

# **The Army NCO's Guide to Mentoring**



**by Raymond A. Kimball**

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*This book is dedicated to the hundreds of non-commissioned officers who shaped my development as a leader over the last 20+ years.*

The views expressed in this book are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the U.S. Government.

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## **Section I: Mentoring Theory and Definitions**



## Introduction

SAMUEL: Young sergeants and staff sergeants, they don't want to seem inferior. [They say:] "I don't need help, I've got this, I can do this." They never want to ask for help. We see it all the time; you have a leader who's screaming and yelling at subordinates, but not telling another NCO that they don't know what the hell they were doing...They don't ask the right questions because they're so focused on day to day operations.

This book is about mentoring in the Army Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) Corps, the backbone of the U.S. Army. Before we talk about why this book exists and how it contributes to the profession, let's hear some great stories of NCOs in action from the NCOs who lived them.<sup>1</sup>

### Great Stories of NCOs in Action

DIANA: We were training at Stewart and had a relatively new driver. Back where he came from in Alaska, they would go hard through puddles to initiate new guys, and our gunner was real new. You go hard through puddles and it just splashes the gunner. There's no cause for that. I couldn't do anything about it; all of a sudden, the driver gunned it and I was like, *Whoa, what are you doing?* The gunner got splashed; he got mad and came down. There were words exchanged down there. I knew I had to do something right then, right there, to handle it. It was on me and no one else. I got between them and settled it.

EDGAR: We were engineers, attached to an infantry unit or a supporting unit, and in more of a supporting role as opposed to being more directly in the fight. Some units would know how to use us, but others didn't know our full capability. It was a shift, being attached to a unit. You're like that kid on the basketball court: *Put me in the game, coach! I can do this, I got it!* The shift required me to not be so anxious to get into the fight; to show them what we're capable of doing, so they know. A lot of the training was centered around combined arms: *You got an obstacle? Give me five minutes and watch what I can do to it.* Show those light infantrymen what engineers can do.

SAMUEL: We were in Afghanistan. We were going to conduct a raid, bag our guy, be back for breakfast, and chill out for the evening. The enemy had a vote, and when it was all said and done, we got caught in an IED minefield. All offensive ops in Afghanistan got shut down to recover us because we were out there flapping. We could easily have gotten overrun. Thank God we only lost one guy that day, one of my team leaders. So we finally get back to the Forward Operating Base (FOB). I was sitting on a bench with my head down. I think I was smoking a cigarette (and I don't smoke.) V came over, looked at me and said "What the fuck is wrong with you? You can't be moping around. You're a leader! You have to get out there and set the example!" It was a 2-3 minute tirade where he chewed my ass. When it was over, I was angry. *Who is he to say this? I just lost a Soldier and MEDEVACed 14 people. We had 8 catastrophic vehicle kills.* The next day, outside our BN TOC, he comes over and tells me to sit down. "You know why I chewed your ass yesterday, right? Because I have to. In my position, I cannot play a favorite. I have to be even keeled with everybody. From your platoon's perspective, if they're going to see you moping around and kicking rocks, they're going to do the same thing. And then next time you go out on an operation, somebody else is going to get hurt. And it's going to get worse. You have to be that leader who's like 'OK, what next?' No matter what happens, you have to be resilient and bounce back from

it." I walked away with a little crooked smile and my head held high: *Ok, I got it*. Just that five-minute conversation, I had a different respect for him. Before that, I thought, *all he ever does is bitch at us, telling us what we're doing wrong. He never tells us we're doing anything right*. After that short conversation, I realized that he does that because he expects leaders to maintain a level of professionalism at all times, no matter what the circumstance is. We have to be those people who, no matter what adversity shows up, there's still a mission to accomplish. Now, obviously, you have to take care of your people, your subordinates, but at the end of the day, mission comes first.

WYATT: When I became The Unit<sup>2</sup> CSM, I had a couple of graybeards approach me at one of our get-togethers. These were guys who were incredible, respected leaders in the SOF community. They said, "Hey, congratulations on becoming Unit CSM, but know this: you can't retire from The Unit. You have to take on at least one more assignment afterwards outside of the Unit to give back and help out the broader force. If nothing else, look at it as a way to help The Unit from the outside." I nodded and said, *Ok, I'll definitely put that in my rucksack*.

As you were reading, did you find yourself disagreeing with the narrator? Wanting to know more? That's going to happen a lot in this book. We owe it to these NCOs to accept their stories as presented and simply put ourselves in their shoes to learn from them, rather than sitting in judgement. Use the reactions that these stories prompt in you as opportunities for reflection: *Why did I react that way? Why do I think the NCO is representing their position in this manner? What can I learn from it?*

## The Role of the Army NCO

What do all of these stories have in common? They all feature NCOs conducting their duties, the gritty, day-to-day challenges of training, inspiring, and equipping Soldiers. The Army's NCO 2020 Strategy Vision makes the importance of capable NCOs crystal clear: "A professional, trained, and prepared NCO Corps is central to the Army's ability to remain ready as the world's premier combat force."<sup>3</sup> But what, exactly, is it that NCOs do that make them so important to the U.S. Army? The answers lie in the opening phrases of each section of the NCO Creed, first authored as part of the Army's post-Vietnam rebuilding.<sup>4</sup>

*No one is more professional than I.* NCOs are expected to be the keepers of standards within their unit. Those standards encompass the full range of a Soldier's life, from professional training to personal appearance to moral character. It is NCOs' enforcement of standards that keeps a unit ready and resilient during difficult times. A strong NCO can be a rock that others use to plant their feet when everything around them seems to be coming apart. A weak NCO is, to paraphrase the biblical maxim, a foundation of sand that will quickly wash away when tested. As

a colleague of mine put it while reading this manuscript, “Good NCOs train good officers and Soldiers; bad NCOs train bad officers and Soldiers.”<sup>5</sup>

*Competence is my watchword.* NCOs are the trainers of the U.S. Army. They are expected to be tactical and technical subject matter experts, proficient in all aspects of their job. That proficiency is essential, not only for their own job performance, but to ensure that their Soldiers are trained and led properly. NCOs are conversant in the applicable doctrine for their functions, while understanding when and how it is appropriate to deviate from that doctrine. They instill that same understanding in their soldiers through tough, sustained, and realistic training.

*Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine.* The officer and NCO dynamic is a complicated one. Although officers hold a higher rank, they are typically junior in age and experience, especially at the company level. Officers are responsible for everything their units do or fail to do. NCOs are charged with carrying out the orders of those officers. They must possess a balance of candor and wisdom, advising officers with solutions

and maintain a strong image among their soldiers; often giving the officer what is needed rather than what is wanted. The best units carefully balance the abilities and actions of their officers and NCOs.

### Why a Book on NCO Mentoring?

The burden and complexity of NCO duties require an equally complex and powerful development system. A significant part of this development comes from the Non-Commissioned Officer Education System, which has undergone significant evolution throughout its existence. However, formal education and development is only part of the process of developing a professional identity. Army leadership doctrine has long recognized both formal and informal workplace mentoring as an important part of NCO development. Unfortunately, the Army's own leadership surveys consistently find that *Develops Others* is the leadership competency rated as least effective across the force.<sup>6</sup> In the words of currently serving NCOs:

CATHY: Overall, I would give [NCO mentoring] an average. Everyone is not afforded the opportunities that I had, to have great mentors. In some organizations, your first 3 or 4 years,

you don't have the best of mentorship or leadership. So you're behind the curve compared to others. That's more so with mentorship. As leaders, we're still trying to develop our own leadership skills, so sometimes that mentorship does lag when we need it to be strong.

DIANA: Quite honestly, I would have to say it's not until the last few years, that any one has really talked about mentoring formally, that it was important. Nobody really told me to find people that I trusted, that I could go back to. We get so caught up in the execution of things, taking care of things, and there's a lot to be taken care of as a team leader or a squad leader. There's a lot going on, and we're so much about accomplishing the mission and taking care of soldiers that we don't do a good job talking about people's futures and someone who can help them along. I don't really remember anyone talking about it, that you've gotta find somebody who you trust and there should be a mutual trust.

EDGAR: Currently, I think the mentorship on the enlisted side has lost its voice. It has been put on the back burner. I would tell my soldiers, *Leadership is taking a group of individuals and accomplishing a particular task*. That is what the Army [has] gone to, because of our current tempo. We need leaders, leaders, leaders. I think of mentoring, that mutual agreement between two people, where one says "I can't do this much longer. Let me pour into you everything I know so the Army is not at a deficit." Not too many leaders understand that. They take all of their good stuff, and when they get ready to leave, it goes to sit in their attic.

EVAN: I think some of the lack of mentoring for E1-E5 might be time-based: the amount of time it's going to take versus the number of experienced people that can actually facilitate that. The other impediment is the lack of the protégé wanting to be mentored. It's a lack of understanding of what they're really doing. I was there, at one point. It's just hard-headedness, not being able to see what they're really doing.

FRED: The practice of mentoring within the Army NCO Corps is a little bit weak. I think it has a lot of room for growth. There's a lot of factors that I see that are hindering us from actually sharing more and taking care of our NCOs a little better. It's so much harder now for people to stand out. That's one of the biggest factors. It keeps people from helping each other out, serving in those mentor roles.

The new forced weighting of the NCOER, I think it was the nail in the coffin in that respect. It just changed the mentality. No longer do we say that peers are brothers, helping each other out. Now it's, *That's my rival. If I don't do better than him, then I won't get that top block / 1 block.* It was just the culminating factor where NCOs are more focused on competition than completing the mission. There's still a lot of growth to be done.

JAMES: NCOs won't accept formal approaches because if it's more formal, it just gets boring. We go to a lot of leader development-type meetings, and a lot of times it's "Do this. Do that. Next slide. Next slide. Next slide." You lose that audience in the first 5-10 minutes in a formal setting.

SAMUEL: I think [the current state of NCO mentoring] is terrible. The reason I say that is because I see what happens in the officer corps. I've seen lieutenants whose battalion commander treated them like complete shit, but they get mentored as a senior lieutenant or junior captain by a colonel or lieutenant colonel. They talk very regularly about personal and professional development. There are some people who I could pick up the phone and call today, and chitchat about anything, but collectively it doesn't happen, especially at the lower level. My position as a promotable sergeant first class, I can call these master sergeants and sergeants major and do that. You rarely are going to see a senior specialist or young buck sergeant talk to their platoon sergeant, or another platoon sergeant, or a first sergeant within the organization, just to get a different viewpoint.

I think that's one of the things we're definitely lacking on.

We're not taking the experience level and knowledge of those



roots that will ultimately make us better. As a platoon sergeant, your job is to train the team leaders and mentor and advise the squad leaders. Most of my time as a platoon sergeant was spent kicking the asses of my buck sergeants! I would take the time to help with their development, but it took a long time to do that. For them, it was deemed not cool or weak to ask somebody else for some professional advice. I just think we're missing the boat on it.

WYATT: I would describe [NCO mentoring] as informal, first and foremost. It's hit and miss, depending on who your leadership is, their talents and their experiences. Their talents to mentor, their talents to counsel people. Their objectivity. I think we're all a product of our experience. I think there's a lot of room for improvement across the Army and all of the services on Mentoring and talent management.

We talk a lot about talent management, but I'm not sure how much we really do. Especially into the mentoring piece, and trying to get people where they are best suited. Most times, that is overcome with needs of the Army. "You may not be the best for this, but you're going to this unit and you're going to figure it out. See ya, good luck." It's the nature of the beast.

In my previous book, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring*, I sought to capture the lived experiences of professional mentoring for U.S. Army officers. Even as I was writing that book, I knew I would eventually have to conduct a similar examination of NCO mentoring practices. Just as the dynamics of a unit cannot be fully understood without viewing both the officers and NCOs, the totality of Army Mentoring cannot be truly comprehended without examining both officer

and NCO practices. At the time, I wrote “as an outsider, I don’t consider myself capable of fully understanding the nuances of NCO leadership.”<sup>7</sup> Subsequent feedback on my book convinced me that, to put it plainly, this statement was a cop-out. That motivated me to do something similar for NCO mentoring, and this book is a result of that feedback.

### Where the Stories Came From

Fortunately, my current position at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, NY, afforded me a unique opportunity to gain a cross-section of NCO perspectives. The NCO cadres that support the USMA Tactical Department and Department of Military Instruction are diverse by design. They are consciously cultivated and selected to bring in high-quality NCOs from across the force, representing multiple branches, operational experiences, and personal backgrounds. The leadership of both organizations graciously allowed me to engage their NCOs and offer them an opportunity to participate in the study. I gave all participants complete anonymity to tell their stories: I anonymized all of their contributions here and did not

disclose their participation to their chain of command. One additional participant outside of USMA was identified through a recommendation of the initial participants.

In total, ten NCOs consented to be a part of this study and tell their stories. They represent eight different branches drawn from across the warfighting functions. These NCOs come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including white, Hispanic, and African-American. Two of the NCOs interviewed were women. The NCOs featured in this book range in rank from Sergeant First Class to Command Sergeant Major. They received no financial or career incentives to tell their story; their sole motivation in participating was to further the practice of NCO mentoring.

There are some inherent limitations in the approach I took. First and foremost, there are no junior NCOs represented. I made that choice not only because of my limited ability to draw from NCOs available, but also because I wanted to talk to participants about their protégé and mentor experiences. Junior NCOs simply don't have many of the latter. In the same vein, because of my limited sample size, the experiences contained in this book are not necessarily representative of NCOs as a whole. Instead,

readers should treat them as indicative of real occurrences, best practices, and opportunities to reflect.

Because this book takes a story-based approach to presenting NCO experiences, readers may find themselves unsatisfied with some of the narratives. You may find yourself wanting to know more about how a certain situation was resolved. You may vehemently disagree with the perspective presented because it doesn't match your own experiences. I acknowledge that all of these factors may potentially detract from the reader's experience. Again, readers should use stories that provoke them as an opportunity to reflect. Ask yourself: *Why am I reacting so strongly to this? What do I disagree with? What would I like to know more about?* If nothing else, those stories may help you get some insights about yourself.

### Book Structure

This book is divided into 3 parts. The first section, including this introduction, is an **overview of mentoring theory and definitions**. It will summarize the existing literature on workplace mentoring that is applicable to the stories related in

this book. It will encompass perspectives on counseling, coaching, and some useful tools for all aspects of professional development. This section will be most useful to anyone unfamiliar with mentoring terms and references or someone seeking to better understand a broader context of mentoring theory. The literature chapter may feel a little intimidating, and that's OK! If you're anxious to get into the hands-on aspects of mentoring, feel free to skip ahead; you can always come back to look at definitions of specific terms.

The second section is about **mentoring benefits and outcomes**. Professionals don't just mentor for the sake of the process; they do it to achieve some tangible benefit for both themselves and others. This section will look at the career, psychosocial, and role modeling benefits of NCO mentoring relationships. It will tackle challenging outcomes like broadening assignments, staff versus line positions, and whether to stay in or get out.

The final section will discuss **mentoring practices and contexts**. Mentoring practices in the NCO Corps are diverse and varied, and this section will attempt to give the reader just a taste

of the kinds of things NCOs do for development. It will examine mentoring between supervisors and subordinates, seeking to understand the difference between routine practice and authentic mentoring. It will look at a peer and networked approach to mentoring, where NCOs seek to broaden the perspectives available to them. The final chapter will look at relationships where mentor and protégé differ by gender, ethnicity, and rank category.

A word about terms: I'll use a combination of current Army doctrine and scholarly material to define the key terms of use. Current Army doctrine defines *mentorship* as “a voluntary and developmental relationship that exists between a person with greater experience and a person with less experience, characterized by mutual trust and respect.”<sup>8</sup> However, the Army doctrinal definition of mentor is less helpfully written. Therefore, this book will use the classic definition of *mentor* as the individual in a mentoring relationship with greater experience. A *protégé*, by contrast, is the individual in a mentoring relationship with less experience. I use protégé in place of the Army's doctrinal term, *mentee*, because the latter suggests a one-way

transfer of benefits from mentor to protégé only (I'll discuss this further in Chapter 1). Finally, for the purposes of this book, a *supervisor* is anyone serving in an individual's rating or evaluation chain.

In all of these areas, I hope to inspire NCOs to think about mentoring opportunities for their soldiers and themselves. Let's get started!

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<sup>1</sup> All names provided are pseudonyms. Individual letters represent the redacted names of soldiers who were not participants in this study. Block text represents quotes from study participants. Italics within those blocks represents their internal monologue or statements they made to others. Quotes within those blocks represents statements from others to them.

<sup>2</sup> "The Unit" is a shorthand term for a Tier One Special Operations formation that conducts sensitive missions around the world at the direction of the National Command Authority.

<sup>3</sup> U.S Army Training and Doctrine Command, "NCO 2020 Strategy" (White Paper, Fort Eustis, VA, 2015), 4.

<sup>4</sup> "The History of the NCO Creed," Association of the United States Army, accessed March 1, 2018. <https://www.ausa.org/history-nco-creed>. For more on just how difficult that process was, see James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> MAJ Kelly Jones (Army officer) in discussion with the author, March 7, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan P. Riley, et al, "2015 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Military Leader Findings" (Technical Report, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2016), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond A. Kimball, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring* (West Point, NY: The Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, 2015), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Department of the Army, "Army Profession and Leadership Policy" (Army Regulation 600-100, Washington, DC, 2017), 32.

## Chapter 1: Mentoring 101<sup>1</sup>

EDGAR: A mentor has to have a willing investment in that individual. I can do things for an individual. I can sit down and show them a way, but when I walk away, there's no investment. That's just me showing you how to do it, fail or succeed on your own. But when I invest in you, I don't completely walk away. I'm looking over my shoulder to see if you'll take heed. There has to be some level of investment, short-term or long-term. Why would I teach you these skills if I'm just going to walk away?

No NCO worth their salt would go into the woods without a map. As a consequence of our training, we instinctively understand the need to have a plan for our path before we set out on the journey. In the same way, we can't really understand mentoring practices without a basic summary of the research that's already been done in the field. Although our Army has unique cultural and behavioral factors that impact its mentoring practices, there is much we can learn from the academic discipline of mentoring. This chapter summarizes key portions of the literature that are relevant to the NCO experiences chronicled in this book. It talks about how mentors and protégés pick one another and what they hope to get out of the relationship. It then discusses all of the different forms mentoring relationships can



take. It concludes with Army-specific mentoring considerations from previous studies on our professional mentoring practices.

### Who Mentors and Why?

Peer-reviewed studies have consistently linked good mentoring experiences with workplace wins like increased salary, faster promotions, and perceived career success.<sup>2</sup> The single most important reason that individuals seek out workplace mentoring relationships is a perception of change that exceeds their ability to cope.<sup>3</sup> Mentors help protégés deal with challenges that span both their personal and professional lives; doing so often helps mentors reflect on their own experiences.<sup>4</sup> Mentoring is also a way to overcome plateaus in mental development and career skills, where the employee feels stagnant and unable to improve themselves.<sup>5</sup> Personality is a crucial element in the formation of mentoring pairs. In addition to the similarity characteristics discussed later in this section, mentors and protégés alike typically require a sense of altruism and willingness to accept intangible benefits over tangible ones.<sup>6</sup> Individuals who were

previously in a mentoring relationship, either as a mentor or as a protégé, are far more likely to serve as mentors than those with no mentoring experience.<sup>7</sup>

There are multiple reasons why individuals choose not to seek out mentors or protégés in the workplace. Workplaces may have barriers to mentoring practice, like an evaluation system that emphasizes team success over individual development.<sup>8</sup> Other obstacles may include a perceived lack of leader support for mentoring or unhealthy competition among employees.<sup>9</sup> Potential mentors who never had a mentor themselves anticipate greater mentoring costs (such as time spent with protégés) and fewer benefits than those with mentoring experience.<sup>10</sup>

Demographic barriers appear to be less prevalent. Controlled studies show neither a real connection between protégé demographics and individual willingness to mentor nor any significant relationship with age, job type, or time in the organization.<sup>11</sup> The perception of a shared ability or personality, rather than demographic similarity in terms of age, gender, or social class, is the single more important factor in how mentors

and proteges select one another.<sup>12</sup> It is not, however, the only factor. Later in this chapter I'll discuss the impact of differences in gender and ethnicity on mentoring practices.

Mentors overwhelmingly select their protégés based on their assessed potential rather than their perceived need.<sup>13</sup> For their part, protégés who see themselves as similar to their mentors report significantly higher satisfaction with the mentoring experience.<sup>14</sup> A consistent theme throughout the literature is that informal mentor relationships, where the mentor and protégé choose one another, are more effective and longer lasting than those formed by a formal mentoring mechanism.<sup>15</sup>

### So How Does It Work?

Not every relationship follows the same path, but there are similarities. Mentoring researcher Kathy Kram defines four phases of a mentoring relationship that are consistently used in mentoring research.<sup>16</sup> The *initiation* phase begins when mentor and protégé agree to start a relationship and lasts for 6-12 months as they feel out the dimensions of the relationship. Mentor and

protégé then enter the *cultivation* phase, lasting 2-5 years, with the maximum benefits of a mentoring relationship achieved in this stage. Eventually, the mentor and protégé move to the *separation* phase, a 6-24 month period where the two become more independent due to life or career changes. The relationship then settles into the *redefinition* phase, which may see the relationship end completely or settle into a more peer-like friendship. During these phases, mentor and protégé alike experience a wide variety of benefits that are broadly binned into two categories: *career functions* and *psychosocial functions*.

Career functions are those that enhance a mentor or protégé's career advancement. Perhaps the best known career function is sponsorship of a protégé, in which a mentor publicly endorses them for a role in the organization.<sup>17</sup> Mentors also assist protégés with organizational visibility and coaching, giving them opportunities to demonstrate competence while suggesting specific strategies and techniques.<sup>18</sup> Mentors also provide protection to their protégés, shielding them from damaging contact in the workplace or mitigating the effects of that

interaction.<sup>19</sup> Less well known are the benefits that a mentoring relationship accrues to the mentor. Mentors report greater personal satisfaction, workplace energy, improved performance, and greater loyalty to the organization.<sup>20</sup> Serving as a mentor is also a proven strategy for avoiding workplace plateaus and opening new opportunities for the mentor.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to career functions, psychosocial functions enhance a mentor or protégé's sense of competence, identity, and personal effectiveness.<sup>22</sup> The most obvious psychosocial function is acceptance and confirmation, where an individual builds a positive sense of self through the relationship.<sup>23</sup> Mentoring relationships also provide counseling and friendship opportunities to explore personal concerns that interfere with that positive sense of self.<sup>24</sup> Finally, a mentoring relationship provides the protégé with a role model to emulate.<sup>25</sup> While these elements have remained consistent in classic research, recent studies offer new insights. One study suggests that clarity of values, the ability to properly situate oneself in a moral context, is an important benefit for protégé and mentor alike.<sup>26</sup> The same study stresses

that individual motivation has a critical impact on the depth of psychosocial benefits.<sup>27</sup>

### Variations in Mentoring Practice

Many of us have a mental picture of what a mentoring pair looks like: a single mentor and protégé who connect with one another. But just as all of the above benefits vary from person to person, the actual structure and practice of mentoring relationships varies as well. One significant variation is the possibility of an individual's supervisor simultaneously serving as their mentor. Some of you may have reacted negatively to that statement, remembering my initial definition of mentoring as voluntary and mutual. How can an involuntary assignment as a supervisor or subordinate then be considered mentoring? Contradictory, right? Nevertheless, current mentoring research suggests that supervisors can serve effectively as mentors **under certain conditions**. A 2012 study shows that such a relationship can thrive under the idea of *reciprocity*, where both members of the relationship benefit from it.<sup>28</sup>

The same study suggests that variations in strong self-esteem, emotional stability, and emotional intelligence can strengthen or doom a supervisor-subordinate mentoring relationship.<sup>29</sup> Further work proposes that a supervisor-subordinate mentoring relationship assists in key aspects of goal setting, including contextualization and reflection on workplace achievements.<sup>30</sup> All of this suggests that supervisors can serve effectively as mentors under the right conditions.

Another major variation on the traditional mentoring pair of two people is a networked approach to mentoring, where a protégé draws on multiple mentors simultaneously. The core idea of the networked approach is that a single traditional relationship cannot meet all of the needs of the modern workplace.<sup>31</sup> Instead, networked mentoring suggests that protégés and mentors alike seek out individuals who play specific roles in supporting their development.<sup>32</sup> These roles include a demographic match (someone who looks like them), an interest or specialty match (someone with a skill they want to pursue), and a geographic location match (someone who is physically present).<sup>33</sup> One

potential downside of a networked approach is that protégés will receive very different levels of career and psychosocial support from each individual mentor.<sup>34</sup>

Implicit in the idea of networked mentoring is the concept of peer mentors, where mentors and protégés are comparable in rank or age but have varying experiences. Remember, the key difference between mentor and protégé is greater experience on the part of the mentor, not greater age or higher rank. As more organizations are opting for structures that are collaborative rather than hierarchical, some researchers argue that peer mentoring is now an essential component of individual development.<sup>35</sup> In the same way that reciprocity powers a supervisor-subordinate mentoring relationship, mutuality makes a peer mentoring relationship feasible. Mutuality proposes that members of a mentoring pair who are comparable in most respects can actually shift roles as mentor and protégé based on their respective levels of experience.<sup>36</sup>



## The Man or Woman in the Mirror

Another variant of mentoring that must be considered as part of the whole is cross-gender mentoring, in which the mentor and protégé are different genders. Although gender is generally assessed not to be a barrier to the formation of mentoring relationships, it definitely affects what gets brought to the relationship and what is taken away from it.<sup>37</sup> Given that women are a minority in some workplaces, cross-gender mentoring can offer women the opportunity to access informal networks for advancement and seek challenging assignments that might not otherwise be available. It also may help women understand the prevailing culture in organizations and enhance their sense of belonging in situations where they might otherwise see themselves as outsiders.<sup>38</sup>

Participants in a cross-gender mentoring relationship should understand the potential barriers to that relationship's success. Those include gendered stereotypes and behavior, difference in power dynamics, and the perceived possibility of sex in the relationship.<sup>39</sup> As a result of the last item, cross-gender mentoring

pairs often avoid meeting in one-on-one settings. One study found that while 95% men and 93% of women in mentoring relationships prefer to give guidance in a one-on-one setting, 64% of those men and 50% of those women hesitate to be one-on-one with the opposite gender.<sup>40</sup> This is a significant challenge to mentoring, because mentoring relationships often require privacy to facilitate candid communication.

By contrast, cross-ethnic mentoring seems to impact relationship formation more than actual mentoring practice. Race plays a significant factor in mentor/protégé selection. Mentors paired with protégés of the same race liked them more than mentors paired with different races. Protégés paired with a mentor of the same race reported greater support in the relationship than those paired with a mentor of a different race.<sup>41</sup> White men are more likely to have a mentor than non-white men or women.<sup>42</sup> Despite their best intentions, potential mentors and protégés alike need to be candid with one another about if or how demographic differences impact the relationship.

## What the Army Already Knows About Mentoring

The Army has come a long way in mentoring doctrine in the last fifteen years. The emphasis on clearly stating expectations began with the 2002 *Army Training and Leader Development Program* study, which found significant deficiencies in mentoring practice.<sup>43</sup> The current definitive Army publications on mentoring, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22 and Field Manual (FM) 6-22, both contain well-written sections on mentoring practice. The ADRP is heavily focused on defining terminology and differentiating mentoring from other developmental practices like coaching and counseling. The FM talks extensively about what healthy mentoring relationships look like and ideal characteristics of mentors.

What we know about how that doctrine gets implemented largely comes from a single study: the Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL). The CASAL is the gold standard of quantitative research on Army leadership, conducted annually since 2005.<sup>44</sup> According to the most current CASAL, 57% of junior NCOs (E5-E6) and 64% of

senior NCOs (E7-E9) currently receive mentoring from one or more mentors.<sup>45</sup> Half of junior NCOs interact weekly or more often with their mentor, but only 32% of senior NCOs do the same.<sup>46</sup> Almost 80% of senior NCOs say they serve as a mentor to others, while 64% of junior NCOs claim to do the same.<sup>47</sup> The most current CASALs did not ask about cross-gender, cross-ethnicity, or peer mentoring practices. Respondents as a whole indicate the need for additional resources on how to be a good mentor or protégé. The study authors point out that Army leaders often don't distinguish well between coaching, counseling, and mentoring (we'll discuss this more in the next chapter).<sup>48</sup>

Qualitative studies of Army mentoring show that it follows the practices discussed in this chapter, although uniquely shaped by Army cultural norms. Interviews with 24 junior officers found that Army mentors and protégés alike experience both career and psychosocial benefits from their mentoring.<sup>49</sup> Another study drawing from in-depth interviews with nine officers found a broad diversity of mentoring practice, including peer mentoring, e-mentoring, cross-gender mentoring, and supervisory

mentoring.<sup>50</sup> A study of 40 senior Active Component (AC) officers' mentoring perceptions found few gender-based differences in mentoring, although men had a lower instance of being mentored by women.<sup>51</sup> A complementary study of 10 female officers at Fort Hood, Texas, found a wide range of effective practices in mentoring shaped by proximity, personality, experience, and time.<sup>52</sup> None of these studies engaged with NCOs; hence, the importance of this book!

I started this chapter with a navigation metaphor: hopefully, this summary of the current mentoring literature has given you a map to start your exploration of NCO mentoring. In the next chapter, we'll talk about the seemingly clear distinctions between coaching, counseling, and mentoring and examine how those distinctions often get muddled in practice. More importantly, we will discuss what we can do about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the references and the overall structure of this chapter are drawn from my forthcoming Army War College Strategy Research Paper, "Army Mentoring Experiences of Senior Reserve Component Officers." I have altered the language and emphasis of sections to be more applicable to the audience of this book.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Dougherty, Daniel Turban, and Dana Haggard, "Naturally Occurring Mentoring Relationships Involving Workplace Employees," in *The Blackwell*

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*Handbook of Mentoring: A Multiple Perspectives Approach*, ed. Lillian Eby and Tammy Allen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 141.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Murphy and Kathy Kram, *Strategic Relationships at Work: Creating your Circle of Mentors, Sponsors, and Peers for Success in Business and Life* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Dawn Chandler and Rebecca Ellis, "Diversity and Mentoring in the Workplace: A Conversation with Belle Rose Ragins," *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 19, no. 4 (2011): 494.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Dougherty, Turban, and Haggard, 147; Murphy and Kram, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Dougherty, Turban, and Haggard, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Kathy Kram, *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 161-162.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 163-165.

<sup>10</sup> Belle Rose Ragins and Terri Scandura, "Burden or Blessing? Expected Costs and Benefits of Being a Mentor", *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 20, no. 4 (July 1999), 493.

<sup>11</sup> Dougherty, Turban, and Haggard, 147-148.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*; Sylvia Hewlett, "Make Yourself Sponsor-Worthy," *Harvard Business Review* (blog), February 6, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/02/make-yourself-sponsor-worthy>.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Ensher and Susan Murphy, "Effects of Race, Gender, Perceived Similarity, and Contact on Mentor Relationships", *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 50, no. 3 (June 1997), 472.

<sup>15</sup> Murphy and Kram, 2014, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Kram, 1988, 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 27-28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Tammy Allen, "Mentoring Relationships from the Perspective of the Mentor" in *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work*, ed. Belle Rose Ragins and Kathy Kram (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 134.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Kram, 1988, 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 36-38.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 33. Some later mentoring research classifies role modeling as a function separate from career and psychosocial. For simplicity's sake, this study will retain Kram's original taxonomy.

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- <sup>26</sup> Aarti Ramaswami and George Dreher, “The Benefits Associated with Workplace Mentoring Relationships” in Eby and Allen, 2010, 215.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 224.
- <sup>28</sup> Belle Rose Ragins, “Relational Mentoring: A Positive Approach to Mentoring at Work”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, Kim Cameron and Gretchen Spreitzer, eds, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012, 521.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 525.
- <sup>30</sup> David Clutterbuck and Susan David, “Goals in Coaching and Mentoring: The Current State of Play”, in *Beyond Goals: Effective Strategies for Coaching and Mentoring*, ed. Susan David, David Clutterbuck, and David Megginson (London: Routledge, 2016), 32.
- <sup>31</sup> Melenie Lankau and Terri Scandura, “Mentoring as a Forum for Personal Learning in Organizations” in Ragins and Kram, 2007, 104.
- <sup>32</sup> Kathy Kram, Susan David, and Christina Congleton, “Goals in Mentoring Relationships and Developmental Networks”, in David, Clutterbuck, and Megginson, 271.
- <sup>33</sup> Chao, 187.
- <sup>34</sup> Rajashi Ghosh *et al*, “Developmental Networks at Work: Holding Environments for Leader Development”, *Career Development International* 18, no. 3 (2013), 242-243.
- <sup>35</sup> Stacy McManus and Joyce Russell, “Peer Mentoring Relationships”, in Ragins and Kram, 2007, 275.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 277.
- <sup>37</sup> Carol McKeen and Merridee Bujaki, “Gender and Mentoring: Issues, Effects, and Opportunities”, in Ragins and Kram, 2007, 198.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 200-201, 198.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 205.
- <sup>40</sup> Hewlett, “Make Yourself Safe for Sponsorship”, *Harvard Business Review* (blog), October 7, 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/10/make-yourself-safe-for-sponsorship>. A logical follow-up question that has not yet been extensively researched is if and how growing LGBTQ acceptance in the workplace impacts these numbers.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 469-470.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 143.
- <sup>43</sup> Army Training and Leader Development Panel, “Officer Study Report to the Army” (White Paper, Washington, DC, 2002), OS-10.
- <sup>44</sup> Ryan P. Riley, et al, "2015 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Military Leader Findings" (Technical Report, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2016), v.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 99.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 100.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid*.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Juanita D. Catchings, “Forward, March: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study for Developing Army Officers Through A Formal Mentorship Program” (doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix, 2013), 76-77.

<sup>50</sup> Raymond Kimball, *The Army Officer’s Guide to Mentoring* (West Point, NY: The Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, 2015),

<sup>51</sup> Scott R. Johnson, “A Phenomenological Study of Cross Gender Mentoring Among U.S. Army Officers” (doctoral dissertation, Walden University, 2017), 72-73.

<sup>52</sup> Heather McAteer, “Mentorship of Women in the United States Army: A Qualitative Case Study” (doctoral dissertation, University of the Rockies, 2016), 102-103.



## Chapter 2: Counseling, Coaching, and Mentoring

JAMES: Coaching versus counseling is probably based on the individual person you're interacting with. It's also about the situation itself...In coaching, you're trying to motivate them, encourage them. You show them what to do in order to achieve their goals and show that if they don't, they'll fail at their goal. You have to be aware of what they're bringing to the table and how they're dealing with it. You have to know what to give them.

A pair of colleagues who run an amazing mentoring outfit called PROMOTE<sup>1</sup> have a running joke about the subject of this chapter. They say that the U.S. military really only has one term for individual development: *coachteachmentor*. Think about it: how often have you heard those terms run together by well-meaning leaders, without any attempt to differentiate between them?

WYATT: There's no doubt that there are subtle differences [between coaching, counseling, and mentoring]. A shortcoming overall in the military is that we do lump them all together. We just say "Teach, coach, and mentor." One is synonymous with the other. I confess I probably, when working with someone, will hop between those things and not even realize I'm doing it, and just hope I'm being a good leader to them.

Now add into that confusion the fact that counseling often has a negative connotation in the Army (e.g. "Hey, make sure PFC

Snuffy gets his Chapter counseling.”) This chapter will help you better understand the distinct roles of coaching and counseling. After laying out the doctrinal definitions, we’ll look at how our NCOs experienced counseling and coaching. We’ll close by talking about why the lines often blur and what we can do about it.

Just as we did with mentoring, it’s helpful for us to start with the Army’s doctrinal definitions. The Army classifies counseling as “the process used by leaders to guide subordinates to improve performance and develop their potential.”<sup>2</sup> The critical difference between counseling and mentoring is that counseling is always done in the context of the chain of command.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, coaching is defined as “a development technique used for a skill, task, or [for] specific behaviors.”<sup>4</sup> Coaching may be focused on short-term or long-term skills, but the coaching relationship itself tends to be bounded and of short duration. Both coaching and counseling can be involuntary, but mentoring by its definition cannot. So how do NCOs in the real world actually experience these different practices?

## Counseling

In practice, the lines tend to get blurred. Take this comment:

JOSEPH: Mentoring, when you go to the line, it's almost forced. You have to do it. It's different when S came to me and explained how the Army works. That was 100% voluntary on his part. But most of the time, NCOs, we are forced to mentor personnel. The reality is, we say, *this is what you have to do, go do it* versus saying *I'm going to take you under my wing and make sure you're set up for success in the Army and life.*

JOSEPH clearly understands that there's a difference between mentoring and other forms of individual development, even if he himself unintentionally blurs the definitions. Notice how he differentiates the voluntary and sustained mentoring he experienced from the more immediate and transient practices of coaching and counseling.

EDGAR summarizes the gap pretty well:

I don't think many NCOs understand the difference between counseling and mentorship. An NCO thinks he's being counseled or his NCOER is supposed to lead him in a certain direction, and it stops at that. With C [my mentor], I said: *I think you're a great NCO. I want to know what you know. Can you bring me up to where you are? ...* I think we get into the habit of saying *Here's my NCOER. Here's what I have to do to get a 1-1, and that's where it stops.* Again, that's not mentoring, that's counseling, that's developing. Mentoring goes deeper.

ROBERT helps draw the line a little more clearly on how counseling and mentoring differ in action:

There's a formal setting to counseling. That's going to be recorded and documented. Whatever I put on a counseling statement, I have the potential to use it again in the future for whatever I need it for, be it an award or an NCOER. When it comes to mentoring, it's outside of my horizon. A lot of times, it's anything from a religious aspect to how a guy handles a ticket that he got.

The distinction here is really important: given the intimate nature of mentoring conversations, it's hard to imagine a mentoring relationship being documented the way we document counseling. It is reasonable to imagine a level of trust inherent in a mentoring relationship that is not present in a coaching or counseling approach.

Time duration of the relationship is also an important difference. As we discussed in Chapter 1, mentoring relationships frequently last years. Because counseling is tied to the senior-subordinate relationship, it's rare for counseling to outlast that tie. That doesn't mean that leaders stop caring about their former subordinates:

ROBERT: I have a soft spot for the proverbial shitbag. I never give up on any of my soldiers. They can really drag me

through the mud and back, and I'm still going to be there trying to improve them and make them better. I've had my heart broken more times than I can count by a guy who had given up on himself, or given up on me, or just didn't come through on their obligation to be an honorable service member.

## Coaching

In fact, that persistent desire of leaders to see their former subordinates continue to succeed can be a gateway to coaching:

DIANA: There's been three times that I had a couple of former soldiers that posted stuff online, things they shouldn't have been doing [like] making political comments. I reached out to both of them and said, *Listen, you're a first sergeant now. You can't be doing this. This is how it looks. You have to think about this.* It was received very well. I had been their command sergeant major and they moved on. Because of that prior relationship, I thought it was important to reach out to say: *I know I'm not in your chain anymore, but I'm concerned about you and your career, and this ain't good.*

So why isn't what DIANA did mentoring? For one, because it wasn't voluntary: these Soldiers didn't actively seek her advice. She reached out and made a directed comment focused on a specific aspect of professional conduct.

Another aspect of relationships that often draws a line between coaching and mentoring is the sustained nature of contact in the latter.

SAMUEL: I've had soldiers, sergeants or staff sergeants, who reach out to chat, but it hasn't been continual. They'll hit me up every two or three months when a problem arises. It's like church: they never come to you when things are good. I have lieutenants reach out to me all the time. I do believe that's one of those second order effects of what we teach officers: that they seek out mentors. Once again, that lower to mid-level enlisted and NCO does not [reach out] unless stuff is bad.

SAMUEL goes on to further stress the importance of that sustained contact, and how it changes the developmental relationship in his mind:

I've continued the relationship with St and Sp. They've both been in my home numerous times. They showed interest in doing the job not just for a career, but for a while, and wanted to be good at it. I said to myself, *If they care, dammit, I need to care and help them out too.* I've had a lot of other people who wanted to be successful and had the same kind of qualities, but weren't as persistent about seeking that advice and those two did.

Not every coaching relationship comes from a prior senior-subordinate relationship. Some NCO jobs naturally lend themselves to a coaching approach, even when the NCO has no sustained authority:

WYATT: The Ranger Instructor job was good for me because you learn to coach people. It's just inherent in the job of a Ranger instructor. You've got your checklist, watching your students, evaluating them. Some Ranger Instructors were complete hard-asses and were never going to pass anybody. Some were Santa Claus. I saw both and said, *I want to be*

*legit. I want to be somewhere in the middle, doing some teaching and coaching along the way.*

The student who passes a patrol, that's easy to coach them at the end of the patrol. But the student that you don't think you should pass... you've got to be able to sell it to them in a way that they learn something from it. I had a real obligation: If I'm gonna flunk them, I've gotta arm them with some tools so they've got a good shot at passing the next one. If I don't do that, you're setting them up for a recycle, if not total failure.

And yes, sometimes the line gets blurred within the same relationship. Remember back in Chapter 1 that we noted that coaching is one of the career-related functions of mentoring. That can lead to confusing situations like what EDGAR describes:

The mix of mentoring and coaching goes back to the relationship. For example, me and C, before it was 50-50, now it's more 70 coaching, 30 mentoring. It's based off of where your relationship is with that person. It'll never be exactly 50-50, it goes back to the need at the time.

Feeling frustrated? Stay with me. I promise this is going somewhere, but we need to go a little further down the rabbit hole first.

Communications: Blurring the Lines, Greasing the Wheels

One reason why the line seems to blur so much is that modern communications make it so easy to quickly re-establish contact

when it's needed. That quick connection can make what's nominally a coaching relationship feel like a mentoring one, simply because you think the conversation never really ended.

Let's look at how modern NCOs communicate in their developmental relationships.

Every one of the NCOs that I talked to stressed the importance of phone conversations in sustaining developmental relationships. Some representative examples:

DIANA: You just get a better conversation on the phone or in person. You just get more out of it than on email. On email, it tends to be more straightforward, seeking an answer, maybe something more pointed. But you get so much more out of an actual conversation.

EDGAR: If C gets a phone call from me, he knows that it's a serious thing. We both got to understanding that: if either of us calls one another, it's a serious or critical conversation. *This is what's been going across my mind and I want to talk to you about it, just brainstorm some ideas.* So we'll do a phone call, maybe once a month.

JOSEPH: when it's a frustration or I need help figuring something out, I use the phone. I like to be able to hear him, hear the tone of voice. When you try to communicate with subordinates and provide guidance, I don't think email is effective as talking. You need to hear the tone, the words used; that's all different in email. Because I can't talk to him face to face, phone is the closest thing. It lets me hear how he says it, lets him tell me more than just the short stuff in an email. You can't have a full-blown conversation in an email.



One NCO pointed out how helpful it is to have a constant mechanism for professional contact:

CATHY: My phone number hasn't changed since nine years ago. B's phone number hasn't changed either since then. The conversations on the phone are more personal, times to reflect and communicate with one another.

Closely linked to the use of the phone is the exchange of ideas via text message. Most of the NCOs saw the use of text messages as a way to set up developmental conversations, such as this perspective:

SAMUEL: A lot of times, [the conversation] starts with a simple text: *What's going on?* The text conversation will go for maybe a day or two, and then later in that week, we'll sit down and chit-chat [on the phone] about life for 20-30 minutes. That happens bi-monthly. Texting back and forth...yeah, it's convenient, but it's also good to hear what's going on in someone's voice.

Text messaging can be used for conversations that are seen as more personal in nature:

EDGAR: The text messages, it's more personal, taking the uniform off. [I'll send to someone:] *I just caught a ten pound bass, what have you done with your life?* It's more one-on-one, we can downgrade the career progression and just be men. I don't call S, but I send him a text. He'll text me something about hunting and I'll text him about something I did with the boys.

Texting is also a way to differentiate between truly pressing matters and ones that can be addressed at leisure:

EVAN: I communicate with mentors via Text message and phone calls. Sometimes email, but rarely. Text message would be used for a question that really wasn't pressing. Phone call would be catching up, getting advice on things that were more pressing or needed that back and forth for feedback.

Email can likewise be a way to get developmental feedback on subjects that don't have a great deal of urgency:

CATHY: For J, if it's something urgent, she'll call and say, "Hey, I need your help with this." If it's something that isn't time-pressing, she'll email me and say, "This is the situation, what do you think, what should be the next step?" It's both conversations, they're both on the same topic, but sometimes she needs an answer right now. Sometimes it's more to run it by me.

Because every Soldier has an Army email account, email is often a way to clearly delineate professional conversations from personal ones:

FRED: When it's more on the professional side or work-related, I use Enterprise Email. It's less about the topic, more about the personal/professional divide. That's something where I always drew the line and made sure we all know where it is. Away from the office, I'm going to talk to you as a person, but in the office, I'm going to make sure we both know where we stand and talk professionally.

CATHY: R and I haven't talked on the phone, but we do have lengthy email conversations. Sometimes you don't want perception to be one thing, that you're always calling him. With email, there's no perception problem, it's professional.

With the explosion of social media over the last decade, no description of communications would be complete without it.

NCOs described social media as being useful for keeping a line of communication open for when it was needed:

JAMES: I'm in contact with P on social media. It's a little easier, we're FB friends and keep tabs on each other via that aspect...I don't think FB is really good for mentoring engagement. It's more along the lines of staying in contact, seeing where you're at, how you're doing, stuff like that. To shoot a quick note. If we needed to have an actual mentorship conversation, if I needed advice, we would just call each other or shoot an email instead of social media.

NCOs emphasize how useful social media is for maintaining insights into people's personal lives.

EDGAR: Social media interaction is more character development. If I post something about my coursework or my college, C will comment and say "Stay up late. Knock out that paper. You got this!" More along this lines of encouragement: "Keep pushing through!" When I read those comments, it reminds me to stay on my Ps and Qs, because he trained me, so I gotta keep pushing.

EDGAR: B and I started picking back up on Facebook. I was doing rear detachment and he was deployed. He was telling me about his deployments. At that time, his Buffalo got struck by an IED and he ended up with an injured leg. During

his recovery, I tried to stay as proactive as I could. I told him, *Don't let this be the end of you. There's more in your life.* I really pushed him to get to where he's at now. He ran his first Spartan Race last month and he posted a picture of him with his medallion. I commented: *That's what I'm talkin' about!* I couldn't have been more proud at that moment.

None of the above should be taken to mean that NCOs exclusively use one mode over another. Just as they often do in the workplace, NCOs tend to pick the tool that's best for the job at hand:

SAMUEL: I use all modes: Call, email, instant message. S & W, they get back to me in a heartbeat. V, I know that he's not going to take the time to get back to me. I know with him, it will be 4-6 months later, I'll get an email randomly. It won't be "How are you? How's the family?" It's more like "I saw this today and make sure that you're doing a, b, c." *Roger, CSM.* S, I could call him right now and he'd answer the phone. If I was going to send W a message, I know he'd get back to me within 30 minutes.

EVAN: I use Phone calls, texts, emails for talking with protégés. No preference in terms of topics. Text messages for something that I'm just looking for feedback, phone call for instant feedback on or trying to explain it better. Sometimes they'll contact me, sometimes I'll contact them.

Did you notice that almost all of the above modes contained a mix of coaching and mentoring? In some cases, the engagement was all about addressing a specific, bounded need. In others, it was about sustaining the relationship and continuing a sustained

level of development. This is less about the speed of response and more about the continuous presence of these communications mechanisms. Our communications don't draw an artificial line between types of individual development; no wonder we have difficulty doing so!

### Spaces, Not Faces

The spaces that NCOs use for professional development often blur the lines between coaching, counseling, and mentoring. Perhaps the biggest offender is the Army Career Tracker (ACT), a newly created portal intended to support Soldier career progression. Several NCOs noted the utility of that site, but a few voiced concerns:

CATHY: On AKO, they have the ACT website. It goes over the military career path for your MOS, what you should be doing at each level. I saw that I needed a broadening assignment and recruiter, drill sergeant, AIT PSG were the top three.

ROBERT: He's listed as my mentor on ACT. He had me write the Individual Development Plan (IDP) there, and it was like pulling teeth, getting it written. It took me three months to get it tuned and tailored to where I could honestly say, *Yes, these are my goals and this is what I want to do.* I'd never done that before in my whole career.

DIANA: The Army did set up the Army Career Tracker, where you would go in there and list mentors. I had a few people that put me down and used that a couple of times to send messages to those folks. Not a whole lot, but maybe a couple of times. I remember hearing leaders say, "Use the ACT, it's a great resource. Recommend everybody use it." That kind of thing. The Army ramps that up from time to time. But it raises the philosophical question - isn't it supposed to be voluntary?

Developmental spaces can also be tangible groups or physical locations. ROBERT notes the importance of the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club for his development:

I absolutely see the SGT Audie Murphy Club as a mentoring venue. That's how I got involved. Those that came before me, putting themselves out there to help anyone who's interested in going through it. I met a lot of great dudes there and still have people across the country I can call on to answer a tough question. It's beyond a club, it's more like a fraternity of professionals.

WYATT describes how crucial location is for empowering individual professional development:

D's got a teeny little humble office, but he's on the main spine, this huge long hallway in the building. He's always either in his office with the door open, ready for people to come in and talk, or he'll just stand there posted outside his office during the high traffic times. Like when people are going to the morning meeting or people are going to chow, because he's on the way to the chow hall. He's got this strategic location to go by...

You walk down the hallway, you go to the mess hall or to the gym, and you see these experienced guys that you look up to. They greet you warmly. They just emulate this welcoming persona that pulls you in. It's easy to let your guard down, even in the work environment, and speak openly and talk about what's on your mind

### Why Should I Care?

If there's so much commonality between individual developmental practices, why should we care about making distinctions between them? First, because the distinction of what's voluntary and what's not is really important. Mentoring relationships are intimate relationships, where the mentor and protégé open up to one another. Being forced into a relationship like that is not a positive way to engender trust. Counseling and coaching should be reserved for those narrow and specific situations where the success of the unit or the survival of the individual is at stake.

Using the terms correctly also helps set the right level of expectations in the relationship from the start. If you ask someone to be your coach, they'll understand that you're seeking help on a specific task and only for a specific period of time. But if you ask someone to be your mentor, they should grasp that

you're asking for an extended commitment. The former may be doable for them at a time when the latter is not. In that respect, clearly differentiating between types of relationships is a way to show respect for other people's time. If nothing else, using the correct terms is a way to help start a conversation that clarifies the expectations for both parties.

Finally, using terminology correctly is a mark of a professional. Making clear distinctions between coaching, counseling, and mentoring shows that you understand the role that each plays in developing Soldiers. With that in mind, the next section will look in depth at the impacts that mentoring relationships have on Soldiers' personal and professional lives.

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<sup>1</sup> "Mentorship", PROMOTE, last modified 2017, <https://www.promoteleadership.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Department of the Army, "Army Leadership" (Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-22, Washington, DC, 2012), 7-10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



## **Section II: Mentoring Benefits and Outcomes**

## Chapter 3: Career Benefits

ROBERT: I don't know when I'm going to get out of the Army, so I threw a number on the calendar: 25 years. I mapped out what I want to get done in that time before I get out. I laid it out and [my mentor] looked it over. We looked through things that he thought I was wasting my time on. I've been leaning on that experience ever since.

Career benefits are what we think of most naturally when it comes to mentoring outcomes. Unfortunately, that often equates to favoritism in people's minds. The equation goes something like this: *Soldier X couldn't do something before their mentor came along. Now Soldier X is getting things done. Therefore, Soldier X's mentor must have made it happen.* This chapter will emphasize that the reality is much more complicated than that. We'll look at how mentoring produces career benefits for protégés and mentors alike. In addition to overall benefits, we'll examine how mentoring impacts job performance in line positions, staff positions, and broadening assignments.

### Benefits for the Protégé

The most persistent career benefit of a mentoring relationship for protégés is understanding what a realistic career path looks

like. While it's true that the Army provides all kinds of career mapping resources, those are often written in an impersonal way that makes it hard to overlay onto our experiences.

ROBERT: The operations sergeant major, he was the first one to sit down and talk. He asked me about my hopes and dreams, took an interest in my career. Then we'd talk about it. He'd tell me what I'm doing wrong, how to get it fixed, and that he wanted me to do something about it.

The last point of ROBERT's statement is really important:

mentors give protégés the ability to visualize success, the tools to achieve success, and the drive to succeed. They don't always take action themselves, as we see in another example:

CATHY: B was in my same MOS. She helped mentor me by explaining to me my roles and responsibilities in that MOS. She asked me, What goals and aspirations was I trying to achieve? Was I going to stay in for 20? Was I going to do 4 years? What was my plan? With her asking me, it got me wondering what my plan was. She helped me to develop my SMART<sup>1</sup> goals as well as taught me the key things I needed to achieve those goals. "Never give up. Always have SMART goals to achieve. Always be the best YOU that you can be. Own up to your mistakes (that was #1). Be the best soldier and leader you can be."

Each of us wants to believe that there's something unique about ourselves. While that's a great motivator for success, it can

sometimes make it difficult to see opportunities right in front of us.

JAMES: One of my soldiers came to me looking for advice on how to get promoted to sergeant. At the time, it was hard because we were prepping for deployment, so I had to find the time to sit her down and discuss why she was being overlooked. We actually broke out the promotion point worksheet and went line by line to discuss her downfalls and her successes. I think that better opened her eyes to see an actual list of objectives that she needed to accomplish. In her head, she was just going off of what she had done and what she saw. I think she was grateful for the interaction, in more of an informal-type atmosphere to show her in person exactly what she was lacking and how she could progress. It took her about eight months after that time, and she obtained her E5 before I left the unit. I think mentorship like that, showing someone a visual means of success, opens their eyes and they understand it better than just thinking about it, or pondering on it, how they can do it and get it done.

JAMES didn't create anything new for his protégé. He just tapped into the tools at hand and shared his own time and experience to help make them comprehensible to someone of lesser experience.

This phenomenon isn't just limited to Soldiers at the start of their career. Many protégés continue to benefit from their mentor's advice on career paths even after they are well established in their field.

EDGAR: S was all about career progression. We had some independent family conversations, but his focus was "Let me show you how to be the best soldier you can be based on what you're capable of." He would take some of his drive, his focus, his tenacity, and say "This is how you apply this based on what you're doing right now in the [operations] section or as a platoon sergeant."

In that same vein, mentoring often helps protégés put new processes or techniques in place to improve the functioning of their unit. Here's just a few examples of how our NCOs put their mentor's advice into practice when they had the opportunity:

SAMUEL: S asked me, "Is your physical current and updated?" I said, *Well, I just PCSed, so, yes. Why?* He said, "Because when schools come down, I want to send folks to school. I'll sacrifice some time in the field, and that will put us behind the eight-ball, but I'm going to send folks to school to let them advance militarily." Just based on that, I think we had, in our platoon alone: 8 Ranger qualified guys, 12 ARSOF qualified guys, 4 Jumpmasters, 2 Pathfinders, 3 Snipers. Everybody had 2-3 skill identifiers, from PFC all the way to the PSG.

When I became a platoon sergeant, on Day 2, I asked *How do we look on physicals?* They looked at me like I was crazy. I sent a lot of folks to school. We had a heavy intensive training cycle in the summer of 2012, and for most of that summer, we were probably only executing with 18 people at a time, because generally there was 10 folks who were not there due to school or a PCS. We were hamstrung, but I had no problem with that, because I wanted them to do those things to set themselves apart from their peer group. And we did. Ultimately, we got a lot of folks promoted to SSG and SFC. I got that from S.

JOSEPH: G sat down with me [when I was an operations NCO]. He walked me through the best possible ways to provide guidance to 1SGs so they would work with me instead of saying "I'm a 1SG, you're just a SFC." He told me how to handle ranks at that level and what was really involved with the position, what it was all about. He covered both down to the subordinate units and up to brigade level, because I also had to communicate with the Brigade Command Sergeant Major a lot. He taught me how to manage both sides of the house.

Sometimes, a mentoring relationship is what's needed to identify hidden or latent talents in a Soldier. An invested mentor will often see things that otherwise well-intentioned leaders may miss.

DIANA: I think W saw something in me to be able to develop. By my own right, I was interested in learning and would ask questions, delve into things. I would ask, *How do I get better at this, how do I do that?* It was a mutual thing: he showed that interest and that desire, that willingness to teach. I felt comfortable with him and continued to seek it out.

Often, identifying new talent opportunities is as simple as finding a new venue for those talents to fully manifest.

CATHY: I told F, *Hey, maybe get out of Flight Operations and go to the S3 shop. Try to work on OPORDS, DTS, taskings, and land and ammo management, just to get away to something new.* It was about career progression, trying to figure out new avenues to help him out.

Sometimes, identifying talent in a protégé means seeing potential in people that others have given up on:

FRED: [He] was one of those people who you knew had potential but he was always hanging around the wrong crowds. Not doing bad things, but not pushing himself to be better. I know that when it comes to promotions to E6, I need to see potential. I knew he had the potential, but he wasn't pushing himself. I was always on him. I moved him around to different positions. I almost demoted him. It finally started to show: he started getting it and pushing himself. He found himself as the top E5 in the battalion. There were eight people that went to that board, and he was the only one who got selected to SSG.

EDGAR: B was actually in another platoon. He was a good soldier, but when he was out of uniform, he had problems following the rules. On occasion, showed up to formation late, was consistently drinking and partying. As I watched him and saw his interaction with others, I said, *He's not a bad Soldier.*

There was one point where he came down for a drug-related incident. They were going to throw him out of the military and I petitioned to the 1SG to let me take him into my platoon until they figured out his legal issues. The 1SG agreed and put him in my squad. From that point, I got to know him, his past, and his history. He asked me to be his character witness at one of his hearings. From that point, instead of kicking him out, they decided to give him another chance.

Based off that, his whole life turned around. He got promoted to E5, took over his own team, became a section leader, deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Even now, when I see him, he always says that if it wasn't for that day, his life would've gone in a different direction.

EDGAR's story is particularly poignant because he took action based on his own experiences. As a young Soldier, he had a mentor similarly see potential in him:

I was doing what C did for me: *This is what I know. Here's how you do your job. And on your off time, find something to do.* It really involved me focusing my attention on bettering him. At the same time, B got the sense that I was invested in him, so he couldn't fail because I put my neck on the line for him.

### Benefits for the Mentor

It's important to stress that mentoring relationships aren't just about benefits for the protégé. While it makes sense that the person with less experience will accrue more benefits, mentoring relationships cannot be completely one-sided:

EDGAR: I think there has to be something you provide as a protégé. It can't always be that the mentor gives and you take. I love the Bible verse: "Iron sharpens iron."<sup>2</sup> As you're giving something to me, I should be giving back to you. I should be sharpening you. I just pour back into S to keep the relationship going. It's about what can I do as a protégé to help you out with where you are right now. That's the key.

Sometimes, the benefits that a mentor accrues take the form of tangible objects. It may be a specific technique or process that the mentor is disinclined to try:



EDGAR: C had no idea about social media. I sat down with him, showed him how to set up his Facebook and Google account. He would have never learned that on his own because he's set in his ways. Now I see him use them. I just sent S all of my trail products so he can use them in his new company [as a first sergeant.] You have to keep growing as a protégé and be mindful of what you can do to assist your mentor. They may be at a plateau, so what can you do to get them over that hump? Keep pushing them forward, so you can strive to be where they're at.

Protégés can serve as conduits for new insights or reflection:

DIANA: I just had such a desire to learn [from my protégé.] He would always come with different things, he would see lots of opportunities in things happening here. He would go to them and then come to talk to me about it. Or he would watch some kind of town hall with the TRADOC CSM, come back, and talk about what he learned. That was really invigorating for me. His desire to learn and to excel was great.

A mentoring relationship often helps older mentors avoid stagnation in their perspectives:

ROBERT: When I get a weird question from some of my protégés, I have to look it up and get privy to it, because I don't know what they're talking about. I'm in that transition period in my career where I'm the old guy now, and I never thought of myself as the old guy. I'm sure every senior NCO goes through this. You say something that you think is funny, and then you realize, *You guys have no idea what I'm talking about.* That perspective, when guys come to me with situations I haven't heard before, I realize this must be a new thing that the young guys are doing. I need to know about it, I need to figure it out.

Other mentors made it clear that being a mentor helps them maintain accessibility in their everyday practices:

WYATT: I've tried to be that approachable, accessible guy. I've tried to have my door open unless I'm engaged with something. It's important to be that approachable leader that people are willing to come talk to, the drive-bys. That's very rewarding, when that happens, that troops are still coming by to talk to me.

Overall, good mentors see their relationships as opportunities for their own professional growth. That growth may be intangible or tangible, but it always has an impact:

EVAN: As a mentor, I got the ability to guide people through situations I've dealt with myself, to be able to help them through that and to be able to succeed. Sometimes they come up with situations that I haven't gone through either, so I get to share that experience and gain some knowledge myself.

EDGAR: From the time of B moving up in the ranks, being a mentor has pushed me to grow. Knowing that someone is going to need my assistance is important. Any class that comes my way, I take it. I just signed up for a PMP certification course. My wife asks me, "Why?" I say, *You never know*. I just add it to my skills. That motivates me to say, *I may not need this at this current time, but the people who rely on me, I have to continue to grow in order to be there for them. If they stagnate because I wasn't able to help them find an answer, I've done them an injustice.*

CATHY: I'm in good shape, but working with J on physical fitness was helpful for me as well. I've always passed the PT test and been able to do 90 points in each event, but doing PT with J pushed me just as much as her.

## Opening the Aperture: Line, Staff, and Broadening Jobs

A popular conception of NCOs has them solely as the movers and shakers in the line units: that is, in the squads, platoons, and companies of the Army. While this is certainly accurate, it is incomplete. As they become more senior, NCOs find themselves working on staffs to a greater extent. Several NCOs stressed just how different that experience was:

JAMES: Being a staff NCO, especially on a division-level staff, you're more busy than on the line. When I was on the line, I just thought that staff NCOs, staff officers, they didn't do anything. They stayed in their cubicles, their offices. They got 9-5 jobs, enjoyed the good life, while us on the line embraced the suck and are always gone. Being in the staff job, I was way busier, way more deployed. I also got to see the bigger picture of how operations are formed, how to maneuver personnel, and how you've gotta look out for situations to occur. I never thought about that when I was a squad leader or a platoon sergeant.

EDGAR: With the structure and mindset of a line platoon, you're in more of a reactive state. You know your mission, you have your mission set. You write your plan, you clear your route, you come back in, and you debrief. If nothing blows up, it was a good day and you wrap it up. In transitioning to the operations section, you have to be more proactive. You have to think ahead: *We have the MPs on this route and our clearance package is on this route. How can we merge the two to get them the protection they need to complete the mission?* You're doing a lot of future planning as opposed to daily missions.

EVAN: I was in line to take a platoon before I got pulled to the S3 shop to be the S3 Air NCO. I went from this very narrow field of view where I just saw what a squad does within a platoon for operations. Now, at the battalion level, I'm seeing all of these people and networking with them. All of these questions I previously had about why does this happen, why does that happen, were answered on the spot. You see how the battalion functions and you get to understand those processes, why they're there, and contribute to them.

Several NCOs found unexpected latitude in staff positions:

JOSEPH: As the operations sergeant, I was free to move around, talk to a lot of people. Platoon sergeants do the same thing, but another PSG will have people that belong to them, so you don't teach or step into his boundaries. But as an ops sergeant, a lot of people see you as the higher echelon. It's almost like a sergeant major, in that you go around and talk to a lot of people. It wasn't as extensive as it would be with a 1SG or a SGM, but I had more freedom than talking with just one unit.

ROBERT: As the operations NCO, I was the go-to guy to collect resources and get it all done. A young hard charger ended up taking over my platoon, and he did great with them. That just bolstered our relationship, because now I was the inside man in the S3 shop. All of the PSGs came to the S3 shop more. That meant the S3 interacted with them more, got more of the inside knowledge in the troops and the platoons. That really helped tailor the future operations of the squadron, because the S3 was hearing it from the horse's mouth.

Confronted with the new challenge of being on staff, NCOs instinctively sought out assistance from mentors both old and new:

FRED: I went from being on the line to working at the Division Level, working with new equipment, new mentalities. It was the highest position I've ever been in and I was lost in the beginning. I didn't know any of the systems. I didn't know any of the procedures. S's patience, his willingness to take the opportunity to develop me was awesome. He suggested schools and courses so I can learn everything. If not for him, I would have never been successful in that position.

JAMES: O helped me learn the ropes as a staff NCO. The first year, it was just him and me, along with one civilian, running the show. We were so busy that he couldn't do it all himself, so he got to rely on me to go to certain meetings, take notes, give decision points. Decide whether we're going to move MP assets into Kosovo or into Ukraine or if we can even do convoy operations. Within a day or two, he had reeled me in on everything and taught me things about a plans and operations NCO. He's not going to be there all the time: he's gotta take leave and has a family, so I had to jump into his boots sometimes and go address these colonels and generals, explain the MP assets and what we had going. I would say he helped shape and mold me to a planning NCO. I'm grateful for that.

CATHY: In S3, you're not the head honcho. You may be the person who does the work but you still have a sergeant major or a master sergeant who is over you who takes the credit. He helped me, mentored and developed me, to see as an S3 that you can't do everything. You gotta delegate. You have to find your key people who are subject matter experts in things like DTS, land nav, taskings, or in writing OPORDS and FRAGOS. I knew about all of those things, because I'd worked in S3, but I couldn't be one doing it. I was there verifying, crossing Ts, dotting Is, on what my soldiers had completed. He helped develop me with that.

Notice the consistent theme of a rapid jump into a new perspective, which sparked the need for further individual development. Mentors helped all of these NCOs quickly assimilate into their new positions.

The same holds true for broadening assignments and details outside of a Soldier's MOS. NCOs talked about one specific broadening opportunity and how it challenged them:

DIANA: I liked the challenge of being a drill sergeant, to bring in civilians and make them into soldiers. I remember looking at my basic training platoon and seeing their eyes staring back at me. I thought, *Man, if I am not on my game, I can really mess up some junk. If I am not doing exactly what I should be and if I'm not professional and competent, I can mess up some stuff.* If you get taught something incorrectly the first time, you always go back onto that. That was a huge moment for me: I really had to be on my game and be the ultimate in professionalism, set the example for these guys.

JAMES: The hours make the drill sergeant job different. An MP drill sergeant in One Station Unit Training, you're there with those individual Soldiers seventeen weeks straight, non-stop. From the day you pick them up from reception until the day they graduate, you're there with them to 0430 to 2100. As an MP drill sergeant compared to a line unit MP, that's one thing I would have to say: you put 100% more effort in your job as a drill sergeant.

Mentors were often crucial in helping NCOs see the opportunity in broadening assignments and how it could benefit them:

DIANA: E and I continued our relationship, but now it was much more NCO-to-NCO. I talked to him about advice on career, issues with Soldiers. I always felt like I could reach out to him. He came to Fort McClellan and promoted me to E7. When I got the opportunity to come [to West Point], he was one of the first ones I asked whether to take it or not. He said, "Go to West Point, you idiot!"

ROBERT: V got an opportunity to be a Master Resiliency Trainer instructor on his installation. That's a nominative position: you have to get picked by the Corps CSM to work there. They want to keep good talent in that area to ensure success. He was just going to the gym and one of the guys who ran that place said, "Hey, I've been noticing you and I want you to consider working here." He wasn't sure about it, because it's not on the standard career path. He didn't know what to do, and I told him, *Hey, the avenues that can come from this job [are significant.] Not everybody follows the same career timeline.* He needed to hear that point of view. More recently, he was identified as a potential Air Assault School instructor, because he's pretty much outperforming everyone at his current job. He's told me, "I don't know what to do again." He's an instructor there now. He took the open door and is doing well.

JAMES: As drill sergeants, we're there constantly, and we tend to lose focus on the outside role of being a line MP. W brought us in and whenever we had white space, he would bring us in and just talk to us, mentor us: "Hey, you guys are doing all these things, but don't forget, you've got this other mission going on too." He would just keep us up to date on real-world stuff going on. When we did leave our positions as drill sergeants, we didn't walk into the unknown. That plays a huge role in us being mentally ready when we did leave. When senior leaders don't do that, the drill sergeants go to the next unit and it's all about their time on the trail: "We did this on the trail" or "This happened when I was a drill sergeant."

Not everything's on the trail! You've got other folks there that you have to be a leader to.

Even when they weren't in broadening assignments, NCOs saw great benefits in having mentors from a different MOS.

Some noted how difficult it can be to find perspectives outside their own branch:

JAMES: I haven't had any mentors or protégés outside my branch because I've rarely had the opportunity to work with people outside my branch until I started to work in staff. That was in Germany, a couple of years ago. That's when I started working with other branches: engineer, FA, signal, AG, stuff like that. Up until then, I rarely had any contact with anyone else from outside my branch.

Mentors and protégés from other branches provided NCOs with new opportunities to learn and grow:

FRED: For me, the biggest impact of having mentors from different branches was just getting to dig into somebody's brain as they do their job. That really helped me understand, even to this day, how the infantry think and how they operate. That helped me implement what I needed to do and be more successful. They didn't care about the difference in branch. I was just another soldier that they needed to help and grow.

WYATT: I was guilty of saying, *I don't care about [the process.] I know what I need and I need it right now.* It's the human resources specialist, the logistician, the communicator who says "OK, but the system doesn't work that way. Here's what you need to learn as you come up through the ranks." You've gotta learn to plan more and understand that you're gonna have some lag time on these systems.



DIANA: [My protégé] was a 92-series NCO. If he raised a branch-specific thing, I wouldn't know 100% and could only give my best thoughts on what I thought would be best. I knew that the garrison commander sergeant major was his same MOS, so I encouraged him to reach out. I also let the CSM know he would be reaching out. They developed a relationship there. And it turned out that both the garrison CSM and I answered his question the same way, so I guess I was right. That felt good, to give him another outlet to touch base who knew more about his branch.

### Putting It All Together

If nothing else, hopefully this chapter has disabused you of the notion that career benefits of mentoring are all about favors or sponsorship. There is certainly a time and place for both of those, but as you've seen in this chapter's narrative, they make up a very small fraction of the career benefits. Simply put, mentors and protégés help one another see career possibilities and paths for realization.

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<sup>1</sup> Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time Limited

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

## Chapter 4: Psychosocial Benefits

DIANA: [He] was really easy [to mentor] because he was so fired up. You can't help but get pulled in by someone who's that fired up about learning and developing. It was just his fire to do the right thing and do the right thing by Soldiers. That was something that fired me up.

Let's address one issue up front: in a profession where taking care of Soldiers is often co-equal to accomplishing the mission, distinguishing career benefits from psychosocial benefits is really hard. We often note that military bearing and coolness under pressure is just as important as tactical and technical proficiency. The majority of the Army Values derive more from personal characteristics than professional performance. My first challenge in writing this chapter was to make this difficult distinction, and you may well disagree with where I drew the line.

I started with the definition of psychosocial functions that I provided in Chapter 1: [actions that] enhance a mentor or protégé's sense of competence, identity, and personal effectiveness. I then looked for mentoring outcomes that weren't necessarily tied to a specific task or event, but instead helped develop an overall sense of professional self. I also included

benefits that were more about personal gains or benefits than professional actions, including family issues. Finally, I tried to capture how mentoring impacted a decision made by every Soldier: when to stay in and when to leave military service.

It's important to note that most, but not all, of the study participants had some psychosocial element in their mentoring. The ones with fewer psychosocial benefits tended to be ones who felt that they didn't need assistance in that area:

EVAN: I don't want people in my personal business. I feel like I handle myself well on a personal level and I maintain myself to focus on my job in the military. I guess I just have a good management of my personal relationships. I've been married for 13 years with nothing going on: just the normal quarrels between a married couple, nothing too serious. I pride myself on that, because you often hear stories about military folks getting divorced.

Remember, all mentoring relationships differ in intensity, length, and outcomes. Consequently, not everyone experiences the full range of psychosocial benefits. As you read this chapter, consider it a menu of possibilities for the positive psychosocial benefits to mentoring. Just as you wouldn't order every entrée from a menu, you shouldn't expect to see all of these in a single relationship.

## Building the NCO Worldview

All of the participants noted that their mentors helped them conceive and develop their personal leadership style. In many cases, that style was different than what was perceived as the prevailing style in a particular unit or environment:

WYATT: I started to see that you can be an effective leader in different leadership styles, where they fit situations and people in different ways. Some people only react if they've got someone in their face with that 'over the top' leadership. As a guy who found his niche in SOF, I'm happy with: *Tell me what you need, one time. Treat me like an adult and I promise, it'll get done.* Watching the Ranger leadership and other different types as I grew up, I learned to appreciate the 'quiet professional' way of doing things.

CATHY: R helped me develop a better leadership style for younger soldiers. As an AIT<sup>1</sup> Platoon Sergeant, you do a lot of yelling and other stuff, and he showed me that I didn't have to do all of that. He showed me regulations, counseling, things in place to do that. He showed me how to find out what leadership style my soldiers needed.

JAMES: W would sit me down and talk to me about pursuing my leadership career, how to better develop myself. What he encouraged was to go out and seek someone, learn their leadership style, because everyone has different styles. You can learn from them all, whether it be bad, good, and indifferent; you can always learn from it and use it along your military career.

SAMUEL: I'm an emotional leader - I wear my emotions on my sleeve. [Mentoring] is one of the best things I could have done, because it's helped me a lot to reel those emotions in.

When you get the initial bad news, now I can assess the situation with perspective from all sides instead of just going high and right, thinking you fixed it when you might have made the situation worse. [Mentoring] has helped me to assess who I am and who I want to be as a leader.

Beyond leadership traits, NCOs found that their mentors helped them see new perspectives. NCOs noted that the rise through the ranks often makes it difficult to understand what higher echelons are thinking. A good mentor can open new horizons about the road ahead:

EVAN: G would help me understand what I was feeling, empathize with me instead of saying "Well, that's what the military is like. These are things you've gotta do moving forward." He helped me see the light and opened my eyes to a lot of things militarily. He was the one that I really pulled from when I developed my Staff Sergeant perspective.

NCOs also noted that their responsibilities for their units often lead to tunnel vision about adjacent unit needs and requirements. A mentor often helped them get beyond that narrow perspective:

DIANA: H said it ten times if he said it once: "Take your blinders off, First Sergeant! It's not just about you and not just about your unit!" Consequently, I said that as a battalion command sergeant major as many times as he ever said that to me. [NCOs have to understand] your role, your job. [You must understand] how to not only take care of your soldiers but, as a more senior NCO, how you fit into the big picture and what role you play in that.

Finally, NCOs often sought out simple affirmation from their mentors. In these cases, NCOs knew the right thing to do, but felt like they needed to hear it from someone else:

ROBERT: E came to me in the tough times of counseling. We had a couple of soldiers who were less than desirable. We were in Iraq and he had two of them that weren't making the grade. He was at wits' end with them a couple of times and didn't know what to do. A lot of times, these guys know the right answer, they just need to hear it from somebody else. I was the guy who told them what the hard right was. He just needed to make sure he was doing the right thing. He just needed a word of encouragement.

In some cases, that affirmation ended up being significantly different than expected:

SAMUEL: W is a guy that, no matter what I'm doing or where I was at in the world, I could call him or send him a text and he would be willing to help me out at the drop of a hat. He didn't always tell you what you wanted to hear, but he was compassionate, he was willing to sacrifice for others.

### Emotional Regulation and Personal Issues

Yoda said it best: "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering."<sup>2</sup> NCOs likewise noted that mentoring was a useful mechanism for managing fear and anger that was having negative consequences:

EDGAR: H had a lot of built-up anger, frustration. He had those qualities where he can be a great leader and a good peer

and mentor for others. Working with him, I wasn't teaching him new things, but showing him how to harness what he had to better himself. From the time we started working together, people said "Oh, he'll never be anything." They all said: "He has anger issues. He'll never be an NCO." [His anger] was our primary focus, helping him positively take his passion, his fire, and put it into the work and let others see it.

JAMES: P had some very emotional significant events going on downrange, and I had to switch my hats from being a squad leader in a tactical environment to being a counselor and father figure for him. He was directly out of high school, he really didn't know what he was doing. He was a PFC directly out of basic and AIT. He showed up to his first unit and got told, "You're getting deployed." About a month into it, he didn't know what he was doing, he didn't know his purpose. He didn't know why he was there. I had to sit him down during an off-time and explain, *This is our mission, this is what we're doing. This is your squad, this is what we're here for.* I broke it down for him at a kid level, so he could understand. I think that after I sat him down and talked to him, he grasped it a little bit and found his spot within the squad itself. He felt more welcomed and had more sense of being, of why he's there and what he needed to do.

ROBERT: I enjoyed that K gave me advice on keeping my act straight, keeping me out of trouble in my career. We had totally different avenues; he was talking about leadership and I was a punk back then. I got in a lot of trouble.

Sometimes, NCOs drew on their own struggles in this area to help their protégé:

EVAN: S had a bad temper. I learned from past experience, having a bad temper myself, struggling trying to stay calm and reasonable. [I helped] him through that: *Instead of doing it this way, try to approach it this way. Not everybody*

*receives the ass-chewing well, so you have to balance that with the individuals you're working with, and that may not be the best way to go about it.*

Beyond just anger and fear, NCOs found that mentoring was a useful tool for all kinds of emotional regulation. Sometimes, a shift in outlook or personal engagement worked wonders.

CATHY: Day by day, F and I worked on just having a positive and optimistic outlook on everything, not coming in and saying, "Oh, they didn't pick me to go to soldier of the month" and being upset. Most people knew him as not smiling or being grumpy and mean. I told him, *Hey, change it! When someone comes in, ask them how their day was! Customer service, it's what we're here for.* Helping him change the whole outlook on everything and bettering himself, he did make E5 before his 8-year mark.

EDGAR: My key takeaway from mentoring, even now, was to have that touchpoint, that place in my life, where if I hit a hard bump or lose motivation, lose focus, I have someone I can reach out to and say *This is where I'm at. This is how I feel.* They can kick me in the pants and say "Shake it off. Let's talk this thing through."

In general, NCOs stressed that mentoring was helpful for things that they classified as personal challenges or issues. These were things that didn't necessarily have a direct connection to the Army, but did impact a Soldier's ability to serve:

EVAN: Sometimes, mentoring revolved around personal stuff for soldiers. We owe it to them to guide them along, make sure that their finances are squared away and [that they're]



investing for the future. Help them go through with furthering their education through the GI Bill, knowing how to use that resource to get their education.

Again, the personal experience of the mentor was often an important component of these discussions:

FRED: E's mentoring was nothing military. It was where I saw myself, my goals in life, and my family and how they were doing. Then he transitioned to what he had done, how he got to where he was, the time it took, how he saw things. That was a big part of what helped me. It was how he took who he was on the outside, to be successful in the military, how to turn it around. That was the majority of our conversations.

### Relationships and Family

Military life is hard on families and relationships.

Unsurprisingly, several mentoring relationships focused on or dealt with this hard truth:

JOSEPH: G would share his own experiences in marriage. Sometimes marriage gets tough due to things like: being considered for a job; deployments; training that lasts for a long time; and being out for school for 2-3 months. Sometimes that stresses the family members. He talked to me about how sometimes you have to bring everything to your family members. You consider OPSEC of course, but sometimes it's better just to share as much with your family as you can. That way they will truly understand what you go through. They'll understand why you go to school for so long, why you can't communicate for days on deployment.

JAMES: I've seen great leadership, to where an NCO or an officer is there 100% of the day but they still manage to balance their family with their military life. I find that hard for me to do sometimes, because I want to do my work and I want to be proactive in my military life, but I find it hard to balance my family life. Therefore, something's gonna give. So through that [mentoring] conversation, I was able to vent and listen.

NCOs noted that mentoring relationships were a way of dealing with hard times in relationships, especially with spouses:

EVAN: S would come to me often and entrust me to listen to things he had going on between him and his wife. I think a lot of the things I coached him on were in that relationship. I would tell him, *When the wife is making me angry, this is how I deal with it. I find better outlets to work through that.* I would help him through that.

CATHY: I didn't get married until later in my military career, 8-9 years in. I talked to B about how to balance a relationship, a marriage, a family with the military. I thanked her, because I did eventually get married, to a civilian.

Although challenges with spouses often came up, mentoring insights were also applicable to other relationships:

FRED: The biggest personal benefit of mentoring is truly being a family man and putting my family before all else. With the majority of mentors, especially going back to E, M, and H, they were all about family. I think that was really important to me and helped me on the personal side.

EVAN: Some of it was a lot of mentoring on the personal relationship level. Within the personal relationship thing,

general overall expectations on what relationships look like, coaching them through difficult times in their relationship.

Several NCOs noted that families were an enabler of mentoring relationships. In several cases, the mentoring relationship forged a closer bond with the family as well as the mentor/protégé:

DIANA: With P, I've become part of their family. I'm also pretty close with Z and his family. If I go to where they are, I always go see them. That was a nice benefit, making personal connections in that way.

ROBERT: M and I ended up having a closer relationship than I expected. I found out he was coming back to [my installation.] He called me up and said he was looking at a house in the neighborhood, and I helped him out with that. He bought the house and our backyards ended up connecting. Our families became friends; my wife and his wife hit it off pretty good. We didn't really talk about work after he moved in; they're just family friends now.

### Benefits to the Mentor

Similar to the previous section, it's important to note that not all of the psychosocial benefits in a mentoring relationship accrue to the protégé. As noted earlier in the chapter, mentoring relationships helped participants see a broader set of perspectives. Mentors specifically noted the utility of this in their relationships:

FRED: Having [a protégé with] a different way of thinking is always good. I like having people who ask questions, who want to challenge me, who want to try something different. It allows you to be better and just makes you a better NCO. G, he would challenge everything. He would always have something different. You would tell him, *The wall is blue*, and he's say, "No, it's red." And it resonated with me: *OK, you're the one who's going to make me work for it. You're going to make me look into this.*

EDGAR: My overall mentoring benefit is the opportunity to get to know so many great individuals from all over the world, from so many demographics. It allows me to not filter my understanding of people through my lenses, but see it through different circumstances and life experiences. I can have a sense of empathy in engaging with people who don't look like me or have my same situation. I can give back.

Building on EDGAR's comment, above, several mentors noted how their relationships led to improved personal skills or understanding on their part.

FRED: The benefit I got from my mentor experience was actually listening. Not just hearing what they're saying, but listening. Taking the time to get the information, absorb it, process it, and understand it. I might not like what they're saying, or agree with it, but I see what they're actually talking about.

CATHY: With F, I got a good understanding of the blame game. I got to understand how someone could spend all those years putting the blame on others. I couldn't play the blame game: I had to listen to what the story was. I had to have patience and make it better.

SAMUEL: I think the biggest benefit to mentoring is seeing that there are multiple ways to relate to people. It's reaching out and getting different perspectives from other folks, getting different methods.

Ultimately, many mentors felt that the personal satisfaction they got from mentoring was a reward unto itself:

JOSEPH: Mentoring gives you the opportunity to change someone's life. Changing someone's life opens your mind, helps you get beyond just the Army, complete the mission. As NCOs, we come to work, get the tasking, get it done, and complete the mission. Now, I get to change somebody's life. Maybe they have a better marriage, a better life.

### Staying In or Getting Out

Every Soldier eventually leaves the Army. Some leave voluntarily, some involuntarily. Because workplace mentoring focuses on the development of professional identity, it's tempting to exclude the stay or go decision from mentoring practice. But several NCOs noted that retention was also a factor in some mentoring decisions. EVAN explicitly stated about his mentor: "At the time, I never really intended to stay in, it just kind of happened. He was the one who pushed me through that period." ROBERT noted of his potential transition: "I know who to go to

when I need information when it's time for me to get out of the Army. But I'm not even thinking about that yet.”

It's important to stress that, with respect to retention, mentoring is often just as much about helping individuals decide to seek life outside the Army rather than staying in. NCOs emphasized that, even when individuals ended up leaving the Army, they could still derive satisfaction from the relationship:

JAMES: When someone like K gets out, you just gotta go with the punches. You have to tell them, *This is the way I feel, this is what I think would be best for you. But if you have another goal in mind, another aspiration, another road to travel down, then by all means, take that. Otherwise you're never going to be happy.* K told me he was going to get out of the military. We had that talk, about future goals and stuff like that. We weighed the pros and cons... what would be more beneficial for him, what would make him happier. You have to tell your protégé that you'll always be there for him, regardless of civilian, military, because you have that brotherhood or sisterhood.

JOSEPH: Even though E is out of the Army, I know she's going to do great. She's got an interview next week for another federal job. So I can change somebody's life and improve it. I can use it as an example with cadets, how much of an impact they can have on soldiers, not only professionally but personally.

In some cases, a protégé's departure from the military happened as a result of regression or backsliding from progress

made during the relationship. In those cases, NCOs were often reflective and philosophical about what could have been achieved:

CATHY: After I left [our unit], F went back into that slump. He was the type of soldier that you have to physically stay on for anything to happen. If you let it go by, nothing will happen. He would call me up: "Oh, they don't want to send me to the promotion board." It was the same stuff we always talked about before I got him to the E5 board. I asked him, *So what have you been doing? Are you using the steps and tools that I gave you?* "Yeah, I'm using it." *Are you using it every day? Not once a week, once a month, when you see people looking at you?* I stayed in contact with him, but he eventually got out.

JOSEPH: I don't want to say that I failed as a mentor in this case. Every individual has their own mind and not everyone is meant for or likes the Army. It's a really hard career to keep going for a long period of time. This was the one where I wasn't successful.

### The Whole Person

Hopefully, this chapter has shown you the utility of mentoring for personal development. I always differentiate the benefits of mentoring in this manner:

- Career benefits are *what* you want to be. They are your way forward, your path to professional success.

- Psychosocial benefits are *how* you want to be. They shape your outlook on the world and how you relate to others.

Both of those lead to a third benefit: *who do you want to be?* That question, and role modeling's component of mentoring, are the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Advanced Individual Training.

<sup>2</sup> *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas (1999; Marin, CA: Lucasfilm, 2002), DVD. Congratulations, I've now saved you from having to watch any more of this terrible movie.



## Chapter 5: Role Modeling: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

FRED: C started as a mentor, but one in my chain of command, and then [he] turned into a completely different person. I saw him as a mentor, we developed a good relationship, and then as time passed, he was not **who** I thought he was or **how** I thought he was. It completely changed my career path.

It's fair to say that, up to this point, this book has presented a consistently positive picture of mentoring and its benefits. This may feel one-sided, as we've all had negative experiences in our developmental lives. A chapter on role modeling, with a focus on the whole person rather than individual characteristics, is the right place to address the negative aspects of mentoring and how to counter them.

Arguably, there have been aspects of role modeling present throughout the previous chapters. With respect to career and psychosocial benefits, protégés and mentors saw aspects of the other that they wanted to emulate. Role modeling is different in that it speaks to the totality of who a person is. As I noted in Chapter 1, role modeling is often considered as a subset of psychosocial benefits. I've chosen to break it out here, as other

mentoring researchers have previously done<sup>1</sup>, because I think it's a useful construct to discuss how participants in a mentoring relationship view one another.

### Role Modeling as a Relationship Catalyst

The previous chapters of this book focused on benefits that emerged after the relationship began. However, it's important to note that role modeling can actually be a powerful mechanism for the initiation of mentoring relationships as well. As one of the readers for this manuscript commented to me, "You can't be what you can't see."<sup>2</sup> In this frame of reference, current and future NCOs see an individual who exemplifies their preferred path:

ROBERT: You read what an NCO is, you see it in the NCO Creed. But you don't really have any tangible things to visualize in your mind. The guys I've picked as mentors in my career are who I'm choosing to be like. They're my choices of examples for things like candor and commitment.

EDGAR: When I came in, I used the metaphor of "finding the rabbit." It means you find that person in your profession that you try to catch up to. You have to work hard to catch the rabbit. When I joined the military, that was my mindset: *Follow the rabbit. Watch what he's doing. Do the same, and then you become the rabbit.*

Role modeling doesn't always lead to a specific relationship; sometimes, it's enough to help a potential protégé visualize what they should be looking for:

EVAN: Initially, in my first unit and being in the SF pipeline<sup>3</sup>, the biggest thing that stood out to me is that a lot of those folks strive to seek excellence and achieve the schools they want to attend. [They] do the harder right over the easier wrong throughout that training. I saw that and said, *OK, that's something I want to try to do, try to be, to excel.*

When aspects of a role model specifically resonate with a potential protégé, it can be a catalyst for a mentoring relationship. This is especially true when specific demographic characteristics match in addition to overall behaviors and outlook:

CATHY: W was a woman who was achieving all of the things that I wanted to achieve, all the things I saw myself achieving. She was a drill sergeant who became an AIT PSG. She was a person who exemplified BE-KNOW-DO.<sup>4</sup> She always led by example, always looked the part, and always looked professional. This was someone who I aspired to be.

Even when a role model doesn't end up forming a relationship, they can still be a powerful mechanism for shaping a Soldier's path:

JAMES: With P, it was less of individual mentorship, it was more self-reflection. To me, he was the standard-bearer of what right looks like, what you need to do to succeed in

today's Army [in my branch.] If you follow what he does and what he says in today's Army, you'll be very successful. I've found that to be true and I still find it to be true. If you act the part and be the part, you'll be successful.

One unique aspect of role-modeling is that, unlike other aspects of mentoring practice, it can actually be unconscious.

Some mentors noted how they were unknowing role models to future protégés:

CATHY: When I made E5 at Fort Campbell, F was older than me. I made E5 when I was 23. He was about 27, 28, and had been in the military for almost 8 years. He was at the point where he had to decide if it was time to get out or time to stay in, try to make E5. He came to me and said: "Hey, Sergeant, you just got in and you made E5. What am I doing wrong? Why have I been in so long and not made it that far?"

EDGAR: [My future protégé] would watch me and I didn't even know he was watching me. He would watch how I interacted with the platoon or how I went on missions. When I got ready to PCS, he caught me by surprise: "You know how you told us to always find our rabbit? You were my rabbit. I want to catch up or be you." I was shocked, at first. He was very quiet, never said anything, and never acted as if he needed help or assistance. I said, *Well, let me know when you're ready and we'll get the ball rolling.*

CATHY and EDGAR's stories should serve as a powerful reminder to all leaders: someone is always watching who we are and how we present ourselves.

## The Good: Role modeling to inspire development

Once in a mentoring relationship, role models often help Soldiers understand career options or next steps in professional development. Sometimes, this takes the form of further milestones on an established career path:

CATHY: R also helped me with my SMART goals. At that time, my SMART goals were: make E7 in 10 years; make E9 in 14 years<sup>5</sup>; finish my bachelor's degree; and, start on my master's degree. R showed me [that was possible in my MOS], that you can be an E7 in ten years, and you can make master sergeant in 12. He made sergeant major in 14 or 15 years, I think. That was like: *Wow. You are the example of what I'm trying to be, the goals I'm trying to accomplish.*

Sometimes, a role model helps a protégé make a choice when faced with a fork in the road:

EDGAR: My benefit of mentoring was the key NCOs placed along my career path. You'd have your toxic leaders where you'd say to yourself: *How are you my leader? I can do exactly what you're doing.* But my mentors, seeing them in action, actually in combat: They taught me one way and then I got to see them execute it. That was the key, I wanted to be them. If I didn't have those individuals, it would have been easier to say, *I can be more beneficial on the officer side doing the higher thinking.* Those NCOs showed me the reward of being enlisted and I wanted to give that back to others.

Role models can give Soldiers a nudge to stay on the cutting edge of their profession:

SAMUEL: S was so good that we challenged ourselves to beat him to the punch. We'd have a training meeting or an update and he'd say, "I need you guys to do A, B, C, D, and E." We'd say, *We got it, we're already there.* He'd then say, "What about F and H?" All of sudden we would get mad at ourselves, because we were trying to be on his level and think ahead. We would leave the meeting kicking rocks, angry at ourselves because we didn't have the foresight to see these things. That's something I've taken to this day: looking at the big picture, strategically, where can I lean forward? I really got that from him. He always challenged us to be better.

Role models can give protégés a mechanism for seeking advice.

In this case, it is less about knowing that mentor has specific skills and more about believing that the mentor has the right outlook for a given challenge:

WYATT: I benefitted from my mentors' wisdom. When I knew that I had to make a decision that I was unsure of and felt underprepared to make on my own, I said: *Heck, here's all these friendly faces of all these guys I know and respect. They're always willing to talk, so why not go bounce it off of them?* I wanted that advice and counsel, so I could turn around and put it into action and see it work out. *Wow, that worked, that was pretty cool!* You should always be a learning creature, never thinking that you don't need anyone's advice, that you've got it figured out.

For their part, mentors saw great benefits in being a role model. Some echoed the previous sentiments about being exposed to a diversity of ideas and perspectives:

JOSEPH: Mentoring gives you a diversity of experiences. I was just one NCO in the unit, and before I came to the S3 and met those two mentors, I just had that one perspective. I was just one style of NCO leader. In talking to people of different backgrounds, different ethnicities, different experiences, I learned. They helped me change and be able to understand different people, regardless of where they're from. I can more easily see leadership styles to try to mentor, help, teach someone, and get their attention.

Others saw the value in being an example of success for people with perceived deficiencies:

FRED: I like mentoring the hard-headed ones, the ones who don't want to listen, who think they're always right, who think they know it all. Those are the ones I look forward to, because I was like that. You help them find out that there's other ways to do things, that you're not always going to be right. You help them see that everybody's ideas are just as good as yours. That's what I look for: those who want to challenge everything, think they know it all. Because that's how I was.

An acknowledgement of those deficiencies is really important. In the end, mentors and protégés alike have human flaws. Any mentoring relationship should candidly address those flaws and what can be learned from them.

## The Bad: Negative role modeling

Mentoring relationships are intimate relationships, so it's inevitable that human flaws emerge as a result. Mentors and protégés alike should accept that this is a feature, not a bug. As DIANA put it:

There was some bad with W: he had issues with alcohol and marriage, so I learned some bad lessons too. That's OK. I learned a little of good and bad from him.

Seeing the flaws in a mentor helps protégés think critically about what should and shouldn't be emulated:

SAMUEL: W talked like a drunken sailor truck driver. Some of the things he would say, I would stop and laugh, because they didn't even make any sense. It was just a tirade of four-letter words. [He did that because] he understood his audience and he got his message across. That's another thing I got from him: understand who you're talking to and how you're going to relate to them.

Protégés have to be honest with themselves and their mentors about the impact of flaws on their development:

SAMUEL: Probably 95% of the stuff S did was something to emulate. But 5% was that he played favorites. It didn't cause friction or a rift, but within our platoon, we knew there were always people who weren't treated the same. I told myself, *When I get put in that position, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to play favorites.* This is a guy I still speak to, someone I respect very highly. But that was a thing he did that I wasn't a fan of.



I was intrigued by that statement and I asked Samuel: *That negative aspect wasn't enough to turn you off of the relationship.*

*Why not?* His answer was enlightening:

SAMUEL: Because we all have faults. Not every single person is going to be the greatest. Learning from people's faults as well is beneficial going forward. Believe me, I know I have them. I hope I'm setting an example of what right looks like more often than not, but I know there's times where I drop the ball. It goes back to something a sergeant major told me while we were running around doing PT: "Every leader you're going to have is going to do stuff you'll want to emulate and stuff you won't."

SAMUEL was able to look beyond his mentor's faults, but sometimes the flaws in a mentor are simply too much to bear. When that happens, protégés must be alert to warning signs and be willing to walk away from a relationship before it does permanent damage. FRED gave me a cautionary tale in this vein:

FRED: When C first came into the unit, he was our command sergeant major. He said everything we wanted to hear as NCOs: he cared about our career, wanted to see us get to the next level. For me as a field artilleryman who was always neglected by the home unit, that was important and I saw him as a mentor. We started to approach him on things because he wanted that and wanted to approach us, one on one. When we hit the third or fourth month, we didn't see any real changes and we were getting put in bad situations because of him. It started going downhill. We started bringing stuff to him and he wouldn't even talk to us, wouldn't acknowledge us. It came

to the point where he took it out personally on some of us. At that point I had to go the brigade sergeant major and ask to be moved from the unit, because the tension was that bad. It got to the point that if there was a crap job to put someone on, he would purposely put me on it. He wasn't afraid to tell the other NCOs he was doing it. He tried to ruin my NCOER for no reason. It was just one of those things that you don't wish on anyone.

FRED's ability to remove himself from the relationship was complicated by the fact that his mentor was in his unit and in a *de facto* position of authority over him, though not in his chain of command. We'll talk more about the complexities and possibilities of supervisory mentoring in the first chapter of the next section. For now, it's worth reviewing some of the ways mentoring relationships can go wrong, both from the perspective of the mentor and the protégé. The ancient construction of the Seven Deadly Sins (pride, wrath, envy, gluttony, sloth, greed, and lust) gives us a useful framework to do that while offering some means to avoid them.

### The Ugly: The Seven Deadly Sins of Army Mentoring<sup>6</sup>

In a mentoring relationship, pride manifests as mentors wanting their protégés to be just like them, and providing

guidance to that effect. Conversely, protégés fall prey to pride when they seek to mirror a mentor's career or personality in every way. This is hardly surprising, given that perceived similarity is a driving factor for relationship formation. But falling prey to pride takes this natural desire to an extreme that ignores the individual nature of self-development. Just as it is impossible to step into the same river twice, Army career paths and choices are the confluence of individual choice and a whole host of external factors. Mentors and protégés alike must internalize this reality and be candid with one another about how career opportunities and personal preferences will drive mentor and protégé alike down different paths.

A failure to understand the individualized nature of self-development can lead to the second deadly sin of mentoring: wrath. In a mentoring relationship, wrath is the anger felt by a mentor who does not understand or disagrees with the career choices and decisions of a protégé. It can equally appear in the mind of a protégé who does not understand why a mentor is unsupportive of a career choice or decision. Once again, this

discord is driven when the relationship departs from a perceived similarity that may have brought the pair together in the first place. The best way to avoid wrath in a mentoring relationship is to sustain candid and honest communication between both parties about their respective actions. Clear and concise communications of the motivations and desires underpinning choices and recommendations are essential to avoid the specter of wrath.

The flip side of wrath is envy: in this case, jealousy that manifests when a career success puts a person on a different path. For a mentor, envy may come out when a protégé earns opportunities that place them on a faster advancement path than the mentor, perhaps even leapfrogging them! Although less likely to appear in protégés, envy can manifest when an advancement or opportunity puts more actual or perceived distance between mentor and protégé. I place envy third after wrath and pride, because the key to avoiding jealousy in a mentoring relationship involves a combination of mitigation strategies from the former two. Specifically, mentors and protégés alike must clearly communicate when those pangs of jealousy manifest and what is

making them emerge. Separation is a natural progression of all mentoring relationships; mentor and protégé alike should be professional enough to recognize when this is happening and adjust accordingly.

In a mentoring relationship, gluttony does not refer to one too many trips to the all-you-can-eat buffet, but instead appears when mentors or protégés take on more relationships than they can handle. We'll talk about network approaches to mentoring, relying on different partners for advice on different aspects of development, in Chapter 7. A networked approach to mentoring is made easier by the greater accessibility that comes from electronic mentoring venues like email or social media. The combination of these two phenomena can lead to too much of a good thing. For example, a mentor can become so saturated with protégés that they can no longer communicate effectively with any of them. Conversely, successful protégés may find themselves acquiring an ever-expanding list of mentors. Self-awareness is key here: just as the smart eater knows when to turn down that extra helping of prime rib or sautéed tofu, the savvy

mentor and protégé must each resist the temptation to add just one more.

A close cousin of gluttony in mentoring practice is sloth, routinely failing to answer or engage with one's mentor or protégé. There is a tendency to believe a lack of outreach means everything in a mentoring relationship is fine. That same lack of engagement could also mean that your mentoring partner is so swamped that they could really use some outreach. All of us have experienced the phenomenon of an important message getting buried beneath the constant onslaught of inputs. Now imagine the unintentional signal sent by a text message requesting insights or providing feedback that inadvertently goes unanswered. Mentors and protégés alike should think about the means they use to engage and have a conscious process for ensuring that important requests are answered in a timely manner. This may include being candid with mentors and protégés about communication mechanisms that simply don't work for one's individual mentoring style.

Greed in mentoring refers to the practice of using privileged information shared during mentoring engagements without consent, for personal advancement. Mentoring relationships rely equally on the discretion practiced by mentor and protégés. Ideas can be shared in mentoring exchanges as illustrative points rather than directive points. When a member of a mentoring pair uses this information for personal or career gain without the permission of the opposite party, it breaches the trust that makes the mentoring relationship work. Examples of potential trespasses include acting on a job opportunity not broadly known within the workplace (mentioned by a mentor) or taking action on lower-level concerns (shared by a protégé). Both parties in a mentoring relationship must gain consent from the opposite party when they intend to act on knowledge gained through their mutual engagement. An additional benefit of doing so is the opportunity for the opposite party to clarify their intent and provide any missing context that could be essential to action.

There are few hard and fast rules in mentoring, but lust is directly involved with one of them: if you're having sex with

someone, it's not a mentoring relationship. Mentoring relationships are by definition intimate, but not romantic. Clawson and Kram best encapsulated this in their "levels of intimacy" construct, showing how mentoring relationships fall in a narrow band of productive levels of intimacy.<sup>7</sup> This sweet spot of professional development is flanked by cold distance on one hand and romantic intimacy on the other. A simple, effective way to avoid lust is to be aware of the surroundings where mentoring activities are conducted. Privacy is often important in mentoring interactions, but venues that can be construed as romantic should be avoided at all costs.

### The Best Role Model You Can Be

Role modeling is one of the most difficult aspects of mentoring practice. Mentors and protégés alike must not only be conscious of what they're saying, but they must also understand what they are unconsciously communicating. One lesson that I hope you took away from this chapter is that potential protégés and mentors alike are always watching. Therefore, thinking about



yourself as a role model can help you better present yourself as someone worthy of being part of a developmental relationship. Those relationships will inevitably have flaws: being self-aware of your own shortcomings along with those of others is a crucial step towards addressing those flaws.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Belle Rose Ragins and Kathy Kram, “The Roots and Meaning of Mentoring”, in *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Ragins and Kram, eds. (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> CPT Mandi Rollinson (Army officer) in discussion with the author, April 5, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) training has a long training sequence of courses, any of which may result in a candidate being deemed unsuitable for SF service. Candidates are often described as being “in the SF pipeline” to denote this long process. EVAN enlisted under the 18X program, which allows Soldiers to compete for SF selection after they complete their initial entry training.

<sup>4</sup> The BE-KNOW-DO leadership paradigm is often cited as the essentials of NCO leadership.

<sup>5</sup> Timelines for enlisted promotion can vary widely between career fields. For CATHY’s job specialty, this was a very aggressive timeline.

<sup>6</sup> This section is adapted from a blog post I wrote for the U.S. Army War College War Room: Raymond A. Kimball, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Army Mentoring” last modified June 23, 2017.

<https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/seven-deadly-sins-army-mentoring/>.

<sup>7</sup> James G. Clawson and Kathy Kram, “Managing Cross-Gender Mentoring”, *Business Horizons* 27, no. 3 (1984).

## **Section III: Mentoring Practices and Contexts**

## **Chapter 6: Mentoring in the Chain of Command**

WYATT: One of the most important characteristics of a mentor is...knowing you can't force a mentor-protégé relationship. The protégé has to want to be mentored by that individual. You can certainly have a senior-subordinate relationship, but to call it a mentor relationship, you have to have the right chemistry. I saw that coming up through the ranks: [they were] all good leaders, but there was a certain leadership style that I felt drawn to.

At this point in the book, we're going to transition from mentoring aspects that are broadly shared to variations on the mentoring relationship that are less common. As we do so, we need to revisit the definition and characteristics of a mentor, because lines that have been seemingly clear up to this point are going to get a little blurry. Remember, mentoring involves voluntary participation by both parties in a developmental relationship that contains mutual trust and respect. The only characteristic that strictly defines a mentor is possessing greater experience in a given area than the protégé. While rank, age, and position can all be helpful predictors of likely mentors and protégés, they do not directly confer either status.

At first glance, senior-subordinate relationships and mentoring pairs couldn't be further apart, especially in the Army. The Army's practice of frequent movement into different job positions and duty assignments usually means that those moves are done involuntarily. Rare is the Army unit that gets to hand-pick all of the members of its team. While an individual may seek assignment to a particular unit or position, they rarely get the chance to choose to work for a specific individual. So how can senior-subordinate relationships possibly turn into mentoring relationships?

The simple fact is, they do. As I discussed in my previous book, eight of the nine participants in that study indicated that they pursued mentoring relationships with someone in their chain of command.<sup>1</sup> The frequency was even higher in this study: **every single participant** related having a mentoring relationship with either a supervisor or subordinate. One individual noted that **all** of his mentoring relationships came from the chain of command. Even after I pushed back, reminding them of the voluntary and mutual nature of mentoring, they all insisted that

these developmental relationships exceeded those conducted with other leaders. To better understand how this is possible, we need to look closer at their individual experiences.

### The Protégé in the Chain of Command

NCOs who identified as protégés in a chain of command relationship felt that their mentor went above and beyond what a conventional supervisor would do. They saw an individual who was open to meeting the needs of their subordinates on an individual level:

EDGAR: F said out loud to me and the other platoon sergeants: "What is your expectation of me?" He took the time to sit down with us and introduce himself and ask that question. Everybody went around and said their expectations. One platoon sergeant said: "Deploy and bring your troops back successfully." Another said: "Help me become a 1SG." When it came to me, I said, *I expect to learn everything you know, so if you transition out, I can step up and fill your role.* Because we'd all voiced our desires, no one took it as a negative if he was spending more time with one individual. Laying it out like that, no one saw it as a hidden agenda or favoritism.

This was particularly helpful when it helped open the NCO's eyes to a new way of doing business in that role:

CATHY: When we got to AIT [as platoon sergeants], we were told: “yell, be tough.” There were 12 of us and we were used to going hard, yelling. R brought us all together to give us another perspective on how to approach these young, impressionable soldiers. He told us: “You don't want them to be afraid of you. You want them to respect you.” With us yelling, going hard, they were afraid of us. They were not respectful of us, they were afraid of us.

Not all protégés in a chain of command relationship had that bond right from the start. In some cases, it grew over time, only being fully realized as the formal senior-subordinate relationship was ending:

JAMES: W left before I did, when he finished his 1SG time. Before he left, he pulled all the drill sergeants in individually. He sat me down and he pretty much told me that I'm a great leader. I do have some indecisive qualities sometimes, and that's one of my flaws. That's OK, because you can build on that and work from that. At the end, though, he told me "I know you're going to go out and do great and wonderful things, and I'm going to see your name in a book somewhere, someday. I'm just gonna read about you and it's gonna be awesome." I've held that in my heart to this day. I just try to keep pursuing that mentality that he instilled.

JAMES stressed that he remains in contact with W, in part because of that final discussion. DIANA mused that, while a mentor can certainly present themselves, the onus mostly remains with the protégé to decide if the relationship will continue:

DIANA: Maybe it's the protégé's responsibility to say "I want to continue this." I don't know. I knew with Z that we had something beyond a normal CoC relationship, and with [another protégé], I feel the same way. I hope it continues.

SAMUEL stands out in this group because both of his mentors were supervisors. As we discussed his experiences, he related how those relationships differed substantially from one another:

SAMUEL: S became my mentor after we got back from our deployment in 2007. We had two back to back deployments. When you get back from a deployment, that's when the skilled people [depart]. At that time, that's when he was no longer just a supervisor, but someone I go always go back to for guidance and wisdom. I wish more people had that relationship. I can just call him and talk about things like my PCS, and what are things I should know for my next assignment? He will literally drop what he's doing and line things up for me: "Look at this, read this, study up on this, blah blah."

His second story took place when he had just moved into a new unit as a result of disciplinary troubles in a previous platoon:

For W, it was different. He was a mentor from the day I met him. He became our platoon sergeant shortly after our first deployment in 2003/2004. He just wanted people to be better. He let us learn from our own successes and failures. I really respected that. He gave us autonomy. I can't thank him enough. As a young sergeant who had gotten in trouble, he asked me: "OK. You stepped on your crank. What are you going to do now?" so he wasn't going to hold that against me. From Day 1, he said: "Your actions in the past don't define

you. What happens now defines you." From Day 1, he was less of a supervisor and more of a mentor to all of us.

The fact that SAMUEL can have such different mentoring relationships with two different supervisors underscores just how much variation there can be in chain of command mentoring relationships. I asked SAMUEL to reflect on how the combination of those relationships affects his work as an NCO.

His response:

SAMUEL: From the NCO perspective, I'm the adopted love child of those two. Even though I might be tearing somebody apart, [that Soldier] knows that at the end of the day, I'm also going to bring them back up. I want that Soldier to trust that, at the end of the day, I'm there for their overall developmental well-being.

### The Mentor in the Chain of Command

NCOs who served as mentors to their subordinates echoed many of the above perspectives. They saw themselves as connecting deeper with those subordinates because of individual needs:

CATHY: Every time we would do a PT test or a PT session, I would see J shy away. When we do PT, you know when someone is giving 100%. When I would look over at her, she wasn't always giving her all. I thought: *OK, so what's the problem? Was it a profile?* We talked, and it was her



struggles of never really being a physical fitness person and now coming into the military.

CATHY emphasized the difference in this approach from others that she'd taken. Because she did not have a sense that the Soldier was deliberately shirking her duty, she sought a better understanding of what was going wrong.

Other supervisors felt that that their deeper connections with some soldiers were part of a larger upholding of standards. They stressed that not every Soldier is at the same level of development, so supervisors must be willing to vary their levels of engagement:

EDGAR: With H, everyone knew, if I invested a lot of time in a soldier, it's because they weren't living up to their potential. That just goes back to my leadership style. If I see someone doing well, I'm going to give them those words of affirmation, of encouragement. But if I see you messing up and not living up to your potential, I'm going to say something to address it. All of my soldiers knew that just because I was invested in one individual, it wasn't because I was picking favorites, but because I expected higher standards of all my soldiers.

EDGAR believed that showing a deeper level of commitment to Soldiers who were in need of development and willing to accept the help highlighted his commitment to the unit as a whole.

One of the most challenging cases in this category was EVAN, who related a story of being a mentor to his platoon leader while serving as the platoon sergeant. This juxtaposition of mentor actions placed against command responsibility probably feels very jarring; it certainly was to me. But as we discussed it further, I became convinced by EVAN's argument:

EVAN: When mentoring someone who's your supervisor, the biggest thing there was the initial introductions to one another, sitting down and talking. We fleshed out roles and responsibilities, who's in charge, the formal and informal relationships that were established. I told him: *Yes, you're in charge, but we are here as a team and if the platoon fails, it's due to both of us.* That's where the foundation was laid... We'd learn as we go. We'll build off of each other.

Remember, the only thing that truly distinguished mentor from protégé is the difference in experience. That difference certainly existed in this case, and was underpinned by the mutual trust and respect present between platoon leader and platoon sergeant. That doesn't mean that every relationship that has those components will blossom into a mentoring relationship. It just means we should be open to the possibility that it can.

## Playing Favorites?

The intimate nature of mentoring relationships inevitably leads to concerns about perceptions of favoritism. The NCOs in this study were adamant that their mentoring relationships in the chain of command did not constitute preferential treatment. One way of avoiding that perception was to ensure that the conduct of the relationship always remained in professional bounds:

CATHY: Your presence and your attitude goes a long way. I always treat them all as my soldiers and I'm their supervisor. Even when I'm the protégé and you're my mentor, I'm always going to treat them professionally. It's a two-way street: I'm going to keep it professional with you, you're going to keep it professional with me. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable and I don't want to feel uncomfortable. [Acting unprofessionally] makes our relationship awkward, makes me not give you the full potential I know I can give to help develop you. At all times, I kept it professional and respectful.

FRED: [With my protégés], it was never on a personal level. I never hung out with them. I might invite them to my house, but that was it. I was always fair. I treated everyone exactly the same. In the back of your mind, you look and wait for this specific person to do or say something [that shows their potential as a protégé.]

In some cases, the fact that a protégé was seen as a hopeless case or a lost cause helped mitigate any perceptions of favoritism.

EDGAR: With B, so many people had already written him off. They said: "He's done, he's going out. EDGAR has a good heart." Because of that, no one perceived our relationship as favoritism. Because of that, it really only came full circle when he was getting promoted ahead of his peers and pinning on stripes. Suddenly, the other soldiers kicked themselves and said "That could have been me if I had buckled down and listened." But nothing to the extent of "that's his favorite."

NCOs also stressed the importance of equal opportunity for Soldiers in their chain of command for developmental opportunities.

FRED: To avoid favoritism, you've gotta give everyone a fair chance and the same amount of attention. With all of these three [protégés], I didn't just focus attention on them. I gave the same attention to everyone else on the team. All of my team leaders, they had the same amount of time with me as anyone else. That's where people make that mistake.

DIANA took this one step further, making sure that there was no perception of unequal treatment to units:

DIANA: Certainly there were times when I was concerned about perceptions of favoritism to my protégé. I think it was important to treat the units overall fairly, and make sure that the units were treated the same. I had to make sure that Z's unit wasn't either more positively or more negatively affected. My commander and I probably rode them harder than anyone else, because Z and his commander were a pretty strong command team [and were more capable.] We certainly had good relationships, but he would come in and argue with me, while the others were more hesitant to do so.

## So Why Does it Happen?

Maddeningly, we are still no closer to understanding why some chain of command relationships become mentoring pairs while others do not. Perceived similarity certainly plays a role, just as it does in mentoring engagements outside of the chain of command. It's also fair to say that the closeness of a supervisory relationship provides more opportunities for potential mentors and protégés to see desired qualities in one another. More than anything else, it appears that supervisory relationships become something more when the perceived similarity and desired qualities are supplemented by desire. In this case, desire means a willingness of the mentor and protégé to actually deepen the relationship. Often, that desire is driven by something the protégé admires personally about the mentor, as opposed to professionally. It feels appropriate here to let two NCOs have the last word:

DIANA: Z and I had some conversations about [that others didn't see me as a mentor.] He used to tell the other 1SGs, "Go talk to her! She's not an ogre. Go argue your point." I don't know, maybe I wasn't being as approachable as I thought I was, but certainly he would approach me. It was

always my intent to have them come. There would be a few takers, but not often.

JAMES: I'm not sure how to distinguish between a supervisor's obligation to develop subordinates and mentoring. I'm not sure if a senior leader is mentoring me because they have to or because they want to. But I would imagine that being a leader and mentoring someone, you'd mentor them because you want to, not because you have to. You're out there to mentor these people, you want to see them succeed and you want to see them progress in their careers, lead them to where they want to go in life... As a junior enlisted or senior enlisted, for my seniors, I could just feel it when someone walked, talked, and wanted to help me out and be genuine and wanted the best for me. I could just feel it. It had that feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond A. Kimball, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring* (West Point, NY: The Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, 2015), 121.

## Chapter 7: Peer and Networked Mentoring

EVAN: I think there's an inherent flaw in how mentorship is seen from a military perspective, that [your mentor] needs to be senior to you. I looked to the left and right [for mentors] because I saw experience and had trust in the people to the left and right of me. It wasn't that I didn't have that trust in the ones above me, but the ones above me weren't ones that I really needed to go speak to about certain things, certain topics. I would get what I needed from [whom] I needed it when I needed it.

As I've already noted earlier in this book, the Army has a persistent challenge in confusing mentoring with other forms of individual personal development. The *coachteachmentor* phenomenon is pervasive and frequently unhelpfully blurs the lines between counseling, coaching, and mentoring. So it's with some hesitancy that I now introduce the ideas of peer mentoring and networked mentoring among NCOs. The fact of the matter is, the traditional mentoring pair just doesn't do justice to the different ways that NCOs engage in mentoring.

Some of you are no doubt saying, "How is peer mentoring even a thing? Someone has to be senior and someone has to be junior." Again, the definition of mentor and protégé is really important here: the sole difference between the two is

**experience**, not rank or age. Because of the wide range of experiences among peers, it shouldn't be hard to think of situations where two peers have varying levels of experience in different areas. Back in Chapter 1, I discussed the phenomenon of mutuality, where mentoring pairs swap the roles of mentor and protégé back and forth depending on the specific issue. If you keep the idea of mutuality foremost in your mind, then peer mentoring becomes a lot easier to grasp and understand.

Networked mentoring is a close cousin of peer mentoring, since the whole purpose of networked mentoring is to help a protégé access multiple perspectives on a single problem. While it is not inevitable that one of those perspectives comes from a peer, it is also not hard to see how that would increase the utility of networked mentoring. In a networked mentoring relationship, protégés reach out to multiple mentors that they see as having specific knowledge or experience that is relevant to a problem. Networked mentoring therefore implies that protégés maintain several mentoring relationships simultaneously. With those



definitions now out of the way, let's see what our NCOs had to say about these two distinct, yet related, phenomena.

### Why Peer Mentors?

Less than half of the NCOs I interviewed described themselves as having peer or networked mentoring relationships. When asked about the gap, those without these kinds of relationships indicated that they'd never thought of it as a possibility. None of them were vehemently opposed to the idea of peer mentoring; it simply didn't cross their mind as an option. This is an interesting difference from the officers I interviewed in my previous book: half of them described themselves as having a peer or networked mentoring relationship. Of those who didn't have such a relationship, a few of them were adamant that peer mentoring simply didn't exist.<sup>1</sup> I'll explore further why that might be at the end of the chapter.

NCOs who had experienced peer mentoring saw it as a necessary supplement to traditional mentoring. In their mind,

peer mentors could provide insights and input that a traditional mentor might struggle with:

JAMES: A peer mentor gives it to you more straightforward, more of an informal way, not really using tact when it comes out in an open dialog. A senior mentor, depending on who it is and depending on how close you are, may have more of a formal and tactful way of giving you that mentorship.

NCOs also saw peer mentoring as a way to compensate for an inevitable lack of available mentors among senior leaders:

EVAN: When you think about a pyramid effect, the amount of senior leader mentors as you move up the chain is going to get smaller and smaller as you go. This translates from the E4/E5 range all the way up the spectrum: The amount of leaders there for mentorship versus the number of people seeking it, as well as the [number of protégés] they're willing to take on.

To further draw out EVAN's point: a Specialist or a young Sergeant has many people senior in rank to seek out as mentors. In contrast, the most senior First Sergeant only has Sergeants Major to draw from in terms of NCO mentors.<sup>2</sup> Those Sergeants major must in turn manage attention from junior and senior NCOs alike.

A fascinating common thread among NCO peer mentoring engagements was that they all seemed to emerge from specific challenges that outstripped the NCO's ability to cope. The formation of the peer mentoring relationship was driven less by a specific quality that one individual saw in another and more by a specific need. This isn't inconsistent with other mentoring practices, but it is different in that perceived similarity was no longer the main driving factor. To put it another way: peer mentoring relationships among NCOs seem to be formed first by need and then by finding the right person to meet that need.

For WYATT, the need that drove his peer mentoring relationship was participation in the Army's Best Ranger competition. This grueling test of military endurance and skill draws competitors from all across the operational and institutional Army.<sup>3</sup> WYATT's participation in Best Ranger was transformative, not only for the experience itself, but for the bond it forged with a peer mentor:

WYATT: I had done Best Ranger the year before. He had that recent experience, knew how to train. That's important, so you don't waste time training on things you don't need. Every effort is well-spent for this grueling event that you're

getting ready to do. We paired together for the competition. As I got to know him, I realized what a solid character he was, in terms of legal, moral, ethical experience, a solid NCO. Now I was learning from a peer, but in my estimation, he was ahead of me on a lot of things and it taught me a lot. On top of his awareness of how to train, he just emulated this superior leadership role model that I latched on to.

WYATT directly attributes his engagement with T and other Best Ranger competitors as driving his decision to seek out a Special Operations assignment.

Another transformative experience cited by NCOs as conducive to peer mentoring was service as a drill sergeant. We've already discussed in previous chapters how the new perspective and increased responsibility of being a drill sergeant drove NCOs to seek additional assistance. For two of the NCOs I interviewed, service as a drill sergeant specifically moved them to seek out mentors among their peers.

DIANA: When I was on the trail, [my peer mentor] was in a sister company and he was the senior drill sergeant. He was a little ahead of me, but not as much as H. He was closer to a peer, even though we weren't peers. But there wasn't a huge difference in the mentoring. It was more of my own sense that I was closer to where he was. I didn't feel as much like a protégé, but definitely I was looking to him for advice.

We'll revisit DIANA's comment above ("I didn't feel as much like a protégé") at the end of the chapter.

JAMES's peer mentoring experience had a similar impetus as DIANA's, but took a slightly different form. Whereas DIANA found one peer mentor through her time as a drill sergeant, JAMES found several:

JAMES: I definitely consider my drill sergeant buddies peer mentors. They're the ones who go through the same thing you're going through day to day. They may have certain experiences that you can learn off of, just like you have certain experiences they can learn. You key off each other, help each other out. If you know one is down one day, then you go pick him up: *Take a breather, I got this. Go do something else, I got you.* You help each other out.

Note how JAMES's peer mentoring experience encompasses both the career functions of specific tasks and the psychosocial functions of mutual emotional support. JAMES was able to get to get a broad range of mentoring benefits from a peer. He was also able to tap into a mentoring network, the subject of our next section.

## Networked mentoring

Networked mentoring is a *de facto* acknowledgement of an inherent truth of individual development: solutions that worked well for one individual don't always work well for someone else. This deceptively simple truth means that a single mentor cannot possibly meet all of a protégé's needs, because the mentor is shaped by their own experiences. WYATT talked about how his vision of mentoring drove him to a network:

WYATT: The protégé is looking for someone who appeals to them in how they carry themselves and what they do. Maybe it's a perception of how that person might help you develop. If I do a self-assessment and decide I'm weak in these area and need help, who has the right stuff and is approachable to go to? ...I certainly found several of these senior NCOs who were very approachable to me. I could go to them at different points in my career, when something happened. You build that short list, that handful of people that [you] can go to with anything.

The experience of networked mentoring can vary greatly depending on how aware the mentors are of one another. When networked mentors know about each other and their relationship to the protégé, they can have synergistic effects. FRED discussed how two different sets of networked mentors had different impacts on him at different points:

FRED: At the beginning, I had so many mentors because how I was. I was getting in trouble and I was a project for them. Then it was just how I grew, my personality, how I saw the military and how I conducted myself. That was all because of their influence on my career... Everything they taught me, their influence, how they conducted themselves, and those folks got me to where I am.

...

H and F were by far the best First Sergeant/Commander combination I ever had, when I was a company FSNCO.<sup>4</sup> I worked with them on a daily basis, we did a lot of stuff together and they were great mentors. Every day, they took time out to sit with me and talk with me. They gave me room to grow and do my own thing. That, to me, was awesome and amazing. [They were] great people to work with.

FRED stressed that this networked approach had a significant impact on his leadership style:

FRED: I'm not the type who just gives people stuff to do. I'm the type to do stuff together. I'm a team player. I'll never had soldiers digging by themselves, I'm always there with a shovel next to them. I think they respect me for that...I think you get better results [that way] as opposed to barking orders all day and using your rank and position.

When networked mentors aren't aware of each or aren't deliberately working in concert, the protégé has to take a more active role in managing what they get out from the network. This requires a significant amount of self-awareness on the part of the protégé:

SAMUEL: Between those three, you had very different approaches. S, very personable. W, always willing to help others, being compassionate. V, the polar opposite of compassionate, standards and discipline based, mission first. He always said: “When you're aggressive, your aggression is going to breed your safety and security. Always keep your foot on the pedal.” Between those three leaders, that's who I've gotten my philosophies from, especially the farther I've gone in service. There's similarities, like all three stringently enforce standards and expect the same performance out of everybody. But their approaches were all very different.

Even when networked mentors are in physical proximity to each other, it may still fall to the protégé to coordinate the network:

EVAN: The S3, B (the S3 Sergeant Major), and the other officers in the S3 I worked with all contributed [to my mentoring.] Having that job, that experience, opened my eyes to battalion operations. It was informal relationships established there, no real formal relationships. But [that network] was able to guide me through why things happen and the networking that drives military operations.

Reading the above quote, it is easy to dismiss EVAN's observation by noting that a staff section is networked by design. EVAN's point is that his network of mentors went beyond the provision of simple staff support. He saw them as guiding and shaping him in a way that exceeded normal professional development.



In some cases, NCO utilization of a mentoring network was driven by a specific need or needs. For one NCO, his mentoring network was a means to address unusual issues or requirements:

ROBERT: I would tap into my mentoring network for the unusual stuff. We needed a script for an NCO induction ceremony, which we hadn't done in a long time. I was looking for products on that. There's a lot of videos out there, but no scripts. I was looking for a good solid product that I could make ours. I reached out to a group of folks who had talked about it at one time, and sure enough, got some good guidance on it. [I used it for] that kind of non-standard thing.

Another NCO made herself part of a network specifically to help her protégé:

CATHY: When I was mentoring F, B (my mentor) was over both of us and F was my soldier. B and I had just met F, because we departed Korea together and came into the unit with new members of the company. We didn't know F, and had to find out from other NCOs over him how he was. *Why hasn't he made E5?* Soldiers will tell you "I didn't make it because this person didn't like me" or other stuff. But we talked to supervisors and got that feedback: "No, he didn't make it because he was flagged, didn't do good on PT, or was just an average soldier who just wanted to stay and not progress." I needed to figure out what was going on, why he was still a specialist.

### Rarity of Peer and Networked Mentoring Relationships

The reasons for the creation of peer mentoring and networked mentoring relationships beg the question: why aren't they more

common? If peer mentoring helps to alleviate a drought of potential mentors, why aren't more people seeking them out? If networked mentoring can help get beyond the limitations of a single perspective, then why didn't more NCOs in this chapter cite a networked approach?

DIANA's comment about her peer mentor experience may give us a clue: "I didn't feel as much like a protégé." What, exactly, is a protégé supposed to feel like? Many of us are grounded in a simple paradigm of mentoring: two individuals, one senior, one junior, engaged in an exclusive relationship. Relationships that don't fit this paradigm get classified as coaching or counseling. This would also help explain the persistent confusion over coaching, counseling, and mentoring, since all three share elements of that same paradigm.

Consider this chapter a challenge: rethink your developmental relationships beyond a simple pair. What potential mentors (and protégés) are you missing out on because of this narrow perspective? And what are the next steps you can take to further develop those relationships?

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond A. Kimball, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring* (West Point, NY: The Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, 2015), 139.

<sup>2</sup> We'll talk about officer mentors for NCOs in the next chapter. Be patient.

<sup>3</sup> "Welcome to the David E. Grange Best Ranger Competition", accessed April 9, 2018. <http://www.bestrangercompetition.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> FRED's status as a Fire Support NCO (FSNCO) is important here, because the FSNCO does not directly work for the company commander and first sergeant. Instead, he works for the company fire support officer, who in turn works for an artillery formation outside the company. Hence, FRED's experience here is classified as networked mentoring rather than supervisory mentoring.

## Chapter 8: Mentoring Across Identities

CATHY: My criteria for mentors doesn't have anything to do with ethnicity, it has to do with if you're driven. What are your goals? Are they in line with my goals? Our values are the same with the Army, so that's how I approach it. It just so happened that two of my mentors matched my ethnicity. I want to follow people that have drive, ambition, that want to go somewhere.

“We’re all *green* in the Army.” That phrase is often used to emphasize that there is no tolerance for discrimination in the Army. That is unequivocally a good thing. But we shouldn’t let intolerance for discrimination blind us to the fact that differences contribute to our diversity and our strength. We shouldn’t let our imperative to treat everyone fairly keep us from acknowledging that we all bring something a little different to the table. This chapter will focus on mentoring relationships that crossed over the most prevalent identity boundaries in the Army: ethnicity, gender, and the officer/NCO categorization. In doing so, hopefully it will prompt you to think about what diverse perspectives you might be missing out on.

## Cross-Ethnicity Mentoring

Of the ten NCOs interviewed for this study, three reported that they had not mentored or been the protégé of someone of a different ethnicity. All three indicated that they never really thought about that fact, or why that would be. All three also stressed that ethnicity did not play a role in their selection of mentors or protégés. They stressed that they felt drawn to mentors and protégés by virtue of performance or temperament, not because of a perceived similarity.

NCOs who had cross-ethnic mentoring experiences echoed the above statements. I've chosen to reproduce all of their statements here because of the remarkable similarity among them:

CATHY: Among my protégés, ethnicity made no difference. We are all in for the same thing, to accomplish the mission. They're my Soldiers...and I want them to be the best they can be. I want to train them the best I know how. I wanted to achieve greatness and I wanted to help them in every avenue I could to help them achieve greatness.

DIANA: I had one mentor of a different ethnicity. He's African-American, I'm White. The difference in ethnicity never impacted the relationship.

FRED: I'm Hispanic. None of my mentors were Hispanic, not one. I'm not sure why. I think it's just that I've never looked at life like that. I talk to everyone the same way: background, color, race, gender, it doesn't make a difference. I guess that's why; I've always just fit in. I'm straightforward, easy to get along with. There were never topics we couldn't discuss because of differences in ethnicity.

JAMES: Two of my protégés were Caucasian, the other was Hispanic. Honestly, it didn't impact the relationship. There's really no ethnicity impact; I won't hold back because of ethnicity at all. It doesn't matter if they're white, black, Hispanic, Asian, a person's a person.

SAMUEL: I didn't necessarily flock to a particular demographic. I think it's important to flock to different people, regardless of ethnicity.

I want to be clear here: just because they are similar in nature, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of these NCO's statements or suspect that they are somehow parroting an approved message. Instead, I suspect that their similarity reflects their internalization of the Army ethos in this respect.

A pair of NCOs did note some challenges inherent in cross-ethnicity mentoring relationships:

EDGAR: I do think there were barriers that we had to get around, and then we were fine. They were all Caucasian and I'm an African-American male, and they were taken aback that I didn't speak with slang, terminology from a hip-hop or similar environment. They would say, "Oh, EDGAR, you're not the typical African-American." Yeah, thanks for telling

me that. [Laughs] I think that preconceived notion of me as African-American, from Georgia, having a real country style of talking, all of that placed a barrier. But once they realized that I'm just a regular guy, that cleared a lot of the guesswork.

JOSEPH: I'll be completely honest, I never thought about the ethnicity of my mentors. [pause] Because me and [my mentor] are both Hispanic, sometimes we're making a joke or laughing together. The jokes I share with him wouldn't be understood by [another mentor]. Like it's something only Hispanics talk about, or in Spanish. But most of the time, I've never really thought about it.

These experiences suggest that, even given the remarkable progress the Army has made on overcoming ethnic strife, there is still a need to be aware of how ethnicity impacts how mentoring relationships are perceived. However, compared to other differences we'll discuss now, the impact of ethnicity on Army mentoring appears to be relatively small.

### Gendered Approaches to Mentoring

There was a significantly greater variation in cross-gender mentoring practice among the NCOs in this study. Three of the ten NCOs (not the same three discussed earlier in the Ethnicity section) reported having no cross-gender mentoring relationships of any type. Four NCOs reported having a Soldier of a different

gender as a protégé or as a mentor, but not both. The remaining three NCOs, which included both women in the study, stated that they had both mentors and protégés of a different gender.

The NCOs who had no cross-gender relationships all attributed to the lack of women in their units:

EDGAR: I never had any females at the company level until recently, 2014. Then I was at Brigade and worked with women in that staff...I relate it to my current job set, my current skill. Since there were no female combat engineers, there was no one to compare myself to: *Hey, she's good at her craft, let me aspire to be her.* That would then lead me to that person to help me understand who they are and what they're capable of. Since all of the women I was exposed to weren't engineers, I had blinders on.

ROBERT: It wasn't until 2011 that I was actually around a female soldier. That was my boss when I went to First Army. I was never in an integrated unit, I never had really any interaction with female soldiers until recently. I have a lot of different points of view about women in combat arms, but that doesn't matter. I'm working with a bunch of females now, and there's no issue. Everybody is a soldier and everybody has a job to do.

This outcome is very similar to what I saw in my previous study of officers: combat arms officers overwhelmingly lacked female mentors and protégés because they had no women in their units.<sup>1</sup>



NCOs with cross-gender experience as either a mentor or a protégé, but not both, had a mixed perspective on how those relationships differed from single-gender relationships:

FRED: The mentoring relationship with a woman wasn't really that different. It helped me understand how they experienced things as a woman. It helped me see how other people talked to them, how they respected them. That helped me on that aspect, especially given how many women are now in combat arms. That was beneficial for me. There was just no difference for me. We were very comfortable. If we had to talk together in a room, it was no issue. We deployed together, never any issues.

JOSEPH: The difference in gender with E didn't impact the relationship at all. It was just like I would talk to another NCO. It was all done in the S3 office. There was some personal conversations about things with her husband. I just tried to motivate her, find out what she was doing right or wrong, share my thoughts.

SAMUEL: That millennial generation [that my protégé belongs to], they generally don't care about race, creed, color, gender, religion. It's all about *Are you good at what you can do and can you perform?* That was something [my protégé] really hit on: "As long as I perform, people are OK with that."

Although the prevailing theme remains one of mission focus, there are some subtle indicators in the narratives above about gendered differences. Note JOSEPH's emphasis on conversations taking place in the office and FRED's acknowledgement of how his protégé "experienced things as a woman."

NCOs who mentored and were mentored by Soldiers of another gender had similarly mixed perspectives:

CATHY: There were never times that I couldn't engage a mentor because of gender. It was just more about what I respected about them. If we talked about something and they felt like they had a limited perspective as a male, I respected that. They would just say, "This is what I can tell you as a male. If you do this, this is the outcome. I can't say what the outcome is as a female."

JAMES: I would like to see mentoring less as gendered. I like to treat them all the same but I know often times I can't. You have to look at the individual person: one might be more emotional, one might be stronger in an area or weaker. You gotta put the gender aside and look at the individual person.

One NCO was very blunt that she saw her cross-gender mentoring status as a matter of professional necessity:

DIANA: All of my mentors are men because I just didn't find a female mentor. There are a couple women Soldiers out there that I certainly have great respect for. But I haven't had that many that I've been impressed by, that I thought would fulfill that role. Recently I've been more on the reverse, where I'm the mentor in that role with a couple of officers. There's very few women NCOs senior to me in my branch.

Both men and women acknowledged that there are very real gendered differences in mentoring practice:

JAMES: There are definitely gendered differences in practice, conduct of the relationship. If I have to bring a female Soldier into my office, I'll always leave the door open or I make them have a battle buddy, another female. If we need to shut the

door, they have a companion there and nothing's occurring. With a male, if I have them in the office I'll close the door and talk to them...Depending on the situation, I may or may not have that additional person or a fellow officer/NCO in the room.

CATHY: There's gendered aspects to mentoring. B's a female, same gender as me. I could be more personal with her, because she would understand from a woman's perspective where I'm coming from as a female soldier. There are just things that males don't understand when it comes to females being a soldier. And it's the same thing with me as a female: I can't understand everything about a male's experience.

The Army has put a great deal of effort into ensuring equal opportunity within the force for Soldiers of different genders and ethnicities. The narratives above reflect both the great results of that effort and the need to understand that some perception of difference is inevitable. One NCO's reflection on his lack of cross-ethnic and cross-gender mentors is important here, because it shows the power of reflection in understanding this essential truth:

WYATT: [None of my mentors were] were a different ethnicity or gender. They were all in my own image, so to speak. In [my organization], it's easy to have that happen. We do tend to look a lot alike. That's who finds their way there. All of the people who I've described for you, through all of those years... We all kind of look the same. [pause] Wow.

[pause] It hadn't dawned on me until you said that. It's an aspect that we don't think a lot about.

### Officer/NCO Mentoring Relationships

In contrast to the limited cross-ethnic and cross-gender experiences described above, every NCO interviewed had an officer as their mentor or protégé. The reasons for that relationship formation varied significantly though. In some cases, it was seen as essential to the career field:

CATHY: [In my branch], I do have to deal with officers a lot. Other branches, most of the time, the NCOs deal with enlisted and working with officers is rarer. So, for them to have an officer mentor is uncommon. But I deal with officers as well as enlisted all the time.

For others, it was about helping to better define the roles of officers and NCOs:

FRED: We like to set up boundaries: *This is an NCO duty, this is an officer duty*. But there should be no boundaries. There are things you'll do as an officer that I'm not going to take care of, and there's things that I'm going to do that an officer won't. But there should be no boundaries between us. If you want to come to PT, who I am to tell you not to be there? If I'm doing barracks inspection, who's for me to say not to be there? If you're doing MDMP, why not have me as part of it? It's about finding a balance where we can work together while finding those areas where we have to work individually. I think it builds on how you work together as officer and NCO.

Similar to other mentoring pair formations, personal attributes played a major role in the formation of mentoring relationships between officers and NCOs:

DIANA: For me, it was the quality of the officer. I'm an outstanding officer, someone I was interested in seeing do more. He was someone who could continue to excel and move forward in the Army and in [our branch.] Also, we're both from [the same state], so we had to stick together.

JOSEPH: S was very soldier-oriented. There's different kinds of officers and NCOs out there. Some of them will tell you, "I'm in charge, do as I say. Make it happen." He had the wisdom and the respect. He would tell you to do something and you would respect him so much that you would go make it happen to the best of your ability. Two things that set him apart were his attention to detail in [branch] operations and his ability to work well with his platoon sergeants...Everything that happened or needed to happen, they talked about it and put it together. They took the best advice from each other and made the plan to execute. It would always result in success.

NCOs felt that mentoring relationships with officers exposed them to a distinct set of benefits. Specifically, they thought that the officer perspective was often helpful in getting them to think more critically about certain topics:

EDGAR: When we hit those questions, with someone asking why we do this and not that, those are key times. I'll say, *Wow, that's a good question. I've been doing this for 18+ years, let's talk it through.* They get past "This is what the

SOP says. Execute." Instead, they ask good, thoughtful questions and you say, *Let's toss it around, let's talk about it.*

EVAN: They ask the question, one thing leads to another, and suddenly you've had an hour conversation about many different things. A lot of the time, the conversation steers towards the platoon leader/platoon sergeant relationship and what that looks like. Some of the biggest themes are: roles and responsibilities, clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

One senior NCO noted that his role as a mentor to a field-grade officer makes him think more critically about how his command functions:

WYATT: H has about a year until she takes command of a battalion. Occasionally, I think, *OK, what more can I do to help her out?* I think about how [my boss] and I do things, and I'll try to send her thoughts about how he does business. I am going through my days, my routine, my exposure, and looking for things to take out of this, even if it's not my experiences. And my boss is OK with that. As I go forward in my mentoring relationship, that's my role: look for little tidbits to share with H to keep her moving forward.

Some NCOs stressed that their officer mentoring relationships focused on different topics than their NCO relationships:

FRED: With officers, the topics were less on the personal side and more on the direct professional conversations. With the NCOs, it was a little bit of both. I think that's because that's how NCOs are, that we want to get into soldier's lives. It just depends on who it was. It's a tough one, because for

me, I felt comfortable with both NCOs and officers, at least the ones I'm close with. It could be both personal and professional with them.

DIANA: Some of the topics that I would talk about to NCOs and officers are different. I don't think there's strictly NCO business vs. officer business, but there are roles that we traditionally do. I wouldn't necessarily discuss those with an officer or seek out one of the officers for something in that realm...I would often talk to K on a more strategic sense. He had more time and a lot of time in DC, that kind of stuff. I would talk to him more about strategic-level stuff, how things were seen in big Army or the political aspects of it.

SAMUEL: The questions I would ask an officer mentor compared to an NCO mentor are not the same. [With an] NCO mentor, it's mostly going to be strictly professional. There might be more personal stuff in there, but at the end of the day, it's going to come down to what makes me a better senior NCO. With the officers, it's not about what would make me a better NCO, but what would make me a better leader. The questions are different. Going and asking those questions: I already know ahead of time, the kind of answers I'm going to get from a retired CSM as opposed to an O6, are going to be different. And I'm good with that - I don't want to get pigeonholed with questions, I want something that's different.

NCOs also noted that the physical practices and means of officer-NCO mentoring tend to differ from those of NCO-NCO mentoring:

SAMUEL: Officers seek mentoring out...An NCO would never come in and say "link me up with an NCO at West Point to be my mentor." I've never had that happen. But on the officer side, I've definitely had that happen. From the

officer side, it's sought out. From the NCO side, the relationship has to be developed first.

EVAN: The officers definitely put a different spin on things...It seems always that, from an officer perspective, [they ask]: "Why can't I do this? Why can't I do that?" From an NCO perspective, it's more about knowing the regulations that you have to work around, bringing it back down to reality. As I've grown up, I've seen the different sides of the officer-NCO relationship, what each side's views are on things. That's where the officer perspective played a role in opening my eyes, in not looking at things one-dimensionally.

JAMES: I wouldn't necessarily say officer and NCO mentoring relationships are entirely different. I would say that the means of delivery are different. NCO-wise, it's pretty much that face to face contact, it's the very informal communication. We might be having an NCO meeting at the local bowling alley and having a beer, just talking. Venting frustrations, talking about being a platoon sergeant, working with a new lieutenant. With an officer, you might be in an officer-type setting [such as an office.] It might be informal, might be formal, the situation dictates, but when I talk to officers for mentorship, it's in that officer environment.

Who's in YOUR relationship?

Far from "all being green", the vignettes in this chapter have hopefully illuminated just how much diversity and varying perspectives there are in the force. Similar to the challenge I gave you in the last chapter, I urge you now to think critically about your own relationships. How many of them look just like you? Why is that? What could you gain by expanding your mentoring



pool to encompass other identities? How can you do that?

Reflecting along these lines may help you see possibilities that you never knew existed.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond A. Kimball, *The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring* (West Point, NY: The Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, 2015), 154

## Conclusion

JOSEPH: Most of the time, NCOs, we are forced to mentor personnel. We say, *this is what you have to do, go do it* versus saying *I'm going to take you under my wing and make sure you're set up for success in the Army and life*. I used to do [the former] a lot and it started changing [when I got here.] Now I see the cadets, and I'm the only NCO, and I talk to them about how NCOs and officers work, but about life also.

Throughout this book, I've tried to capture the authentic stories of NCO mentoring as they experienced them. As I've done so, I've sought avoid a *judger* perspective in favor of a *learner* perspective. The difference between the two is subtle, but profound. The judger perspective is confident of what the **right** answer is and seeks to hold experiences against that standard. The learner perspective acknowledges the importance of professional standards while still leaving room for individual variations in experience. By doing so, the learner perspective seeks to more broadly comprehend what authentic mentoring experiences look like and how they shape an individual's development.

Keeping this learner perspective fully in mind, it is instructive to compare the aggregate experiences of the NCOs in the study

against those of the officers from my previous study. In doing so, I need to re-emphasize an important caveat from the start of the book: neither study's participants can be considered representative of their larger populations. In simpler terms, that means that just because you as the reader saw a particular behavior or activity in these study participants, you shouldn't necessarily expect to see it in another group of NCOs or officers. Instead, the comparison that follows should be considered as statement of what's possible in Army mentoring relationships.

### Similarities of Officer/NCO Mentoring

The NCOs and officers I interviewed both had remarkably similar benefits from their mentoring relationships. Both NCOs and officers uniformly gained career benefits from their relationships. Perhaps most strikingly, those benefits mostly manifested as helping them visualize different career paths and alternative job opportunities. There were almost no cases of a mentor directly intervening on a protégé's behalf to secure a desired position or "plum job." Psychosocial benefits also figured

prominently in the mentoring relationships of both officer and NCO study participants. Specifically, all of the Soldiers I interviewed felt that their mentoring relationships were valued sources of family advice, emotional regulation, and helpful means to think about life after the Army. These benefits didn't just accrue to the protégé: officer and NCO mentors alike saw real and tangible benefits from their time in that role.

Likewise, role modeling played a major and distinct role in NCO and officer mentoring for my study participants. Both groups drew inspiration for a wide range of possibilities from their mentors, seeing possibilities in areas they hadn't previously considered. Mentors helped protégés draw out shared visions of the future that were, at least in part, modeled after what the protégé saw as possible in the mentor. Finally, both officers and NCOs recognized human flaws in their mentors and sought to learn from those negative examples as well.

Both NCOs and officers experienced mentoring within the chain of command. This shouldn't come as a surprise: in the most recent quantitative study of Army mentoring, nearly 40% of

Soldiers reported having a mentor who was their immediate supervisor or otherwise in the chain of command.<sup>1</sup> However, both the NCOs and officers in my studies were extremely diligent to ensure that chain of command mentoring was in no way perceived as favoritism or special treatment. And in all cases but one, NCOs and officers made it clear that the chain of command was just one source among many for meaningful mentoring relationships.

On a more challenging note, both officers and NCOs reported similar challenges with cross-gender mentoring. Soldiers whose service primarily kept them in the traditional combat arms reported few to no opportunities for cross-gender mentoring. Both officers and NCOs attributed that shortcoming to the lack of opportunities for seeing Soldiers of different genders in a professional context. With women slowly beginning to enter previously closed fields, this disparity may soon begin to lessen. More concerning, however, is that NCOs and officers alike reported significant gendered differences in mentoring practice. Many of these differences were driven by worries about a

perception of inappropriate behavior with Soldiers of the opposite gender. With the removal of restrictions on lesbian, gay, and bisexual Soldiers, it is not yet clear if similar concerns will manifest about same-gender mentoring engagements held in private.

### Differences of Officer NCO/Mentoring

While the NCO and officer mentoring relationships studied had much in common, they also manifested significant differences. The following paragraphs will summarize those differences and pose some informed speculation as to why they exist.

While NCOs and officers alike drew on their mentors for career advice, NCOs seemed to draw disproportionately on their mentors for counsel relating to staff jobs and broadening assignments. In contrast, many officers emphasized how their mentors help them prepare specifically for command or platoon leader time. The answer may lie both in the common identity of each group and the importance of specific positions. Many NCOs

typically spend a significant portion of their formative years in rank-and-file positions within squads, sections and teams. Only after they become more senior are they called upon to perform staff and planning functions. Therefore, it is logical that they would seek out assistance in understanding how those functions work. It is also worth pointing out the disproportionate impact that platoon leader and company commander performance have on officer careers. As such, officers are incentivized to seek out mentoring support early for those positions.

Although both officers and NCOs used a variety of communications to supplement face-to-face interaction, NCOs seemed to be much more reliant on text and phone. Although many of the NCOs interviewed noted the utility of social media for staying in touch, they stressed that it was not as effective for meaningful engagement. The officers interviewed appeared much more willing to connect with mentors and protégés alike via popular social media sites such as Facebook. It is entirely possible that this is an artifact of my sample selection. The officers who participated in my study were all participants in

CompanyCommand.army.mil and PlatoonLeader.army.mil, the Army's online professional forums for junior officers. Positive professional experiences in those spaces may have made them more inclined to engage in meaningful dialogue elsewhere online.

Many of the officers reported that their mentor gave them significant support in professional writing, but not a single NCO mentioned professional writing as a mentoring benefit. Again, the answer here may lie in the expectations of each rank category within the Army. Professional writing among the Army officer corps is encouraged and seen as a mechanism for disseminating ideas rapidly around the Army. Until recently, there was no comparable push for NCOs. That is steadily beginning to change<sup>2</sup>, but NCO authors still significantly lag behind officer scribes in all of the Army's prominent journals.

NCOs interviewed in this study were less likely to have a peer mentor, but were also less likely to oppose the idea of peer mentoring. Almost a third of the officers I interviewed vehemently believed that peer development was not separate and



distinct enough from friendship or comradeship to warrant categorization as mentoring. In contrast, even NCOs who had no peer mentor were generally accepting of the idea of peer mentorship. Part of this may be linked to two unique roles filled by NCOs: recruiters and drill sergeants. In both jobs, NCOs are thrust into new environments with extremely low tolerance for failure and forced to rely on peers for support and assistance. It is hard to think of a comparable role for officers.

Finally, although many NCOs cited having officers as mentors and a few protégés as well, almost no officers indicated that they had NCOs as either mentors or protégés. Here, the gap is harder to explain. As the old saying goes, “every Soldier has a sergeant”, and that most definitely includes officers. Officers are exposed to NCOs throughout their careers, so it is unclear why officers would not necessarily have the same proclivity to select NCOs as mentors or protégés. This is an area that will probably need further study and specific questions to uncover more details.

## “Why Can’t I Find a Mentor?”

Because this book has dealt with wide variations on mentoring practice, it is probably most helpful to close by addressing people who feel left out of mentoring. First and foremost, it’s important that Soldiers without a mentor understand that they are not alone. *Develops Others* is consistently assessed as the lowest-rated aspect of leader development performed by Army leaders.<sup>3</sup> On average, one-third of Soldiers report not having a mentor at any given time. Therefore, a Soldier without a mentor shouldn’t consider themselves as abnormal, but should instead turn their thoughts to how best find a mentor that suits their needs.

To that end, one of the best things a potential protégé can do is self-assess what those needs are. Once a protégé can determine what they want to get out of a mentoring relationship, they can better identify people who might be able to provide it. Many Soldiers are familiar with the Multi-Source Assessment Feedback (MSAF) system, the 360-degree assessment required with Soldier evaluations. What many Soldiers do not realize is that the MSAF

is part of a larger suite of personal development tools available to Soldiers through the same website.<sup>4</sup> Even the often-reviled Global Assessment Tool can be a useful mechanism for identifying shortcomings or areas to be developed.

The next task is to find a mentoring *space*, as it is often easier than finding a mentoring *face*. Although it sounds trite, the fact is that trying to find the perfect individual for a developmental relationship can be very daunting. Instead, engaging in an area where Soldiers can see one another's attributes may be a helpful first step towards finding a mentoring partner. These may vary widely by installation: it may be a sports league, or a reading club, or a religious gathering. Soldiers should also be open to the possibility that perhaps the mentor they seek isn't in uniform at all. To that end, they can consider exploring options for mentoring spaces in the local community.

The hardest part of any mentoring relationship is making the initial connection. Once a Soldier has identified a potential mentor, they have to take the difficult step of asking. Take heart: the literature about potential mentors suggests that they may have

as difficult a time conceiving of themselves as a mentor as you did of thinking of yourself as a protégé. A protégé may find that a potential mentor is flattered and startled by the mere fact of being asked. That protégé can help make that process easier by simple steps like being clear about what they're seeking and using simple, unambiguous terms. There is bound to be some initial confusion and challenges; no one ever said this would be easy. But hopefully, the stories in this book and its predecessor have helped show you some of the possibilities in a mentoring relationship.

Mentors, none of the above lets you off the hook. Just as potential protégés are out there agonizing about how to find a mentor, you need to come to terms with the fact that you may need to make the first move towards a protégé. Some of that may feel arrogant, and imposter syndrome is a real possibility. This is especially true of potential mentors who never had any mentors themselves. But similar to my advice to protégés, mentors should take stock of what they have to offer and think about ways to make themselves available.

Whether you're an NCO or an officer, mentor or protégé, you have something to offer in a mentoring relationship. If you can figure out what that is, you can unlock doors and light paths that you might never have considered. I hope this book has shown you some of these possibilities. Happy mentoring!

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan P. Riley, et al, "2015 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Military Leader Findings" (Technical Report, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2016), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Crystal Bradshaw, "The Importance of Effective Writing in the NCO Corps", last modified September 22, 2017.

<http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2017/September/Effective-Writing/>

<sup>3</sup> Riley, et al, vi.

<sup>4</sup> "Coaching Request", accessed May 4, 2018.

[https://msaf.army.mil/\\_layouts/MSAF/coachingrequest.aspx](https://msaf.army.mil/_layouts/MSAF/coachingrequest.aspx)

## **Acknowledgements**

My sincere thanks to the ten NCOs who stepped forward to share their stories for this book. None of them had ever met me prior to this study, and their willingness to trust me based solely on my presented topic is an incredible affirmation of how seriously the profession takes this topic. I hope other NCOs will follow in their footsteps.

I greatly appreciate the support of the United States Military Academy at West Point in pursuing this project. The Office of the Dean provides an incredibly supportive intellectual environment for the pursuit of knowledge that advances the Army Profession. The Department of Military Instruction and the Brigade Tactical Department both gave me the opportunity to solicit participation for this book from their incredibly busy teams. And my team at the Center for Junior Officers provided me with the flexibility to structure my work schedule in support of writing this book.

I greatly benefitted from peer feedback on draft chapters of this book. Those individuals gave of their own time to provide pointed, candid commentary on both the NCO perspectives

presented and my take on them. All of the feedback made this book much better than it would have been on my own. My readers are, in alphabetical order: Adam Brady; Stephen Cunningham; Beth Ennis; Kelly Jones; Christy Keating; Joey Odell; Mandi Rollinson; Jonathan Silk; Anthony Soika; and Adam Szczypka. Any errors of fact or interpretation remain my own.

Finally, my thanks to my family, who shares their own mentoring stories and helps me see new possibilities.

Ray Kimball

May 2018

## **Afterword: Why a Self-Published Book?**

I ultimately chose to self-publish this book after multiple attempts to put it out through both official Army channels and academic publishers. I think you, the reader, are owed an explanation of why I chose this route. If you don't care, feel free to skip to the next section.

*The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring* was published under the auspices of the then-Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning (CALDOL), now the Center for Junior Officers (CJO). That route was not available for this book for a few reasons. As the name implies, CJO is tightly focused on service to junior officers. Although NCO development certainly falls within the purview of individual officers, it does not fall within CJO's organizational mandate. Also, I now serve as the Director of CJO. Publishing one of my own works under the Center's imprint seemed both ethically dubious and incredibly vain to me. And, truth be told, part of me liked the idea of publishing with an academic press.



Over the past year, I've sought publication of this text through both Army organizations and academic publishers. All of them declined for remarkably similar reasons. I list those reasons below not to denigrate those publishers or rebut their reasons, but rather to explain why I ultimately could not make the edits they sought.

*People will confuse this for doctrine. They'll think this is a new way to "do" mentoring.* The disclaimer at the front should be sufficient for this, but in case it's not... The Army's mentoring doctrine is both incredibly broad and accommodating of multiple approaches, as I explain in Chapter 1. It's certainly capable of accommodating a range of under-represented perspectives that don't often get voice in discussions on this topic.

*Readers want to hear your voice, not those of your NCOs. They want to hear from an authority on Army mentoring.* Nothing terrifies me more than the idea that I have become an "authority" on Army mentoring. Given the wide range of mentoring experiences in the Army, it is ludicrous to suggest that one individual can possibly speak authoritatively to them all.

Stripping out the voices of the NCOs who told me their stories would rob them of their context and the often-conflicting realities they present.

*It's too long. No self-respecting NCO is going to read something of this length.* Our NCOs are a diverse group, representing a wide array of skillsets and intellectual talents. Yes, this text is probably too long for some of them. It's probably too long for some members of the officer corps, too, but no one ever suggested that my last book was more than any self-respecting officer would read. If we truly want NCOs to be capable of operating in a multi-domain environment, then we need to give them intellectual challenges that bring them to that standard while still being meaningful and useful for them.

So that's why I self-published, dear reader. I hope you think it was worth it.

Ray Kimball

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Colonel Ray Kimball, EdD, is a career U.S. Army officer with over 20 years of service to the nation, including overseas tours in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and East Africa. Over the course of his career, he has served as a helicopter pilot, a history instructor, a strategic advisor, and a White House staffer. His academic credentials include Masters Degrees in History and Russian Area Studies from Stanford and his Doctorate of Education in Learning Technologies from Pepperdine. He currently serves as the Director of the Center for Junior Officers at the United States Military Academy, West Point, NY.