



**U.S. Army Research Institute  
for the Behavioral and Social Sciences**

**Research Report 2022**

**Assessment of Interpersonal Communication and  
Counseling Skills: Perspectives from NCOs**

**April D. Sanders**  
U.S. Army Research Institute

**June 2018**

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**U.S. Army Research Institute  
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**Research Report 2022**

**Assessment of Interpersonal Communication and Counseling  
Skills: Perspectives from NCOs**

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I would like to acknowledge the dedicated, hard-working, caring Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs) I encountered working on this project. It is their passion for helping their Soldiers, their constant optimism, their desire to live up to the warrior ethos, Army values, and NCO creed, and their general goal to be a good people that inspires my work to support them in their efforts. I also appreciated the officers, Army civilians, family members, and other supportive community members at each of the installations I had the pleasure of visiting.

# ASSESSMENT OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND COUNSELING SKILLS: PERSPECTIVES FROM NCOS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Research Requirement:

This research identified the knowledge, skills, and abilities that allow Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs) to competently communicate with and counsel Soldiers, along with existing training gaps. Previous literature reviewed identified Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM) and Motivational Interviewing (MI) as potential interpersonal communication and counseling skills (ICCS) training models for NCOs (Sanders, In Preparation). Obtaining first-hand accounts from NCOs regarding their experiences counseling Soldiers, common ICCS problems they encountered, related training they received, and the most valuable skills they have identified for effective counseling and interpersonal communication with Soldiers was important to the development of ecologically sound ICCS training for NCOs.

### Procedure:

A sample of 64 NCOs, Corporals to Sergeants First Class (CPL to SFC) from four Army installations (Forts Bragg, NC, Eustis, VA, Hood, TX, and Polk, LA) were interviewed and/or completed a survey during umbrella week data collections from August to November 2017. Most NCOs participated in an interview and a survey while others were only able to participate in one or the other due to time limitations. Data was then compiled into general themes, observations, and processes by the researcher. Concurrent to data collection, a literature review was conducted that examined Army doctrine related to the counseling process and academic literature related to ICCS.

### Findings:

There were two primary, interrelated findings of this research: (a) there were gaps identified in Army doctrine related to ICCS, and, (b) current Army training did not adequately prepare NCOs to utilize ICCS on a regular basis. Clear guidance was lacking in Army doctrine on (a) emotion management (for NCOs to manage their own emotions and their Soldier's), (b) the use of effective feedback, and (c) how these factors are related (e.g., the impact of emotions on feedback). Research participants indicated current Army ICCS training was insufficient or non-existent. They also noted a general lack of use of basic communication skills, two-way communication processes, and inconsistent use of effective feedback and follow-up techniques, difficulties addressing resistance in counseling settings, and difficulty with emotional content, both internally and with others. These findings are seen across the helping professions (such as medicine, nursing, psychotherapy, psychological counseling, social work, education, life coaching and ministry), as these skills require additional training, it was noted that the types of interventions and trainings found effective for other helping professionals (such as therapists, counselors, nurses, doctors, educators, and social workers) might have applicability for NCOs. The development of ICCS training for NCOs implementing approaches used in the field of counseling, specifically MI and TTM, was supported at the operational level.

## Utilization and Dissemination of Findings:

The results of this research will be used by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences to develop exemplar ICCS training for NCOs based on MI and TTM. The interviews with NCOs allowed for the confirmation of training needs and the current best practices NCOs are utilizing for counseling Soldiers in operational settings. These interviews also provided information on training received by NCOs, the type of training they believe to be the most effective for the range of problems they are facing and what they have learned by trial-and-error. These detailed accounts will be invaluable in delineating the specifics of exemplar training.



ASSESSMENT OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND COUNSELING SKILLS:  
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## ASSESSMENT OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND COUNSELING SKILLS: PERSPECTIVES FROM NCOS

“Words are seeds that do more than blow around. They land in our hearts and not the ground. Be careful what you plant and careful what you say. You might have to eat what you planted one day.” *Unknown*

“Leaders at all levels must understand the counseling process. More importantly, Army leaders must understand that effective counseling helps achieve desired goals and effects, manages expectations, and improves the organization.” *The Counseling Process*

Counseling in the Army is necessary for the development of more capable, resilient, and satisfied Soldiers who are better prepared for current and future responsibilities according to *The Counseling Process*, (Department of the Army [DA], 2014). Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs) play an essential role in counseling, coaching, and mentoring Soldiers in order to develop more capable, resilient, and satisfied warriors who are better prepared for current and future responsibilities (DA, 2014). Effective counseling skills allow NCOs to give feedback, influence others, problem solve, create shared understanding, develop, and train Soldiers (DA, 2015). Counseling skills overlap with competent communication skills, particularly interpersonal communication skills. There is a great need for NCOs to be trained in the competent use of specific interpersonal communication and counseling skills (ICCS) necessary to maximize influence, directing, shaping, and mentoring Soldiers toward Army goals, thus improving adaptability, resilience, and Soldier and unit readiness. Despite the need and the importance to the future Army, training opportunities for NCOs to develop ICCS knowledge, skills, and abilities are limited based on results from the NCO 2020 Survey (Kinney, Sieck, Killian, Stapp, Kronzak & Powell, 2014), Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (Crissman, 2013; Riley, Hatfield, Freeman, Fallesen, & Gunther, 2014), and previous U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences research (Sanders, In Preparation).

This work stems from previous research that explored the roles and responsibilities of NCOs, the available ICCS Army training, noted training gaps, and a review of the scientific literature specific to counseling related fields to identify potential ICCS training models for NCOs (Sanders, In Preparation). Recommendations were made for the design, development, and assessment of an exemplar ICCS-training model; however, it was important to obtain data directly from NCOs regarding their experiences with interpersonal communication issues in the operational environment. Therefore, the purpose of the current research was to identify the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities required that allow NCOs to competently communicate with, develop, and counsel Soldiers, and identify existing training gaps. Towards this effort, we collected information from current NCOs regarding (a) common problems they encountered related to ICCS, (b) training they received related to ICCS, (c) what type of training they believed would be most useful, and (d) their current practices regarding ICCS.

## **Implications of Counseling Approaches for the Army**

A brief summary of the previous findings and recommendations from Sanders (In Preparation) will contextualize this paper. This prior research identified two inter-related counseling approaches noted for their potential salience for use with NCOs in a military setting: the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM) and Motivational Interviewing (MI). The TTM is a conceptual model developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983, 1986) that describes how and why change behavior occurs while MI is the set of interpersonal counseling skills focused on enhancing personal motivation for change developed by Miller and Rollnick (2013).

Prochaska and DiClemente originally developed TTM after examining the natural progression taken by people who changed their behaviors, with or without assistance from therapists. The common pattern of progression of change discovered had several key stages, although it is generally accepted that these stages do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion: (a) the Precontemplation Stage is when no need for change has been identified or there is no intention to change, or there may have been multiple, unsuccessful attempts to change leading to an aversion to discuss it; (b) the Contemplation Stage is marked by ambivalence due to the awareness of the pros and cons of changing; (c) the Preparation Stage is when action is pending and there is typically a goal within 6 months to initiate, (d) the Action Stage is the actual practicing of the new, desired behavior; and, (e) the Maintenance Stage is work to maintain the changes in behavior over the long-term. When trying to help others or plan an intervention, it is important to understand where the Soldier is in their readiness to change and the TTM can help identify effective strategies to reach individuals with least amount of resistance (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1982; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1986; Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992). Figure 1 details how TTM may be utilized to describe a Soldier's process of change by using an example of a Soldier with a drinking problem.

While TTM is important to conceptualizing the process of change, it is the counseling process of motivational interviewing that delineates how to elicit behavior change in individuals. According to Miller and Rollnick (2013), MI is defined as follows:

a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion. (p. 29).

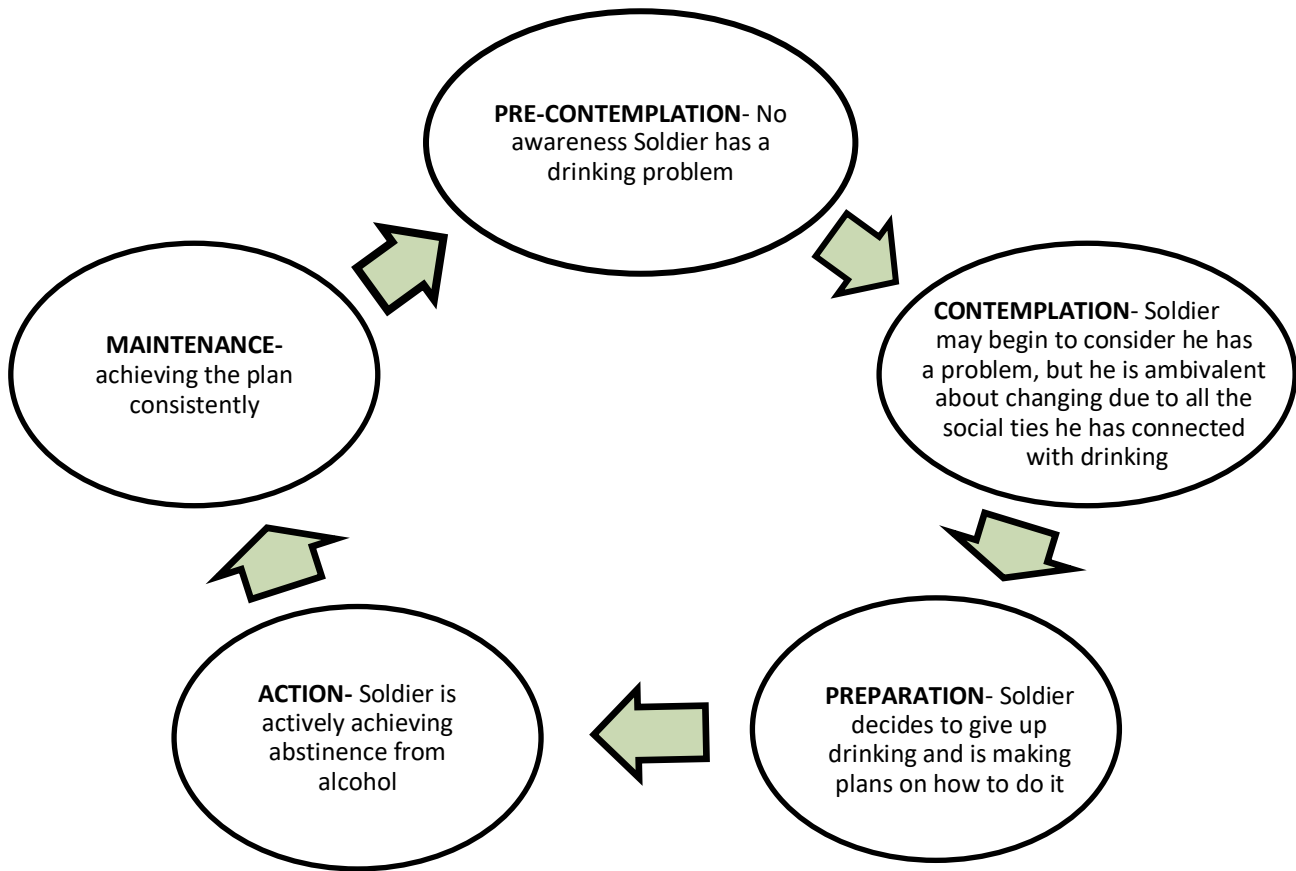


Figure 1. Stages of Change model applied to a common counseling scenario. In this case TTM is applied to a Soldier with a drinking problem.

Miller and Rollnick indicated the importance of specific factors for the implementation of MI, which they referred to as the “spirit” of MI, and is depicted in Figure 2. The noted “spirit” of MI was a vital component to its implementation and was predicated on the principles of collaboration, compassion, evocation, and acceptance. Collaboration suggests MI is done “for” and “with” a person, rather than done “to” or “on” someone. Compassion is the deliberate commitment to pursue the welfare and best interest of others. The principle of evocation views the client as the expert on his/her behavior and assumes they possess the solutions to their problems while the practitioner’s role is to evoke these answers. The last principle is “profound acceptance,” which is an attitude of utter openness towards the client and all they encompass (e.g., culture, attitudes, beliefs, status, etc.). As described by Miller and Rollnick, acceptance includes four components: absolute worth, autonomy support, empathy, and affirmation.

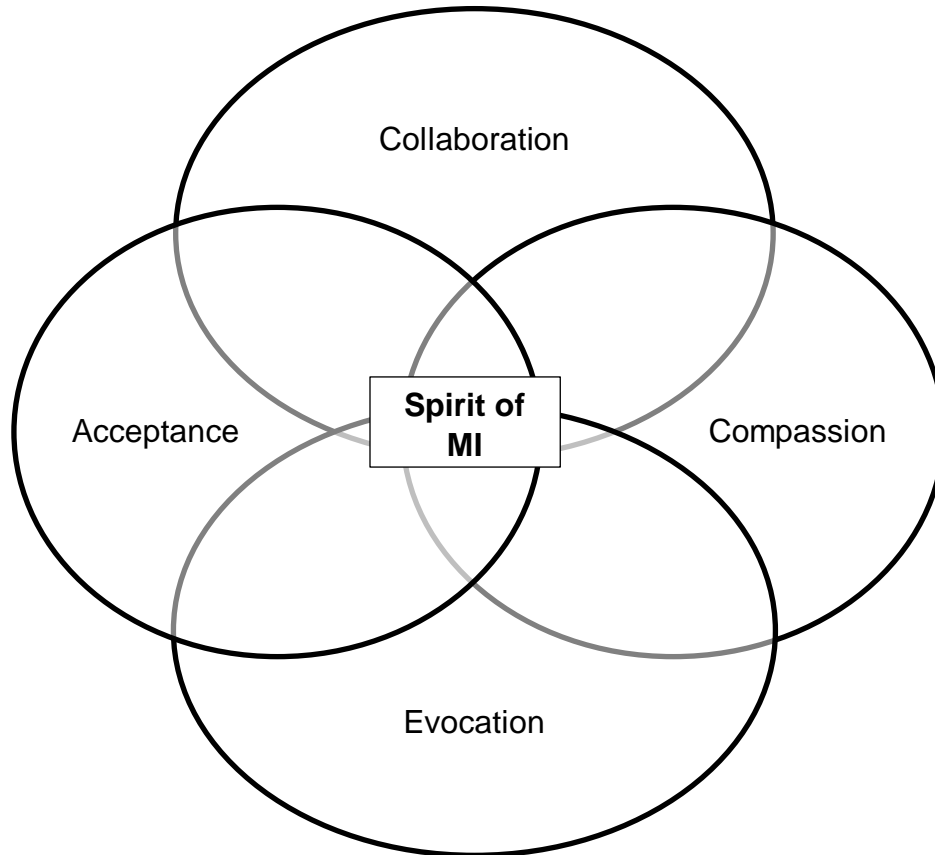


Figure 2. The Spirit of Motivational Interviewing. Without the underlying “spirit” of MI, the techniques used become a cynical trick to manipulate others into compliance rather than evoking their internal motivation to change, according to Miller and Rollnick (2013).

In addition to the MI Spirit, MI is driven by core principles and skills. The five core principles are (a) developing discrepancy (between person’s current behavior and future goals/values); (b) empathy (skillful, accurate reflective listening is a powerful change agent); (c) avoiding arguments (confrontation only leads to increase resistance); (d) roll with resistance (reduce resistance by supporting person while he/she finds the answers within); and, (e) supporting self-efficacy (believing in a person’s ability to change). These core principles are often referred with the acronym DEARS. The core MI interpersonal communication skills are open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries (OARS). See Appendix A for further descriptions and examples of DEARS and OARS.

Even when individuals make efforts to utilize ICCS, the person receiving the communication may not feel heard, understood, or empathized with, thus reducing the trust within the relationship (Carter, Moles, White, & Chen, 2015; Grosseman et al, 2014). This is an important point because it is the perception of being empathized with and the trust within the relationship that seems to produce the most significant behavioral changes in others (Magill et al 2014; Sanders, In Preparation). By capitalizing on MI’s focus on interpersonal relationships through communication skills, along with other skills that increase the likelihood of enhancing an individual’s internal motivation to change, MI can offer NCOs a unique and adaptable skill set.

The strategic use of interpersonal communication skills to elicit a person's internal motivation differentiates MI from other forms of counseling and communication. Discussions employing MI typically focus on developing and discussing discrepancies between an individual's current behavior and his/her core value or desired behavior in a safe, supportive atmosphere, thus eliciting the individual's own motivation to change. They also involve the identification and amplification of ambivalence, the simultaneous motivation to change and remain the same, in order to assist the individual's exploration of the pros and cons of change. The resolution of the ambivalence leads to the individual's thoughts and commitment for change, or "change talk." A practitioner of MI learns interpersonal communication skills that allow them to evoke an individual's desire, ability, reason, and need related to behavior change, which leads to evoking conversations about commitment, activation, and taking steps toward the desired behavior.

Research has substantiated specific tenets of MI are more consistent with producing positive behavior change when clearly demonstrated by the practitioner. The three primary mechanisms for these positive effects are (a) the level of empathic communication demonstrated by the practitioner, (b) the practitioner's ability to refrain from communication styles inconsistent with the MI approach (e.g., confrontation, direction, advising without permission, arguing, judging, etc.) and, (c) the ability to increase the amount of change talk, defined in practical terms as the number of statements made in favor of change as opposed to statements against change or consistent with the status quo (Hall, Staiger, Simpson, Best & Lubman, 2016; Holdsworth, Bowen, Brown & Howat, 2014; Lindqvist, Forsberg, Enebrink, Andersson & Rosendahl, 2017; Magill et al., 2014; Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

## **Review of Army Interpersonal Communication and Counseling Skills (ICCS)**

This section will highlight the relevant literature related to training ICCS in the Army setting. Before proceeding, it would be helpful to clarify the definitions of some key terms used in Army vernacular to allow for greater understanding of the issues discussed below. According to *The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014):

Counseling is the process used by leaders to review with a subordinate the subordinate's demonstrated performance and potential. Counseling, one of the most important leadership and professional development responsibilities, enables Army leaders to help Soldiers and Army Civilians become more capable, resilient, satisfied, and better prepared for current and future responsibilities. Counseling is required of leaders and occurs at prescribed times. The related developmental processes of coaching and mentoring are done voluntarily. The Army's future and the legacy of today's Army leaders rests on the shoulders of those they help prepare for greater responsibility. (p. 1-1)

For many NCOs, however, the term "counseling" represents the final product to be submitted subsequent to an official counseling session, the DA Form 4856 Developmental Counseling Form. During data collection, the researcher made every attempt to distinguish the process described above from the product when asking questions regarding ICCS.

Coaching and mentoring are not necessarily the same process as counseling, but in lay terms, they are often used interchangeably. *Leader Development*, (DA, 2015), suggests that coaching and mentoring are less formal processes for developing Soldiers. Coaching is explained as follows:

Coaching helps another individual or team through a set of tasks or with improving personal qualities. A coach gets the person or team to understand their current level of performance and guides their performance to the next level. A central task of coaching is to link feedback interpretation with developmental action. (p. 3-25)

Moreover, mentorship was described as follows:

Mentorship is 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 (DA, 2017). A mentor is a leader who assists personal and professional development by helping a mentee clarify personal, professional, and career goals and develop actions to improve attributes, skills, and competencies. (p. 3-17)

Mentees often look for mentors with specific skill-sets or attributes they may not have regular access to, especially in low density military occupation specialties (MOSs). Coaching is action-oriented and focused more specifically on moving to the next level of performance. Counseling is a process, with coaching and mentoring supporting the process at various stages. Leadership uses many of the same communication skills as counseling. Because of the inextricable link between competent communication and effective leadership, it makes sense that improving communication skills will have a positive effect on both skill sets. It would be in the best interest of the future force that communication skills be trained by the Army to ensure they align with Army goals and values.

Army doctrine specifically related to counseling can be found primarily in *The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014). However, broader ICCS are mentioned throughout Army doctrine, specifically in the area of leadership. *Army Leadership*, (DA, 2012a) details the Leadership Requirement Model (see Figure 3), which conveys the Army's expectations of leaders, at all levels within the organization (DA, 2012a). One set of requirements consists of attributes of what leaders should be and know (character, presence, and intellect) and the second is a set of competencies that the Army requires leaders to do (lead, develop, and achieve). This model of leadership is useful for aligning leader development activities and personnel management practices and systems. There are specific attributes and competencies depicted in the figure below that can be directly impacted by improved ICCS; however, improving ICCS can also indirectly improve these factors. For example, empathy is a skill that can be trained by teaching Soldiers how to view a situation from another's point of view. The indirect effect this can have on a Soldier is increasing their resilience, confidence, and mental agility. *Leader Development*, (DA, 2015) further expands on this model with descriptions of performance indicators.



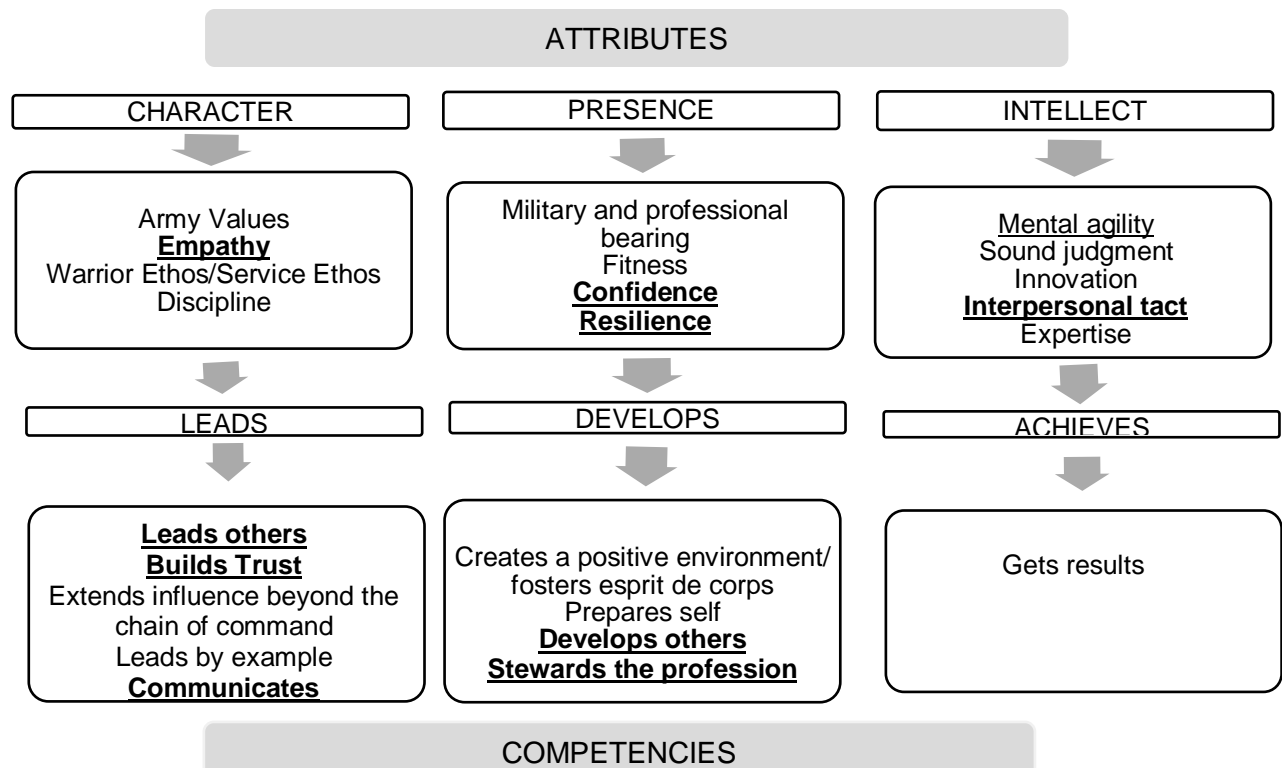


Figure 3. Leadership Requirements Model adapted from *Leader Development*, (DA, 2015) – the bolded attributes and competencies could be improved directly through ICCS training.

*The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014), provides a description of the counseling process, including the common problems that occur. The problems noted mirror those seen in other helping professions, such as new counselors, nurses, and doctors, who are learning the skills of interpersonal counseling. The following quote from *The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014) identifies common mistakes that are seen in the counseling process:

Dominating the session by talking too much, giving unnecessary or inappropriate advice, not truly listening, and projecting biases and prejudices all interfere with effective counseling. Competent leaders avoid rash judgments, stereotyping, losing emotional control, inflexible counseling methods, or improper follow-up. Leaders should be open to new ideas and thoughts. (DA, 2014, para. 2-15)

Brew and Kottler (2008) also identify many similar roadblocks in counseling sessions with new civilian helping professionals. They detail the frequently occurring mistakes made by beginning counselors as they develop counseling skills in the following list:

- Closed question – killing the conversation and usually changing the topic;
- Asking too many questions in one response – the client doesn't know which one to answer;
- Interrupting the client –
  - with what the counselor wants to say – difficulty with inhibition;
  - by finishing the client's sentence;
- Fear of the client losing control (emotionally or otherwise);
- Unable to see one's own feelings, and therefore hard to see the client's feelings;

- Devaluing feelings in general;
- Projecting- relate too much to others. For example, if the counselor has a common issue or experience, they may assume that the “client's” experience is the same as theirs rather than listening from the client's point of view. This was often seen in NCOs who stated things like “I know exactly what they meant, (or how they felt),” or “The same exact thing happened to me,” and,
- Wanting to solve the problem too quickly – ...doing this can take power away from the client, implying that the client isn't smart enough to figure the problem out. Also, sometimes we just want to show that we're wise, so be mindful that you're not doing that either.

The two quotes above, the former from Army doctrine, and the latter from counselor training professionals, demonstrates the similar difficulties experienced by civilian helping professionals and NCOs who provide interpersonal counseling. The Army may benefit from identify training methods civilian helping professionals already utilize to address these same problems. In order to move toward the development of a comprehensive ICCS training model, it was important to consider the Army doctrine and academic literature; however, input from the NCOs in the operational units was vital to developing a sound, useful training from an ecological perspective. Below is a description of the findings from the NCOs perspective regarding ICCS and training.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Army Soldiers with experience providing counseling (current NCOs or promotable) were recruited through research support requests at four installations (Forts Bragg, NC, Eustis, VA, Hood, TX, and Polk, LA) in 2017. All those recruited agreed to participate in the research and provided informed consent.

The sample of 64 included one Corporal (CPL) promotable, 5 Specialists (SPCs) promotable, 21 Sergeants (SGTs), 28 Staff Sergeants (SSGs), and 9 Sergeants First Class (SFCs). The sample was 77% male, and the average age was 32 with the age range being 20 to 47. The average time in service was 9 ½ years. The majority of the sample, 75%, reported having higher than a high school education with about 40% reporting some college, about 13% reporting an Associate’s degree and about 16% reporting a Bachelor’s degree. About 70% of the sample deployed once and 27% of the sample deployed twice or more. There were a range of military occupational specializations in the sample with 80% coming from combat support services, 15% from support services and 5% from combat arms.

### **Materials and Procedures**

The NCO Counseling Response Form was developed for the purpose of this research project and consisted of two primary portions. The first portion consisted of demographic items relevant to describing the sample and theoretically related to communication and counseling skills (e.g., educational level, gender). The second portion consisted of 12 items requesting detailed

information about how they went about aspects of the counseling process (e.g., “Please describe what steps you go through when a Soldier needs counseling,” “Can you describe a time when you were given feedback or were provided counseling that went really well? What made it go well?”). The focus group protocol (see Appendix C) consisted of the same questions as on the NCO Counseling Response Form with a few additional questions to assist with rapport building.

The procedure consisted of two NCOs participating at a time, either completing the NCO Counseling Response Form first or the focus group first. Typically the order of completing the two tasks was determined by the logistical factors such as arrival times. Because there were only two participants scheduled for each focus group, individual interviews were often conducted due to lack of participants. The participants used government laptops to type their answers into a PDF form. There were no specific instructions provided to the participants on how to format their responses or how formal their writing should be. The principal investigator took notes during the focus groups and collated this information with the participants questionnaires using a participant ID assigned during each session.

Concurrent to data collection, a literature review was also conducted to examine Army doctrine related to the counseling process and academic literature related to ICCS, the findings of which were discussed above.

## Results

The results section includes the findings from a content analysis of questionnaires and interview notes. The questionnaires were first examined and coded for general themes while the interview notes were used to supplement these data including additional themes, observations, and notable processes by the researcher. Furthermore, direct quotations from participants’ questionnaire data provide additional contextualization for the results presented below. With regards to data quality, saturation was one consideration in having duplicative items on the questionnaire and the interview.

### Themes from the Narrative

**Counseling: Procedure versus Process.** The participants were asked open-ended questions regarding how they approached Soldiers for the express purpose of providing counseling, as the NCOs understood it. Based on the data, NCOs approached this activity in three main ways. Sixty-nine percent of the questionnaire respondents approached the activity of counseling Soldiers from a predominantly procedural focus. The descriptions of the activities were often recitations of verbiage from *The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014) that describes the steps to take when providing counseling. In their responses NCOs emphasized preparation and execution of the counseling paperwork, writing the DA Form 4856, gathering information from necessary sources, identifying an appropriate location to meet with Soldiers, preparing statements to the Soldier, and preparing any follow-up to be completed by directing the Soldier. These descriptions focused on how the NCO planned to “fix” the Soldier, with Soldier input existing in the form of agreement or making excuses in the negative instances. Some examples of these responses follow:

- “Select a suitable place, schedule time, notify the subordinate well in advance, organize communication, outline the counseling session components, plan my counseling strategy, establish the right atmosphere.”
- “I gather my thoughts first and then put them in the 4856. I always state problems and then how to solve them and my expectations of the soldier in the future.”

Both interview and survey data suggest these NCOs understand counseling more as a one-way process, or something done to or for the Soldier. This was evidenced by the following phrases used by the NCOs in their written and stated descriptions of what they did when counseling Soldiers: *I impart knowledge, I instruct, I guide, I direct, I advise, I demand, I state, I let him know, I tell, I inform, I record, and I notify.*

Fewer respondents noted counseling to be a two-way process, with 31% of the responses reflecting this sentiment. These respondents focused specifically on aspects of the interpersonal process, making note of the two-way exchange of information from beginning to end. Some examples of these type of responses follow:

- “I try to find out what are the Soldier needs/problems. Then hear them out completely and unbiasedly before helping to put a solid plan of action in to place.”
- “Starting with the activating event, such as the soldier being late for work, you shouldn't immediately jump on the soldier about it. This may cause the soldier to become defensive about the situation. You should first approach the soldier and ask him/her why he/she was late to give them a chance to explain what happened to make them late. Based on the result of that conversation, you would then be able to determine the next course of action.”
- “1. Take the sm [service members] somewhere private 2. then ask questions 3. let sm speak 4. ask question.”

These NCOs seem to view counseling as something you do with a Soldier. The following phrases used by the NCOs in their written and stated descriptions of what during counseling sessions indicated they viewed counseling as a process: *having a conversation, discussion, talk with, come to agreement, help Soldier figure it out, identify how we are..., discuss how Soldier felt...what Soldier plans to do..., listen, let Soldier talk, ask questions, and talk together.*

A much smaller portion of the respondents, less than 5%, described activities of counseling to include multiple components. For example, respondents described counseling to include the preparation process for the administrative components, the interpersonal aspects, or two-way communication aspects needed for the counseling process, in addition to describing how the follow-up would be completed. Although the examples below are the steps described in *The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014), they were not merely recited by the respondents; they were described in detail. The descriptions below are examples of the explanations NCOs provided when they understood the differences between the procedure and the process of counseling. The listing off steps seemed to be describing a family recipe that had been used successfully for years rather than a grocery list:

- “First, I identify the need for the counseling. Once I figure out the reason for the counseling, I notify the Soldier that he will be counseled. I also tell the Soldier the time and place. When choosing the right place I tend to take in consideration the right atmosphere. I will then prepare the counseling by discussing the issue and developing a plan of action. Once I gather that information up, I discuss the issues with the Soldier face to face and see if we can come up with a feasible plan of action. Once all of that is conducted, I then notify the Soldier my role in helping him/her to stay on track to reach the goal. After all of that is completed, I will have the Soldier sign and date the counseling. I will do the same agreeing to what I counseled the Soldier about. Lastly, once the goal is met or the allotted time is up I would record the outcome.”
- “Performance counseling is usually conducted monthly, and I keep a note of every task they did, and performance on his/her physical fitness, how many hours of courses they completed, and give them an overall rating to them as a Soldier, and what is their strength and weakness. Also, give them guidance on what they need to fix, improve, and sustain. In event-oriented counseling, I get his/her point of view in the situation and include it in the counseling. For example, a Soldier failed to report to formation; I will call him/her to see if they're okay, and find out their location, and have them report as soon as possible, the soldier told me he got off work late the day prior, takes medication to sleep, and I check his prescription, profile, etc. I will give him an event oriented counseling, for failure to report, and I will include his/her reason, and I will make sure he gets a follow up for sleep if not done so. I will also include in the counseling if the Soldier gets off late, and takes prescribed sleeping medication, to let me know and I will call multiple times an hour prior to formation.”

Ideally, NCOs would be able to reach a point at which they could fluidly integrate the ideals from *The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014) and *Army Leadership*, (DA, 2012a) it into their personal approach to interpersonal communication and counseling. The qualitative shift away from working from a mechanistic approach to counseling to moving towards a more processes oriented approach takes time and training, but would allow the user to more readily adapt to a variety of interpersonal situations. One NCO noted the pros and cons to both of these counseling styles, “Back and forth counseling is most difficult but great value from it; directed counseling does not usually get to the core issue.”

**Need Identification.** When NCOs described identifying the need for counseling several main concepts emerged. These themes were affected by whether the counseling was to be formal/written or informal/just verbal: direct interaction, when it was mandated by Army regulations and assigned duties, standard based, situational (primarily based on the Soldier’s past performance).

- “Identify the need by talking to the Soldier on what we can do for them to meet their needs. Talk to them verbally and identify what they need to work on and how I can provide some guidance and help to achieve their goals.”

- “Not always do my Soldiers want to step forward and speak about whatever the issue may be. Usually body language, mood, facial expressions. Are good signs, and most of the time they open up and unless it’s really serious, it stays between us, unless they ask me to speak on their behalf to whomever. I do share whatever we speak about; I try to give the best advice on what to do. If I cannot give them the best advice, I look for the best person or counselor to guide them in right direction.”
- “The last week of the month begins the construction of the monthly counseling and if the Soldier goes to the board or if the soldier accomplishes something extraordinary then the sm [service member] will be counseled. Along with positive counselings also follows negative counselings. If a Soldier is FTR [Failure to report] or lack of communication or any misconduct etc.”

Thirty-three percent of the participants specifically cited Direct Interaction as their means for identifying the need for counseling. This included observations, third-party reports, and conversations with Soldiers. A few respondents noted the importance of “knowing your Soldiers,” communicating with Soldiers, to include observing the non-verbal reactions of Soldiers. One NCO wrote, “I identify the need by observation of the individual, and by listening to what is brought up (or not brought up) in conversations with the individual.”

The use of standards as the benchmark to compare Soldier’s behavior to when determining the need for counseling was noted by 74% of the respondents. Actually meeting the benchmark was not the determining factor used by the respondents to decide the outcome of counseling. The respondents described using the standard initially, but then engaging their own judgments based on several factors. One factor was the severity of the perceived infraction or significance of the standard based on the command climate. For example, if the First Sergeant (1SG) had been focusing on timeliness and then a Soldier in that NCO’s unit shows up late to a company level formation for the first time. Another factor respondents considered was change in the Soldiers’ performance. For example, if the Soldier was not typically a problem, there may not be a counseling statement provided. Another factor that was frequently discussed was the concept of “formal” counseling, which typically meant, “putting it on paper” (i.e., counseling statement DA Form 4856) versus verbal or “informal” counseling. Interview data suggests there is an increased likelihood an NCO will choose to make a counseling “formal” by writing a DA Form 4856 when there is a command climate to write up counseling statements. For example:

- “Only need to write monthly counseling, they’re stupid, lots of paperwork. Legal makes them standardize writing in order to make them stick for UJMC purposes.”
- “I don’t necessarily put everything on paper, depends on what counseling is for, should not just be for when a Soldier has a negative behavior, need to show them you care and that you are concerned. That doesn’t require paper.”
- “Now everything is on paper as opposed to just fixing it, now you’re forced to write it. We’re not empowered to handle things at the lowest level anymore. Our power in counseling is being taken away by being told to put everything on paper.”

Although the need for counseling was typically identified through some direct observation, whether personally observed or through the reports of observations made by others, the formal or

informal route to address the need appeared to dictate the manner in which the rest of the decisions regarding that particular counseling event.

**Feedback.** The participating NCOs noted that providing feedback to Soldiers was an essential part of their daily job requirements. There were obvious differences in NCOs' abilities to articulate their understanding and use of counseling, communication, and feedback skills with Soldiers, but it was clear that they understood its importance to the Army and many had an underlying imperative to provide feedback to their Soldiers. Twenty-one percent of the participants indicated providing feedback was something they should do or had always done. The interview data provided a broader sense that NCOs believed that providing feedback, correcting the incorrect in their Soldiers, or in their peers and even in their command, was their duty to the Army and to Soldiers. Below are statements made by the NCOs that demonstrate the imperative NCOs place on the feedback process, even if the ability to clearly articulate the steps of providing feedback are absent:

- "I don't know that that is a decision I consciously make. I provide feedback to my subordinates continually, whether I see them doing something I want them to do, or whether they are doing something I don't want them to do."
- "I try to always and constantly provide my SM's with as much feedback as possible. It is a part of Soldier development to provide honest feedback and encouragement."
- "As a leader, I owe it to the Soldiers to give feedback. In order for our organization to function properly, every Soldier must do their part..."

One feedback factor that directly relates to training is immediacy that feedback is provided. About 8% of the respondents specifically noted the importance of providing feedback as soon as the situation arose, or information became available, rather than waiting until a planned counseling session.

**Feedback interference.** Most NCOs indicated giving feedback to Soldiers was an imperative and 55% of them denied any factors interfered with this process. The remaining 45% indicated the following factors interfered with the feedback process: lack of knowledge, distractions, mission/time requirements, command culture, and emotional interference.

According to the participants, a lack of knowledge regarding resources, situational factors, or not having been in the Soldier's situation previously might keep NCOs from providing feedback. The NCOs interviewed also stated junior NCOs struggled with setting boundaries with Soldiers or dealing with angry Soldiers, thus affecting their consistency in providing feedback. For the NCOs who acknowledged they struggled with these issues, they noted it was particularly challenging. There is also a theme discussed by many NCOs that becoming competent at giving feedback and counseling Soldiers requires the development of a personal leadership style, which is a task easier for some than others.

Another factor that reportedly interferes with providing feedback to Soldiers is the frequency of distractions. The NCOs also noted excessive interference occurs due to organizational and family demands, and a general lack of privacy.

Time demands/mission requirements are another significant factor reported by NCOs that interferes with the feedback provided to Soldiers, according to the interview and survey data. One respondent wrote the following: “Time is the main preventative factor. Time is not as important when the Soldier did something wrong, because the issue is not likely to be forgotten about. If the Soldier did something good and could not be immediately praised, it is a lot more likely.” Organizational issues within the command teams that contribute to time management further compound the time demands for NCOs. For example, during one interview an NCO described that due to the larger organizational communication problems “90% of the week is eaten up by deconflicting the schedule.” The quotes below capture some of the impact the NCOs are seeing because of the excessive demands and responsibilities on those who are supposed to be providing feedback:

- “Most definitely overload of responsibility is perhaps the biggest factor in the Army that keeps leaders from getting to really know their Soldiers and mentor the right way.”
- “Organizational goals sometimes are more important which separate that relationship needed in order to be able to accomplish proper mentor-ship in my opinion.”

The time constraints and mission requirements also contribute to the timeliness of feedback. For example, “Factors that keep me from providing feedback are time, and mission requirements. There are times that I have deadlines that prevent me from providing feedback in a timely manner. If the feedback has taken too long, then there is no value added.”

The command culture not only influences how time is valued and managed throughout the organization, it can have direct impact on how feedback is given and received at all levels of leadership. Command culture was specifically mentioned as an interfering factor to the feedback process. One NCO described being given directives regularly that he viewed as inconsistent with Army standards on counseling and feedback. Below is the NCO’s description of his experience:

Sometimes there is push back from chain of command. I am often told to “don’t take things so serious” or to “shut up and color inside the lines” or “don’t make corrections until you’re an NCO.” The Army didn’t get soft. The leadership did. Future leaders like myself must do what we can to strengthen the Army despite what toxic leadership above us might say about sticking to the status quo and ignoring regulations. There used to be a saying in the Army that “whenever you walk by a deficiency and don’t correct it, you’ve just made it the standard.”

Others noted that the command culture affects the entire counseling process. Multiple NCOs noted that counseling must be supported by command and there must be an accountability for maintaining counseling, otherwise, it will not be done properly and it will not be taken seriously.

Several NCOs also mentioned interference in the feedback process arose due to emotions when providing feedback to Soldiers. Primarily, this was described as NCOs adjusting their timing and approach to providing feedback to a Soldier based on the Soldier’s current emotional state. The following are descriptions of this type of emotional interference provided by NCOs:



- “Only reason would be if the Soldier is going through something serious and my giving them feedback at the time can cause them mental or emotional harm at the moment.”
- “If a Soldier appears overwhelmed by a situation, I tailor my approach to the Soldier's state of being. Don't kick them when they're down. If a Soldier has proven unreceptive to communication, I may request the assistance of a peer or senior in addressing an issue.”

Another example of an emotional interference described by an NCO is similar, but it suggests not speaking to Soldiers when they are upset. For example, “In some situations when a Soldier is facing an obstacle they may be upset. In which some people do not like to be talked to, since it might be a touchy situation.” Again, the NCO might be suggesting the use of timing and approach; however, according to interview data, NCOs that are more senior noted that junior NCOs struggle to enforce standards and hold emotional Soldiers accountable. These data suggests there are situations in which NCOs believe feedback might be necessary, but find it more difficult to give feedback to one Soldier over another. Some NCOs spoke candidly about their own emotional reactions to Soldiers they counseled while others denied emotional reactions while their written responses suggest an emotional reaction was present. For example, with regard to giving Soldiers feedback one NCO stated, “If the SM is being a pain, then I just keep the SM wondering if they're doing it right or wrong.” The role of emotions in the counseling process will be discussed in more detail in the section titled Emotions.

**Feedback Follow-up.** Another important aspect of the counseling process (as described in *The Counseling Process*; DA, 2014) is the final step of following up with the feedback. This led to the question posed to NCOs to describe their next steps after they decide to give feedback. Fifty-nine percent of the participants focused on some aspect of the feedback process at the interpersonal level. For example, NCOs prepared how they would speak, how they might plan their emotional reactions to help communicate their point and being cognizant of their own body language. The following serve as examples of these type of responses:

- “I try to make sure I am prepared to have the conversation. I don't always express myself well verbally, particularly if I am angry about a situation, so it would be easy for a counseling session to go in a nonproductive.”
- “Identify how to properly give the feedback, whether it's in a calm manner or a more in-your-face kind of mentality.”
- “It depends on the issue. I do not use public display to punish a Soldier. I will praise and provide good feedback, but not negative. I believe that making negative feedback public will breakdown the Soldier in a bad way. I will do that one on one. Once I identify the need to give feedback, I will give it straight forward, and consistently. I am transparent in my methods of speaking to a Soldier and I continue to be that way throughout my leading of said Soldier.”

Only three responses noted a plan or need to follow-up with the feedback provided to Soldiers on this question. Below are some of the examples:

- “I will continue to follow up on that particular issue until we feel it's resolved.”
- “Given my feedback together we develop a plan to achieve the same goal. The leader and subordinate understand the plan in order for each to be held accountable”

The interview data indicated there are difficulties with the effective use of plan of actions and follow-up in the counseling process. According to one NCO interviewed, “New NCOs don’t use the plan of action competently.”

**Reactions.** The majority of reactions Soldiers had to standard feedback and counseling situations were not concerning to NCOs. However, the reactions that were concerning were more likely to consume a majority of the NCOs’ time, resources and patience. The descriptions of Soldiers’ behaviors described by NCOs as the most common and problematic were categorized into two groups. The first group of behaviors included motivation issues (e.g., “lazy,” “unmotivated,” etc.), a lack of caring and concern, a general lack of skills and knowledge, age-related issues (e.g., “millennials”), and lack of compliance without any direct ill intent on the Soldier’s part. About 70% of the NCOs surveyed noted that Soldiers exhibit these types of behaviors.

Participating NCOs described a second category of Soldier behaviors as more difficult to handle to include directly disrespectful behaviors, lying, anger outbursts, excessive emotionality, manipulating, denying responsibility or denying actions, or engaging in malicious behaviors. About 22% of the respondents noted these types of behaviors to be the most problematic. Very few NCOs reported aggressive individuals as being difficult, likely due to the low occurrence of this type of behavior being tolerated across the force without resulting in severe disciplinary actions and/or subsequent removal from the Army. It seemed that the more subtle or insidious behaviors NCOs dealt with were more difficult and more germane to their regular experiences than the atypical aggressors were.

The reaction of NCOs to Soldiers was also a topic explored with respondents. Of the 47 NCOs who responded to the question, “How do you typically handle the problematic reactions?” Thirty percent of the responses were categorized as authoritarian approaches. The category of authoritarian approaches included responses of lecturing, using their power, or someone else’s, or denied having any problems with handling difficulty Soldier responses. Some examples of this approach are below:

- “I make them stop whatever they are doing, ask them nicely to pay attention and listen to what I’m saying. If they do not listen I put them in a position that forces them to listen.”
- “Lock them up and let them know whose job it is to be angry.”
- “I usually get them to calm down by allowing them to say their side of the story; if it continues, I get a battle.”
- “Never had anything I couldn’t deal with.”
- “Tell the Soldier to stand outside my office while I get assistance from my 1SG or another peer.”

Fifty-one percent of the participants had reactions that can be classified as attempts to avoid power struggles through de-escalation or listening techniques, encouraging Soldiers, utilizing available resources and directing or advising Soldiers. Examples of this approach are seen below:

- "...I've learned to handle it by letting them know how that bothers me and how I would appreciate it if they didn't do that because if I give them respect I expect the exact same from them."
- "I allow them to calm down or have another peer step in to help me with the situation to make sure it is handled properly. More eyes prevent more lies."
- "When the Soldier believes they're being attacked when it comes to a negative counseling. I just sit back listen to what they have to say and explain to them our perspective and how we look at it or how others may look at the situation."

About 20% of respondents noted active listening was used to help the Soldier work through a problem. These responses were considered a type of two-way communication process because input from the Soldier having the problem was considered before responding at multiple intervals. Some examples of such responses follow:

- "I use active listening to determine the thoughts, ideas, and emotions. I will address their worries and concerns."
- "Depends on the circumstances. In some cases, the matter must be tabled, and approached at a later time. In other cases, a demonstration of empathy or compassion can help the Soldier process. Still others, cold reasoning works well. This is why it is important for leaders to know their Soldiers, and have some understanding of human behavior."
- "Inquire whether or not I am being understood; if the Soldier cares what I have to say; if the Soldier understands the purpose of the counseling; what can I do to improve the situation so that the Soldier is engaged."

**Emotions.** Participating NCOs indicated disparate opinions regarding the role of emotions in the counseling process. Eighty-two percent of the participants indicated emotions play a significant role in the feedback process for Soldiers, leaders, and the unit. Several examples of the varying responses are below:

- "It is important to be level headed, firm, but compassionate, and empathetic towards situations, especially if I never experienced a certain incident personally I have to acknowledge the emotions that is impacting them."
- "There should be no friendly emotions during this process. You are there to help the Soldier grow. It is an NCO's job to care for Soldiers. If a Soldier messes up then there should be an absence of anger when dealing with the Soldier. The punishment should fit the crime."
- "None, I strive to remain neutral and steadfast to bring balance to the situation."

Many respondents described the emotions of leaders, specifically their own as NCOs, as having a significant impact for better or worse on the counseling process and therefore must be managed in a professional way while balancing empathy with maintaining discipline and order. Some respondents denied their own personal emotions although they went on to describe them in later comments. It seemed evident that NCOs struggle with maintaining a balance between the emotional investment of care, concern, and empathic feelings they have for their Soldiers with the necessary discipline that is required at times. The following quotes seemed to capture some of the conflictual nature emotions seem to play among NCOs:

- “Leaders have to control their emotions by not jumping to conclusions. They have to be prepared for Soldier rebuttals. Good leaders must manage their tempers carefully. Some Soldiers respond well to a firm rebuke. Others shut down. Leaders have to know when to be gentle, and when to be firm. They need to know when to demonstrate empathy and compassion, and when to show no emotion at all.”
- “The emotions of every Soldier has an effect on the team. Anger and hatred can be toxic to a unit. Cheerfulness and happiness can be positive, but may be inappropriate at times. Humans are social creatures. The emotions of one person can permeate the perception of others. Both negativity and positivity have the potential to spread throughout an organization.”

From their statements, it seemed that NCOs strive to maintain emotional control in order to provide necessary discipline required for professional development, needed training of Soldiers, and unit cohesion and order, regardless of individuals’ personal emotional experiences. Their comments conveyed a recognition of the role emotions play in the counseling process although they work diligently to ensure that role is managed in a professional manner. Some respondents indicated an approach to stifle their own emotions, for maintaining a caring, empathic approach toward their Soldiers that allows them to focus on the problem behavior and the need actions to follow. Although a few responses suggested emotions should not play a role in counseling, upon further examination of the respondents’ statements in totality, a slightly different picture became apparent. Taken together, these statements indicated the NCOs’ goals were not to simply deny emotions existed, but to keep emotions from hindering them from performing their duties in a professional manner or maintaining standards with their Soldiers or the unit. Understanding the desire of NCOs to perform their duties well is valuable insight especially considering the volatile nature emotions can play in some situations.

Only 16% of the participants reported they did not believe they possessed the ability to be empathic or had reservations about using their empathic skills during counseling sessions. Below are examples of statements from NCOs:

- “I have the skills I just do not show much emotion to others. Not sure what keeps from doing so, I’m just used to it and smart enough to know how to handle and identify their emotions.”
- “There are certain areas where empathy is difficult, also when I see a Soldier repeat the same behavior over again, each time further compounding their situation and still look for sympathy, empathy has its limits.”
- “...not the best skills; only when I can relate to a situation and feel I can help them change.”

**Current Training.** Participating NCOs provided valuable information regarding available training on ICCS and other counseling related training. Fifty-nine percent of the participants indicated NCOs receive no standardized training regarding the use of ICCS for use in counseling sessions or other interpersonal communication contexts. Although respondents noted this training gap across the NCO corps, they described how they have acquired relevant skills they believe to be necessary in providing Soldier counseling. The primary methods for NCOs use to develop ICCS and counseling specific information is through other training programs, role modeling/mentoring

and on-the-job-training (OJT). Master Resiliency Training was the training most often mentioned by respondents when discussing ICCS, followed by Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) training, unit level and company level trainings, and to a lesser degree online training such as those offered through the Institute of NCO Professional Development (INCOVD).

***Role modeling/mentoring.*** According to interview data and survey data, role models and mentors were often the source of needed training and skill development not available elsewhere for NCOs. For learning ICCS and skills specific to Army counseling, respondents described the best role models as those individuals who maintained professional, psychological, physical, and emotional boundaries for themselves and others while demonstrating their concern for Soldiers. This provided a calming sense of safety and consistency regardless of external chaotic circumstances. These ideal role models and mentors would also provide explanations, rationale for their thought processes, and decision-making so others could learn from them, not just attempt to replicate their actions when the situation may not be the same. They also knew Soldiers and would be seen interacting regularly with lower ranking Soldiers, even working alongside them. Such role models monitored others for training purposes, not with the intent to embarrass Soldiers.

The impact of role models and mentors is pivotal in the trajectory of a Soldier's training and development. Participating NCOs described incidents involving role models, some for better, and some for worse that shaped their careers and lives. During interviews NCOs often reflected on their experiences, replaying positive and negative interactions with role models, formulating meaning, making sense of situations, and identifying "lessons learned" to be shared. Role models were not always a senior leader, according to the interview data. In some situations, especially when there was a toxic leader or ineffective leader, NCOs described the presence of a positive peer with natural leadership ability to be invaluable in handling such types of difficult situations. Sometimes these vital influences were not within the NCOs' footprint, but they still reached out to them in significant ways. For example, one NCO described how he had been unmotivated to move ahead in the Army, but received mentorship from a Warrant Officer (WO) who took a special interest in encouraging him. The NCO reported he now pushes his Soldiers to get schooling and encourages them to accomplish goals, as the WO did for him. Another respondent noted the value in being a role model/mentor to others by stating, "You learn by being a role-model."

Role models and mentors serve to help train Soldiers and NCOs, but they also serve as a way for NCOs to view skills they would like to develop, or not. In the time it takes Soldiers to develop into NCOs, the Army exposes them to a variety of NCOs with different counseling styles and ICCS. The respondents discussed how they select from this variety, try a skill they have seen or see something in an NCO they do not like and never want to replicate. One respondent said that his counseling style has resulted from taking "bits and pieces" from each person he has worked with to make an "NCO Frankenstein." Similarly, another respondent describes a process of using personal experiences with his own counseling as a source to draw from when providing counseling to Soldiers: "I have received numerous training but none have helped me. I just took into account all the counselings I have had in the past and used it to build counselings. I know what worked for me as a Soldier and what didn't and I tried every method until I found one that not only works for me but for my soldiers as well." Several specific examples of role modeling counseling specific skills were noted in examples such as this one: "Previous NCOs have counseled their Soldiers in

the room with me so that I can see how to counsel and what needs to go in a counseling. Other than that I've never had proper training on how to counsel a Soldier.”

***On-the-job-training.*** Respondents described mixed views regarding the use of OJT. Respondents described multiple ways that OJT prepared them for their role as leaders, NCOs, specific to counseling procedures and, to some degree, ICCS. However, some NCOs, despite it being a staple training modality for many Army skills, questioned the effective implementation of OJT. One respondent stated, “NCOs are getting promoted and thrown into the role with very little mentorship from senior command.” Other respondents noted the effectiveness of the role model significantly affected the outcome of OJT.

**Current Best Practices.** Despite noted training gaps, NCOs have found resources and knowledgeable mentors to develop ICCS to provide their Soldiers counseling. The list below of best practices constitutes a summary of the most salient topics to current NCOs.

- Know your Soldiers. An overwhelming majority of NCOs in the sample described knowing their Soldiers as paramount to their duties as an NCO. The NCOs described this to mean the small changes in behaviors, actions, habits, and moods of their Soldiers. This meant being with and getting to know their Soldiers on a personal level through direct, interpersonal communication.
- Be organized/prepared. Many NCOs described systems they developed or learned from others to manage the procedural necessities. Several respondents reported maintaining a running tab of Soldiers’ activities, accomplishments, problems, etc. in order to track progress and simplify written documentation preparation. Concerning document preparation, NCOs also encouraged such activities as, “Brainstorming beforehand and thinking about what possible issues or counterarguments that might be brought up by the counseled Soldier.”
- Use basic interpersonal skills. The participating NCOs made numerous statements with regard to how NCOs should interact with Soldiers using rudimentary listening skills. For example, hearing out the individual, “treat others the way I would want to be treated,” engage in small talk and courtesies, find common connections with Soldiers, and treat others with basic respect, without concern for rank.
- Set and maintain boundaries. Participants noted the need to set and maintain boundaries while providing positive feedback on what the Soldier was doing well. There was a general notion that “negative” feedback can also be positive, meaning that even if a Soldier receives correction on something they need to change, it can still be a positive learning experience.
- Utilize resources. The participating NCOs were capable problem-solvers. They discussed using all available resources to assist and help their Soldiers. They even described how they used one another as an invaluable resource by using fellow NCOs as sounding boards, proofreaders, assistants during counseling sessions if they needed a “filter,” as just a few examples. They also discussed using any available resources in their ranks and chain of command.
- Use empowering behaviors. Another common theme discussed by respondents was the need to provide junior enlisted Soldiers opportunities to learn and grow by empowering

them. Specific examples included allowing them to conduct sergeant's time training then assessing their performance with them.

**Training needs.** One primary purpose of this research was to determine if there was a need for additional NCO ICCS training. Based on the survey and interview data from NCOs, the vast majority reported a desire for training in ICCS to improve counseling outcomes. No respondents denied the need for training although a couple noted the realities of implementing training. For example, "This training can help at the unit level...but to be honest we receive training and move on to the next one. I do try to apply what I learned, but depending on the organization mandatory training is simply that. Soldiers want time, not a million trainings to the point where the tune it out just to get by." The remaining respondents were vocal in suggesting the best training modalities, setting, instructors, and other design issues.

Based on the questionnaire data, 28% of the respondents suggested a classroom setting as opposed to online training due to the lack of interaction. Nineteen percent of the sample suggested interactive trainings in the form of role-plays, scenario-based learning, and shadowing. Some respondents also noted the need for more professional trainers while others expressed beliefs training should be done within the Army structure. For example, "Honestly you shouldn't train for counseling. It should be taught by your superiors by giving you the responsibility, critiquing your work afterwards, and before implementing your counseling of your Soldiers."

## Discussion

The findings of this research have important implications for the training of NCOs and their subsequent performance. There is a clear need for training to improve NCOs' counseling knowledge, skills, and abilities. In particular, training is needed to increase their understanding and utilization of the two-way communication process. The majority of NCOs describe counseling as a one-way process. Because the MI model has a strong focus on interpersonal relationships, it supports the practice of interpersonal skills needed to develop two-way communication skills. These skills are vital to the development and training of successful Army leaders, and support such valuable leadership skills as conflict resolution, negotiation, and team building.

When helping professionals are trained to counsel others, they are encouraged to examine their pre-conceived beliefs about (a) how individuals change, (b) factors that impact the change process, and, (c) their role in the change process. Army doctrine, values, standards, and training provide some guidance on how NCOs can think about some of these issues, but many NCOs still struggle with how these beliefs impact their ability to counsel Soldiers effectively. One obvious factor that was noted to affect the counseling of Soldiers by the participating NCOs is the idea NCOs have regarding the process of change, counseling, and the role of counseling documentation. The NCOs who participated in this research reported a sense of disempowerment surrounding their autonomy to make counseling decisions for their Soldiers, primarily the type of documentation to provide for counseling sessions. The NCOs typically have a procedural view of the counseling process. This may result from a lack of adequate training, a lack of understanding of the process view, or even feelings of disempowerment. It could be that with a greater understanding of how documentation can impact the process of change for Soldiers, the more

willing NCOs would be to utilize documentation as a tool for change rather than something they are simply ordered to do.

Feedback is an invaluable tool in the change process; however, there is little training, discussion, or thought given to its utilization as such, according to the data. Although some participants noted the importance of providing timely feedback, NCOs who reported this to be important was less than 10%. On the other hand, 55% of these same respondents indicated they did not experience factors that hindered them from providing feedback to Soldiers. Because the questionnaire did not directly ask how feedback was given or received, the available data do not allow for a clear understanding of how feedback is provided to Soldiers, if specific training should target the delivery of feedback, or how feedback is defined by those giving or receiving it. The data did indicate that of those who noted interference in providing feedback to Soldiers, emotions played the most significant role. Some NCOs acknowledged that timing and approach when giving Soldiers feedback was important. There was also a significant lack of emphasis on follow-up on feedback given and this is an area of recommended training focus. The academic literature and Army doctrine emphasize the importance of following up on training outcomes. By implementing aspects of TTM and MI into the feedback process, it might become a more useful mechanism for training and development of Soldiers.

Although 82% of the respondents indicated emotions play a significant role in the counseling process, it is unclear that Soldiers are prepared to manage their own emotions, or the emotions of others, in ways that will produce the most productive outcomes. Some have noted there is a general tendency for the Army to suppress or avoid emotions and therefore are ill-prepared for channeling them in a more effective manner (Kaplan, Cortina, Ruark, Orvis, Engel, & Langkamer, 2012). Current NCOs describe their strategy for managing emotional content as suppression; however, there is evidence that suppressing negative emotions negatively affects performance and decreases well-being (Hopp, Rohrmann, & Hodapp, 2012).

It can be argued that through effective counseling interventions, recognizing, identifying, and connecting with an individual's emotions can fuel the change process (Middleton, Buboltz, & Sapon, 2015; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). It is also apparent, based on NCO report and previous research, that emotions directly impact the feedback process (Pelgrim, Kramer, Mokkink, & van der Vleuten, 2012). Therefore, emotions have the potential to play a significant role in the training, development, performance, functioning, and readiness of Army Soldiers. By providing NCOs a more directed training for emotional content in interpersonal and intra-personal communications, including the use of feedback, can be a great asset to the Army.

## **Implications and Future Research**

The implications of the findings discussed in this report is that there is common ground and common problems between Army and civilian personnel who are in helping roles. By exploring areas of overlap within the helping profession, it may be possible to utilize known solutions to common problems across environments to develop and adapt empirically validated ICCS training programs for NCOs. Some examples of these overlapping areas include the use of "two-way communication." For example, the *ATP-6.22-1* references the use of "two-way communication" as an ideal form of counseling Soldiers: "Leaders may conduct developmental counseling



whenever the need arises for focused, two-way open communication aimed at a subordinate's development. Developing subordinates consists of observing the subordinate's performance, comparing it to established standards, and providing feedback through counseling." Miller and Rollnick (2013) defined MI as a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. As noted previously, the word collaboration in MI suggests an approach that is done "for" and "with" a person, rather than done "to" or "on" someone. With only 31% noting the use of two-way communication during counseling sessions, it suggests an area MI training may be of particular use. While MI has been renowned for its "style" as opposed to rules, Army doctrine tends to focus on procedures, as noted by the high responses to counseling in terms of procedure, rather than process.

Resistance is another example with both MI and the Army describing the need to work around this hindrance to the counseling process in slightly different ways. As described in *The Counseling Process*, (DA, 2014) there is a focus on techniques leaders can do to redirect the Soldier and a general understanding that external factors might be contributing to a Soldier's resistance to complying. These techniques may be useful at times. Miller and Rollnick describe a more holistic approach in how they view the change process. First, they first defined resistance as a "move away from change," however; over their years of experience, they have realized that it is part of the natural progression of the change process. They describe this process as ambivalence, which is a natural part of the change process rather than defining someone exhibiting these types of behaviors as a finite failure. They also classified interpersonal factors in the counselor/patient relationship as "discord" to note the differences between the natural process of ambivalence and counselor behaviors that might lead to discord in the relationships, (i.e. Counseling Practices 2-15. Dominating the session by talking too much, giving unnecessary or inappropriate advice, not truly listening, and projecting biases and prejudices all interfere with effective counseling. Competent leaders avoid rash judgments, stereotyping, losing emotional control, inflexible counseling methods, or improper follow-up. Leaders should be open to new ideas and thoughts.).

The impact of emotions on feedback would be another important topic for future research. The role NCOs play in the development of Soldiers requires them to provide a range of feedback, including issues such as performance, family, health, hygiene, schooling, and interpersonal conflict and relationships. Because of the close-knit nature of small units and the NCOs duties within them, there are very few topics off-limits with regard to feedback because so many things influence performance of the team. Understanding the best circumstances under which to provide feedback to Soldiers, the role emotions (the NCO's and the Soldier's) play, and how these impact the outcome, or decision-making process would provide additional clarity to a training program.

Pursuing additional research on NCO ICCS training and development would provide substantial benefits for the NCO Corps and the Army. Research in this areas should focus on the design, development, and assessment of an MI training for NCO ICCS (Sanders, In Preparation). Another area that is directly related is the lack of adequate assessment tools for this type of skillsets. Therefore, research projects should include the development and validation of assessment tools. Also, research should clarify the feedback process and the factors that impact communication processes around it. Also research is needed to determine optimal conditions for providing different types of feedback to different classes of Soldiers under a variety of contexts and conditions, including emotions.

## **Conclusions**

The primary purpose of this effort was to determine the need for ICCS training from the perspective of NCOs. Based on the findings, the need for ICCS training is supported. It is clear that an NCOs' job performance and the performance of their Soldiers are impacted by the NCO's ability to provide effective counseling. Therefore, it would be beneficial to the overall goals of the Army to supply NCOs with adequate training to meet the counseling demands of their job and thus influence overall performance, readiness, and resilience of their teams. By designing, developing, and conducting thorough assessments of ICCS training for NCOs, more Soldiers may be trained, retained, and have better job performance and satisfaction. MI/TTM offers an empirically validated, adaptable, easily trainable tool for such a purpose.

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## Appendix A

Basic MI Principles and Skills adapted from *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*,  
3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Miller & Rollnick, 2013)

Basic MI Principles and Skills adapted from *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

<b>DEARS</b>		
	Description	Examples
<b>D</b> Develop Discrepancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategy is to create dissonance</li> <li>• Motivate change by creating discrepancy between present behavior and personal goals and values</li> <li>• If values are not identified, it will be very difficult to develop discrepancy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You want to make the promotion list but you showing up late to formation does not help accomplish this goal.</li> </ul> <p>Note: Knowing Soldiers would be vital for this step and it would be important to know what Soldier’s goals are for the future. Do they want an Army career, to pay for college, to be med-boarded due to an injury, etc.?</p>
<b>E</b> Express Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and understand reasons for resilience without judging</li> <li>• Research indicating importance of empathy</li> <li>• Skillful reflective listening is fundamental</li> <li>• Ambivalence is normal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You really want to make rank because you love your job but you also know it will put a lot more pressure and demand on you and you worry if you will still love it as much. You’re really torn.</li> </ul>
<b>A</b> Avoid Arguing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confrontation increases client resistance to change</li> <li>• Labeling is unnecessary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Whether you choose to improve your PT scores or not is your decision. I am here to support your decision.”</li> </ul>
<b>R</b> Rolling with resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The NCO’s role is to reduce resistance, since this is correlated with poorer outcomes</li> <li>• If resistance increases, providers shift to different strategies</li> <li>• The person’s objections or minimization do not demand a response</li> <li>• The person is a primary resource in finding answers and solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect the resistant statement: “You don’t like this idea.”</li> <li>• Reflect ambivalence “On the one hand you want to pass your PT test but on the other you don’t think you can so you stop trying.”</li> <li>• Acknowledge the resistance process “We seem to be arguing about you passing your PT test when it is really up to you.”</li> </ul>

<p><b>S</b> Support Self-Efficacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A person’s belief in the possibility of change is an important motivator</li> <li>• The person, not the counselor, is responsible for choosing and carrying out change</li> <li>• The counselor’s own belief in the person’s ability to change becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You have been made improvements in a lot of other areas so you have the skills needed to change. It is possible to solve this problem, too.”</li> </ul>
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**OARS**

	Description	Examples
<p><b>O</b> Open- Ended question</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elicits descriptive information</li> <li>• Requires more of a response than a simple yes or no</li> <li>• Encourages student to do most of the talking</li> <li>• Helps us avoid premature judgments</li> <li>• Keeps communication moving forward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often start with words like “how” or “what” or “tell me about” or “describe.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “What are you enjoying about your unit?”</li> <li>○ “Tell me about your last mission.”</li> <li>○ “What challenges you most in your MOS?”</li> <li>○ “How would you like things to be different?”</li> <li>○ “What have you tried before?”</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>A</b> Affirming Responses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Must be done sincerely</li> <li>• Supports and promotes self-efficacy</li> <li>• Acknowledges the difficulties the Soldier has experienced</li> <li>• Validates the Soldier’s experience and feelings</li> <li>• Emphasizes past experiences that demonstrate strength and success to prevent discouragement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I appreciate how hard it must have been for you to decide to come here. You took a big step.”</li> <li>• “I appreciate your honesty.”</li> <li>• “You handled yourself really well in that situation.”</li> <li>• “You are very courageous to be so revealing about your problem.”</li> <li>• “You’ve accomplished a lot in a short time.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>R</b> Reflective Listening</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A way of checking rather than assuming that you know what is meant</li> <li>• Shows that you have an interest in and respect for what the student has to say</li> <li>• Demonstrates that you have accurately heard and understood the student</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It sounds like you...”</li> <li>• “You’re wondering if...”</li> <li>• “So you feel...”</li> <li>• Please say more...</li> <li>• Reflections are statements. Statements ending with downward inflection (as opposed to questions) tend to work better because students find it helpful to have some words to start a response. Statements</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages further exploration of problems and feelings</li> </ul>	<p>are less likely than questions to evoke resistance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid “Do you mean...” and “What I hear you saying is that you....” (can appear patronizing).</li> </ul>
<p><b>S</b> Summary Statements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforces what has been said</li> <li>• Shows that you have been listening carefully</li> <li>• Prepares the student for transition</li> <li>• Allows you to be strategic in what to include to reinforce talk that is in the direction of change</li> <li>• Can underscore feelings of ambivalence and promote perception of discrepancy</li> </ul>	<p>“You mentioned a number of things about struggles you have had trying to pass your PT test and how life will change for you if you do pass. You spoke of how you would have more demands on you and you worry how that will affect your family. What do you think might help you figure out where to go from here?”</p>

Appendix B  
Glossary of Key Terms

## Glossary of Key Terms

**Ambivalence**<sup>‡</sup>- The simultaneous presence of competing motivations for and against a change.

**Change talk**<sup>‡</sup>- Any talk from the person being helped that favors movement toward a particular change goal.

**Discord**<sup>‡</sup>- Interpersonal behavior that reflects dissonance in the working relationship between the

**Feedback**- the transmission of corrective or evaluative information about a person's performance or actions to that individual for the basis of improvement

**Interpersonal Communication and Counseling Skills (ICCS)**- the basic interpersonal skills needed for NCOs to perform their assigned job duties effectively as it relates to counseling their Soldiers (e.g., handling interpersonal issues, conflicts, personal problems, and behavioral issues)

**Motivational Interviewing**<sup>‡</sup> (MI)- a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.

**One-way communication**- communication proceeds from the sender to the receiver, in one direction only. It does not allow for a two-way flow of information and ideas.

**Resistance**<sup>‡</sup>- In MI this is natural progression in the change process, which consists of sustain talk and discord.

**Sustain Talk**<sup>‡</sup>- speech from the person being helped that favors the status quo rather than movement toward a specific goal

**Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM)**- a conceptual model developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983, 1986) that describes how and why change behavior occurs

**Two-way communication**- communication flows freely between the sender to the receiver, and allows for a bi-directional flow of information and ideas.

<sup>‡</sup>- as defined in Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013)

## Appendix C

### Questionnaire and Focus Group Protocol

## QUESTIONNAIRE AND FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL –Counseling Soldiers

### Session Information

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

### Introduction and Research Purpose

*\*\*\* Before potential participants arrive, place Informed Consent Forms and Military OneSource Cards on the table - one for each Soldier \*\*\**

Good morning/good afternoon and thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to be here today. My name is Dr. April Sanders. I am a research psychologist with the U.S. Army Research Institute at Fort Hood.

Today I am here to talk to you about one of the most challenging aspects of being a small-unit leader – providing counseling to your Soldiers. You have to do this both formally in counseling sessions and informally through coaching and mentoring. To clarify, I am interested in the process that goes on between you and your Soldiers at the interpersonal level, not the paperwork process, necessarily. So when anyone says counseling, I will assume we are talking about the act of communicating with Soldier's, (e.g., personally giving someone feedback, discussing a personal problem, giving a correction, etc.) whether it is in a formal counseling session or in some other setting. I want to know about your conversations, your thoughts, your actions, your attitudes, and your decision processes that go into these conversations. My goal is to understand what makes this really easy for some NCOs and a challenge for other NCOs so we can all learn from one another.

There are two parts to this research: 1) a set of questionnaires and 2) a focus-group interview. I will provide each of you with a government tablet (or laptop) to complete the questionnaires. Afterward, we will discuss some of the information in the questionnaires so you can have the opportunity to clarify and expand on your answers. It is important to me to understand exactly what the issues and solutions might be.

The focus group typically lasts about one hour and will include two NCOs at a time.

Keep in mind that this interview is not evaluative of performance in any way – be it your performance, your Soldiers', or your leaders'. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers, and I am not here to judge you – you are the experts. I am here solely to learn from you. Also, you can choose to participate in any part or none or all of the sections of this research. Before we get started, do you have any questions about the research itself or anything I've said so far?

## **Informed Consent Form**

Please reference the information in Informed Consent form as I briefly review it. It's important to understand that your participation is voluntary and there are no consequences if you choose not to participate. If at any time you wish to leave, you can return to your normal duties.

Please take a few minutes to read over both of the documents in front of you. If you choose to participate, please sign the second page of the consent form and indicate that you volunteer to participate. Please return this signed page to me. You may keep the informed consent form for your records if you would like.

Before we continue, do you have any questions?

## **Section I. Group Interview**

### **Basic and Demographic Information**

I would like to know a little about your occupational background (e.g., MOS, Branch of Army), the types of units you have been a part of (e.g., Combat, Combat Support, Combat Service Support) and about leadership roles and responsibilities which you have held in your career to this point? We would also like to know how you learned your counseling skills, especially those related to giving and receiving feedback. So we would like to start off with learning a little about you...

1. How long have you served in the Army?
2. What is your rank and MOS/position/unit/etc.? And what do you actually do day-to-day? What are your responsibilities?
3. When did you become an NCO? What was the transition to a position of leadership like for you?
4. What other type of leadership roles have you had (formal and informal, in the Army, prior to entering)?
5. What best prepared you to be an NCO? Knowledge? Skills? Ability?
6. What have you found to be the most challenging aspect of your job as an NCO?

## **Section II. Group Interview**

### **Experiences with Interpersonal Counseling, Coaching and Mentoring**

As I mentioned before, I am most interested in the interpersonal process that goes on between Soldiers when they are giving and receiving counseling. I know that you have all received counseling or feedback in the form of corrections when you made mistakes or when you did

something well and I assume most of you have been in your position to have communicated this to Soldiers. Some people tend to be really good at counseling, coaching, and mentoring others and we want to find out exactly what it is that sets these individuals apart so we can learn from them. I will be asking you about your experiences with counseling in order to learn what works and what has not been effective and why. I understand there are a number of situations, people, circumstances, personal traits and issues, and timing that can interfere with even the best of intentions so I hope that you will be as open as possible so that we can all learn from each other's challenges. However, please do not identify anyone by name or other direct identifier. If this happens, we will simply not enter the identifying information in our notes.

1. Let's start by describing what are the steps you go through when a Soldier needs counseling? How do you identify the need?
2. How do you decide when to give a Soldier feedback? What factors keep you from giving feedback to a Soldier?
3. What do you do once you have identified the need and decided to give feedback?
4. What role do emotions play in the process? For the Soldier? For yourself? For the team/unit?
5. *As I ask the next two questions I would like to remind you about not using peoples' names or units, etc.* Can you describe a time when you were given feedback or were provided counseling that went really well? What made it go well? What did the person do that made it go well?
6. Can you describe a time when you were given feedback or provided counseling (or you witnessed it) when it did not go well? Were there behaviors the person had that led to the negative outcome?
7. What are the most common reactions to you when you give counseling/feedback to a Soldier? What are the most problematic reactions for you to deal with? How did you handle it?
8. Have you received any training on how to respond to these or similar situations? If so, where did you receive the training? Was it useful? If not, what kind of training would be helpful in the situations that you just described? Where would that training occur (classroom, unit, etc.)?
9. What interpersonal counseling practices have you tried that have been the most successful? Why do you think it worked? Would you recommend it to others to use?
10. When you are counseling Soldiers, do you demonstrate empathy? How? What about when you are providing Soldiers or peers with feedback/ corrections?

11. Are there specific issues that hinder your ability to demonstrate empathy?
12. Have you ever tried to give feedback to a higher ranking individual (e.g., an officer)? How did you go about it? What was the result?
13. Can you think of anything I missed asking you about that you believe is important to the interpersonal counseling of Soldiers? Best practices you believe should be shared? Or practices you believe are counter-productive?

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**Conclusion**

Thank you again for your time and participation. Your comments have been very helpful. Please be sure to take your portion of the informed consent form and the additional information that I've provided you. Should you have any questions – please don't hesitate to contact me.