



# Counseling as a Cornerstone

## Reclaiming Developmental Integrity in the FA Branch

By MAJ Jake Giardini, MAJ Becca Diaz, and CW5 Micheal “Todd” Franklin

The opening stanza of the United States Army’s Field Manual (FM) 6-22 immediately highlights the fundamental importance of developing leaders in the profession of arms. Emphasizing this critical need, Gen. (Retired) Theodore D. Martin states, “No other Army in the world can match us; frankly speaking, we have the best people. I firmly believe that leaders are made and not born and thus require a significant investment of time and energy to develop” (U.S. Department of the Army, 2022). If leadership development is such an incredibly critical component to a service member’s career, then why are the requirements and counseling that support this development so often overlooked and inconsistently approached? Despite this unequivocal emphasis and the stated importance of counseling, a major paradox emerges. Meaningful counseling throughout the Army often lacks depth, consistency and impact.

While doctrine assumes all leaders possess the skills for effective counseling, this is not always the case, and the quality of counseling can vary significantly (Allen & Galvin, 2015). This challenge is particularly salient within the Field Artillery (FA) branch. As the Army’s pacesetter and model branch for

revolutionary change in the 21st Century, and with emerging capabilities and long-range fires occupying global headlines, the FA’s responsibility to develop agile, adaptable leaders is paramount. Thus, the FA branch must reclaim developmental integrity and improve its approach to developing leaders who are congruent with the lethality it seeks to achieve. The FA must recognize intentional, honest, and consistent counseling as the critical, underleveraged instrument for assessing officer performance, preventing evaluation inflation, and building the deep organizational trust vital for enduring professional development to maintain its decisive edge and effectively manage its talent in a rapidly evolving operational environment.

### Background and Context

Raising awareness of this critical issue is vital for the long-term success of the branch. The primary impetus for this article stems from evidence-based research, trends and observations witnessed by the Human Resources Command (HRC) FA branch team between March 2024 and March 2026. Two alarming observations stand out. Foremost, officers frequently

*U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Howard Hancock, right, 223rd Engineer Battalion, pins Pfc. Ciearra Conley, Mississippi National Guard, to the rank of specialist during a promotion ceremony at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., Jan. 18, 2025. Approximately 2,700 National Guard members support the D.C. Safe and Beautiful mission, providing critical assistance to the Metropolitan Police Department and community partners to enhance safety and quality of life throughout the District. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Christian Brown)*

	Fail Fast	High Reliability Organizations (HRO)	Relevance to FA Leader Development
Mindset	Adaptable and experimental. Focus on continuous improvement.	Vigilance and resilience. Committed to excellence.	Encourages officers to view feedback as an opportunity for continuous improvement and professional mastery.
Psychological Safety	Essential for experimentation and open sharing of lessons learned from failures.	Critical for open communication, reporting errors without fear of reprisal, and learning.	Underpins effective counseling, enabling officers to admit weaknesses and seek help without fear of career repercussions.
Feedback Mechanism	Frequent, rapid cycles of feedback (sprints, retrospectives, user testing).	Robust reporting systems for anomalies, near-misses and errors; debriefs.	Emphasizes the need for routine, timely and specific feedback in counseling.

**Table 1. Characteristics of “Fail-Fast,” HRO, and Relevance to FA Leader Development**

*Note: This list is not all inclusive. There are many other characteristics that make up the fail-fast mindset, as well as frameworks and principles of HRO Organizations.*

struggle with self-assessment. Second, as evidenced by a recent survey polling junior FA captains, counseling is failing to meet the standard within their present formations.

Regarding self-assessment, a significant majority of officers believe they are above average. This results in officers meeting with their career manager, often without realizing they are underperforming compared to their peers and are potentially at risk of not being promoted. This phenomenon directly parallels the Lake Wobegon Effect, a concept introduced in the late 1950s by Garrison Keillor through his radio program, “A Prairie Home Companion.” Keillor created the fictitious small Minnesotan town of Lake Wobegon, where his powerful storytelling described an environment where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average (Maylett, 2025). This well documented human tendency to overestimate one’s own abilities, achievements and performance creates a dangerous blind spot for many officers regarding their true performance and potential for career progression when coupled with inconsistent counseling. This parallel raises a major question. Is developmental counseling truly honest and growth-oriented within the FA? If the answer to this question is no, the FA is creating risk to our formations: instead of building leadership factories within the FA branch, our warfighting formations are indirectly creating what authors Chip and Dan Heath refer to as positive illusion factories (Heath & Heath, 2010).

It is more imperative than ever to invest in the development of our artillerists and recognize that counseling is not just a requirement; it is a professional obligation tied to readiness, stewardship and leadership development. FA leaders must commit to exposing these illusions and redirect focus to enhance lethality and foster a culture of growth, accurate assessment, and continuous improvement, where the goal is true competence and development, not merely a high achieving appearance. In the subsequent sections, this article will examine three distinct pillars of effective counseling: ownership, roles and stewardship.

**Pillar 1: Ownership**

The central and most important figure in any developmental counseling session or scenario is the officer receiving counseling. To reinforce this importance, counseling must be actively sought by the rated officer, not passively received. For this to occur, a level of psychological safety must be present throughout the

organization to normalize this behavior and establish it as a routine practice. This should not be confused with an officer’s neediness for constant feedback. Counseling must be routinized as part of daily operations and deliberately accounted for, much like an organization does for its transportation assets, weapon systems and personnel readiness initiatives. Counseling must be approached holistically. This culture of active feedback-seeking and learning is analogous to principles found in fail-fast agile methodologies, which prioritize rapid iteration and learning from mistakes. It also aligns with the practices of High Reliability Organizations (HROs), which cultivate psychological safety to ensure errors are reported and learned from without fear of retribution. The Army, particularly the FA, can draw valuable lessons from these models in fostering an environment in which seeking and providing honest feedback is seen as a strength, not a weakness.

To further illustrate these concepts for organizations and leaders, the table below outlines a select sample of key characteristics of fail-fast agile approaches and HROs, emphasizing their relevance to fostering effective leader development and counseling within the FA.

These organizational principles offer valuable insights for the FA. Specifically, a growth-oriented mindset is fundamental, encouraging every officer to view feedback not as judgment but as an opportunity for continuous improvement. Crucially, fostering psychological safety ensures the officers feel secure enough to seek honest feedback and admit areas for development without fear of negative repercussions. Finally, adopting a robust feedback mechanism akin to the frequent debriefs in high-reliability environments is essential to make counseling a consistent, impactful, and routine part of an officer’s career, driving true competence and readiness within the branch.

While analyzing the components and key characteristics of agile and HROs offers valuable insights, this should not diminish the paramount importance of the individual officer’s ownership in the overall scheme of counseling and development. The pervasive Army culture, which often pressures individuals to appear flawless, presents a significant barrier to honest self-assessment and open developmental conversations on a topic deserving further exploration. What remains paramount is for officers to recognize and fully embrace their roles in this process, taking ownership of their development from the outset



*U.S. Army Spc. Ciarra Conley, 223rd Engineer Battalion, Joint Task Force Magnolia, Mississippi National Guard, delivers remarks during a promotion ceremony at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., Jan. 18, 2025. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Christian Brown)*

and throughout their careers to ensure they are prepared and actively involved. This proactive stance becomes even more crucial in an environment where tangible, illustrative developmental examples are often scarce. Without readily available models of effective developmental journeys and their tangible outcomes, the onus falls even more heavily on the individual officer to drive their own growth. For officers in the FA branch, this process begins with the deliberate development of clear performance objectives and the weaponization of goal setting, which sets the tone for their desired professional trajectory.

## Pillar 2: Roles

It is all too common for a Soldier to go through an entire rating period being told, “You’re doing great. Keep it up,” only to be surprised with end results. This superficial counseling fosters an inaccurate perception of performance and potential. FA leaders must prioritize clear and objective assessments of measures of performance (MOP) and measures of effectiveness (MOE) in leader development, mirroring the demand and rigor applied to fire-support planning. Both leaders and their subordinates share the responsibility to dedicate time to candid and constructive dialogue regarding strengths and areas for improvement.

Dedicated time for feedback may not readily present itself due to almost universally high operational tempos across the Army. Therefore, FA leaders must proactively schedule these discussions. Subordinates cannot passively wait and assume that silence equates to satisfactory performance. Instead, they should proactively schedule time in coordination with the executive officer or equivalent to work around the battle rhythm for protected time. At a minimum, formal counseling sessions should be conducted quarterly with a clearly defined purpose beforehand. During these sessions—whether with a rater, senior rater, peer or mentor—individuals should be prepared to receive

feedback and seek clarification on broad statements. Broad questions rarely lead to specific feedback. If someone provides areas for improvement or an area of excellence, ask clarifying questions as a form of back briefing. The area in which you feel most defensive is often the one where you need to listen most. It is often an indicator of an area for growth (Groeschel, n.d.).

Leaders must approach counseling, both formal and informal, with the same deliberate planning as a military operation, defining a desired end state. Prepare a course of action both for subordinates who are receptive and those who are not receptive to feedback. Be prepared to give specific examples and impacts for any trends you address. Deliver honest feedback regarding an individual’s contributions to the organization and their performance relative to peers. Conversely, subordinates should enter counseling sessions prepared to seek clarity. Conversation and general statements about performance do not help you; they fail to clearly define performance and effectiveness. The objective is not to influence a senior leader’s assessment of your manner of performance. It is to understand the perception other individuals have about your actions, performance and how you can improve yourself and the organization. Anonymous 360-degree assessments at an assessment program or as part of a professional military education (PME) should not be the first time a subordinate is presented with personal sustains and improvements.

As raters, providing clear and candid informal and formal counseling can serve to act as a flashing sign to make either minor or vast corrections throughout the rating period. This concept is illustrated by an example from Garden Grove, Calif., in 2003, where city officials struggled to address speeding (Goetz, 2011). Officials tried replacing speed-limit signs and increasing ticketing. Vehicles continued to break the law until the city decided to implement active feedback with dynamic speed displays. These signs did not tell drivers anything they would not already know if they glanced at their own dashboard. However, the city saw drivers slow by an average of 14% over the next month. This active feedback functioned as an external source of assessment, much like a leader’s counseling of a subordinate. Soldiers are generally aware of their strengths and weaknesses but may not have established their own rhythm or maturity to self-reflect from another perspective. Regular leader feedback reinforces positive behaviors and addresses deviations from standards.

A flashing sign during training or a meeting is not always the best method for course correction though. Micro-feedback, which in broader organizational psychology, refers to bite-sized pieces of performance data immediately following a specific action, is a valuable tool for building rapport and recognizing accomplishments throughout the rating period while preventing minor issues from escalating. While positive recognition reinforces desired behaviors, it should not be used to accept polished mediocrity as a new standard. Micro-feedback, however, is insufficient on its own and must be supplemented by dedicated, formal counseling sessions. Raters must set aside non-negotiable battle rhythm time each quarter for one-on-one discussions. These formal sessions should seek to address trends and focus on a few key areas. A leader’s timing and ability to give

this feedback directly, honestly and with respect is more caring than avoiding an uncomfortable situation. Killing people with kindness creates weakness and degrades trust in leaders' ability to develop their subordinates (Moore, 2024). Without these sessions, individuals remain unaware of organizational and leader's perceptions and potential blind spots.

Leaders must recognize formal counseling often elicits anxiety in some subordinates. Even in high-performing units where the command group was a tight-knit family, upon walking into counseling, many continue to wonder, "Was my performance perceived how I felt it should be? Is there something I wasn't catching hints on?" According to Harvard Business Review, the rated individual must understand the purpose to receive and digest appropriately; is the conversation appreciation, coaching, or evaluation-based (Gallo, 2024)? Similarly, military leaders can alleviate this anxiety by leveraging prior positive interactions and clarifying the session's intent. Initiating the conversation with a question such as, "What do you hope to gain from this discussion?" can frame the feedback in a manner best suited to the individual. Linking these discussions to clearly defined, individualized performance objectives established at the beginning or onset of arrival encourage self-reflection and promotes a more engaging dialogue.

### **Pillar 3: Stewardship**

Stewardship provides the philosophical *why*, emphasizing a leader's role is not just to evaluate a subordinate but to shepherd that person's career for the betterment of the Army. A steward of talent recognizes honest, sometimes critical counseling is a professional imperative. A positive illusion factory can only exist when stewardship is absent. Leaders who practice stewardship are focused on their legacy, which is measured not by their personal accomplishments but by the caliber of the leaders they helped develop. It is imperative for leaders to use the full gamut of counseling tools available to them.

To mitigate surprises, leaders should utilize not only DA Form 4856 but also support forms. The designated block for documenting receipt of rater and senior-rater support forms exists for a reason. Leaders must proactively use these forms to provide quantified assessments of performance, potential, and effectiveness, rather than waiting until 60 days before an evaluation is due to develop goals and achievements. Additionally, this can help individuals develop a path to maintain balance and prioritize in the Army's hunt for holistic health and fitness (H2F). Counseling that addresses both professional requirements and integrates an individual's personal and family goals can help establish a foundation of trust and proactively shape support for that individual throughout the rating period. It must be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART), with the flexibility to adapt for both the Soldier and the organization (Department of the Army, 2022).

The question of how to shift our profession away from a sole focus on "Most Qualified" and associated enumerations is complex, with no readily apparent solution. However, as raters, senior raters, coaches, and mentors, the FA branch can prioritize personal and professional development. Most leaders can recollect one or two leaders who truly invested in their development, underscoring the significance of such occurrences. Whether guiding a future Army senior leader or counseling a junior Soldier considering resignation, FA leaders have a responsibility to dedicate time to developing our people. Cultivating an emotional trust bank through consistent recognition of positive contributions will foster professional relationships where individuals are receptive to both constructive and affirming feedback regarding performance and potential.

In short, an officer's ownership and a rater's role are the here-and-now of a duty assignment. Stewardship, however, is the long-range strategic vision for developing the next generation of leaders. It is the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the FA branch remains strong, capable and trusted long after the current leaders and Soldiers in the branch complete their service to the Army.

### **Conclusion**

Counseling is not separate from evaluation; it is the developmental backbone of our Army and the FA branch. Strong, consistent and meaningful counseling is the vehicle for recalibration of ratings and is measured by effective real performance. This approach directly validates Gen. (Retired) Martin's introductory remarks that leaders are made and not born and require a significant investment in their development. Consistent counseling is the embodiment of this investment, building readiness through reflection and accountability. As new generations join the branch and the U.S. Army, the FA branch must adopt new approaches to counseling. Counseling must be recognized as a leadership competency, not solely an administrative burden.

Operating through the lens of self-awareness, feedback literacy, development tracking and goal alignment ensures subordinates possess the tools and feedback necessary to effectively catapult the FA branch into its next large-scale conflict. Effective counseling, as described in this paper, is the solution to ineffective leader development and an imperfect promotion system. It provides the necessary friction to overcome the Lake Wobegon Effect, dismantles positive illusion factories and fills the critical void of intermittent feedback. Until this realization comes to fruition, the FA branch will remain intermittently postured to support the demands of future warfare. The challenge is clear, and the solution is found in a committed, purposeful approach to counseling and developing our Fires and targeting professionals.

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