender. Mentorship. Cultivating professional and personal development of subordinates. Developing team players and esprit de Corps. Ability to combine teaching and coaching. Creating an atmosphere tolerant of mistakes in the course of learning.					
ADV	Provides concrete and individual tasking and expectations to subordinates through the use of the MRO worksheet. Provides subordinates quantifiable and practical feedback and direction through required periodic counseling based on personal observation of performance		Develops and institutes innovative programs to include PME. Provides relevant and thoughtful feedback to subordinates focused on professional and personal development on a routine basis. Challenges subordinates to exceed their perceived potential thereby enhancing unit moral and effectiveness. Creates an environment where all Marines are confident to learn through trial and error.	Widely recognized and emulated as a teacher, coach and leader. Subordinate and unit performance far surpassed expected results due to MRO's mentorship and team building talents. Makes subordinate development a habitual part of life for both himself and his subordinates. Attitude toward subordinate development is infectious, extending beyond the unit. Encourages growth by setting the conditions for subordinate challenge and success.	N/A

Bold text indicated suggested changes