Counseling and Practicum

Cognitive Lesson Objective:
- Comprehend the role of the Air Force officer as a counselor.

Cognitive Samples of Behavior:
- Describe the traits of a good counselor.
- Identify the three counseling approaches: directive, nondirective, and eclectic.
- Explain the aspects of the three counseling skills: watching and listening, responding, and guiding.

Activity Statement:
- In the role of counselor, use appropriate counseling techniques while conducting a counseling interview in a simulated situation.

Affective Lesson Objective:
- Respond positively to the concept of developing and practicing effective counseling techniques.

Affective Samples of Behavior:
- Assert the importance of effective counseling skills.
- Practice using effective counseling techniques during practicum.
“If men can naturally and without restraint talk to their officers, the products of their resourcefulness become available to all. Moreover, out of the habit grows mutual confidence, a feeling of partnership that is the essence of esprit de corps.”

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Air Force has a continuing interest in improving the quality of counseling at all levels of supervision. Even at the lowest level of organization, problems arise that disrupt the performance of individuals and lower unit efficiency. Your subordinates’ problems become your problems when they adversely affect unit or mission effectiveness.

Counseling is the process whereby a qualified person purposefully assists another to better handle personal or work related problems. Counseling is not advice giving; instead, it's a cooperative activity between the counselor and counselee in an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding. Counseling is a skill, and as with any skill, it requires much practice.

When asked about their own ability to correct the behaviors of others, in a counseling environment, lieutenants, with fewer then three years of commissioned service, consistently rate counseling as one of their most difficult tasks. As a supervisor, you'll inevitably discover the importance of knowing how to counsel effectively whenever the need arises. Unfortunately, supervisors don’t always understand the purpose of counseling. Some use the counseling session as an opportunity to dictate their beliefs, while others use it as a social meeting without genuine regard for the problem at hand. Ideally, counseling is an opportunity for you to help your subordinates intelligently adjust to unfamiliar situations.

**TRAITS OF A GOOD COUNSELOR**

To successfully assist people in gaining a better understanding of themselves and their problems, a competent counselor should display certain traits and ethical values. Among these are sincerity, integrity, and the ability to be a good listener.

**Sincerity.** The successful counselor must be sincerely interested in the client and his/her problems. Insincerity is very easy for most people to detect, and it can seriously degrade the effectiveness of any counseling session.

**Integrity.** For a counselor, integrity of character is a fundamental trait. It's the quality of being of sound moral principle, upright, and honest. A counselee will be more likely to confide in a counselor of obvious integrity, feeling that this person isn’t likely to divulge a confidence.

**Be a Good Listener.** The ultimate objective of most counseling sessions can be achieved only if the counselee does most of the talking and the counselor does most of the listening. The counselor must listen attentively to what’s being said and must listen perceptively for what the client really means.
COUNSELING APPROACHES

There are probably as many approaches to counseling as there are counselors. Directive, nondirective, and eclectic are the three basic approaches to start while developing your personal counseling style. These approaches lend themselves to counseling requirements confronting military leaders. They differ in the techniques used, but are similar in overall objectives.

**Directive Approach.** This approach to counseling is *counselor-centered*. Directive counseling is a simple, quick approach to problem solving that provides short-term solutions. This approach assumes the leader has all the skills and knowledge to assess the situation and to offer useful courses of action. It utilizes clear thinking and reason and combines suggesting, persuading, confronting, and directing specific actions to obtain results.

*The leader does most of the talking*—this is one counseling situation where the counselor won’t be a good listener. They state the problem, identify the causes, offer explanations, and list the options available.

**Nondirective Approach.** This approach to counseling is *counselee centered*. The counselor requires the counselee to take responsibility for solving the problem. This approach is usually more relaxed and focuses on self-discovery, therefore taking longer than the directive approach. The role of the counselor is to help the person become self-reliant.

In this approach, the counselee has the opportunity to work solutions to problems through personal insight, judgment, and realization of facts. However, the counselee must understand and fully accept two basic rules.

- First, defensive attitudes must not prevent discussing the problems openly and honestly.
- Second, the counselee must understand they will be responsible for the problem-solving process and for the steps they select.

**Eclectic Approach.** Eclectic means, “selecting from various sources,” and is an approach in which the counselor uses parts of the directive and nondirective approaches. This allows the counselor to adjust the technique to emphasize what is best for all situations. The eclectic approach, which blends the counselor’s ability and personality to fit the situation, is the most frequently used.

This approach assumes that the counselee will eventually be responsible for planning and decision-making. The counselee will take charge of solving the problem but may need some help along the way. It allows both the counselor and the counselee to participate in defining, analyzing, and solving the problem. Still, the purpose is to develop self-reliant counselees who can solve their own problems. The counselor can be directive when
The counselee seems unable to make decisions or to solve a particular problem. The counselor may begin with the directive approach, then switch to nondirective when the discussion shows that a personal problem is the cause of the poor performance.

COUNSELING SKILLS

The most difficult part of counseling is applying the proper techniques to specific situations. To be effective, the technique must fit the situation, the leader's capability, and the counselee's expectations. In some cases, a problem may call for giving only information or advice. An improvement may call for brief words of praise. In other situations, structured counseling followed by definite action may be appropriate. A leader may learn one or two techniques, but still may lack the skills necessary to be an effective counselor.

All leaders should seek to develop and improve their counseling skills. Military leaders are trained to analyze a mission, identify the required tasks, and take action. Some of these skills apply to counseling. While leaders must not try to psychoanalyze their subordinates, they can use problem-solving and decision-making skills to guide their subordinates in solving their own problems. Counseling skills are developed by studying human behavior, knowing the kinds of problems that affect Airmen, and becoming good at dealing with subordinates. These skills, acquired through study and through practical application of counseling techniques, vary with each session. They can generally be grouped, however, as watching and listening skills, responding skills, and guiding skills.

Watching and Listening Skills

Watching and listening skills involve concentrating on what the counselee says and does. Thus the counselor can tell whether or not the counselee accepts what is said, understands what is important, and understands what the counselor is trying to communicate. Spoken words by themselves are only part of the message. The way they are arranged and spoken has meaning. For example, the counselor must try to recognize the amount and type of emotion expressed by a subordinate when describing his concerns or problems. This emotion provides a clue to determine whether the subordinate is discussing a symptom or the problem itself. The nonverbals such as tone of voice, inflection, pauses, rate of speech, facial expressions, etc., are all parts of the total message.

One important counselor skill is active listening. This means listening thoughtfully and deliberately to the way the counselee says things. While listening, be alert for common themes of discussion. A subordinate's opening and closing statements as well as recurring references may indicate the ranking of these priorities. Inconsistencies and gaps in the discussion may indicate that the counselee is not discussing the real problem or is trying to hide something. Often, a subordinate who comes to the leader with a problem is not
seeking help for that problem; rather he is looking for a way to get help with another, more threatening problem. Confusion and uncertainty may indicate where questions need to be asked.

The more the counselee talks the easier it will be to get to the root of the issue the counselee is dealing with. Let the counselee do the talking, stay with the topic being discussed, and avoid interrupting. As the counselor, you should speak only when necessary to reinforce and stimulate the counselee. Occasional silences may indicate that the counselee is free to continue talking; but a long silence can sometimes be distracting and make the counselee uncomfortable.

Another part of active listening is letting the subordinate know that you are concentrating, hearing, and understanding what is said (i.e., you are “getting the message”). Nonverbal behaviors that let the counselee know you are actively listening include the following:

• Eye Contact. Maintaining eye contact helps show a sincere interest in the counselee. This does not mean that the counselor should stare at the counselee. Occasional breaks of contact are normal and acceptable. Excessive breaks of contact, paper shuffling, and clock-watching indicate a lack of interest or concern.
• Posture. A relaxed and comfortable body posture helps put the counselee at ease. A position that is too relaxed or slouching may indicate a lack of interest. Being too formal or rigid makes the counselee feel uncomfortable.
• Head Nod. An occasional nodding of the head shows that the counselor is attentive; it encourages the subordinate to continue.
• Facial Expressions. To remain natural and relaxed is best. A blank look or fixed expression is disturbing. Smiling too much or frowning may also discourage the counselee from continuing.

While listening, the counselor must also be aware of the subordinate’s nonverbal behavior. These actions are part of the total message the subordinate is sending. Many situations involve strong personal feelings. By watching the counselee’s actions, the leader can “see” the feelings behind the words. Not all actions are proof of a subordinate’s feelings, but they must be watched. It is important to note the differences between what the subordinate is saying and doing. Some common indicators to watch for are:

• Drumming on the table, doodling, clicking a ballpoint pen, or resting the head in the palm of the hand all may display boredom.
• Self-confidence could be displayed by standing tall, leaning back with hands behind the head, and maintaining steady eye contact.
• The counselee pushing himself deeply into a chair, glaring at the counselor, and making sarcastic comments, may indicate hate and other negative emotions. Arms crossed or folded in front of the chest often show defensiveness.
• Frustration may be expressed by rubbing the eyes, pulling on an ear, taking short
breaths, wringing the hands, or frequently changing total body position.

• Moving toward the counselor while sitting may indicate interest, friendliness, and
openness. Sitting on the edge of the chair with arms uncrossed and hands open
may indicate either openness or anxiety.

Counselors should use these indicators carefully. Each counselee is different, and each
will react differently to a given situation. Further, although each indicator may show
something about the counselee, it’s important not to assume that a particular behavior
means something. More important, it’s better to ask the subordinate about the indicator
so that he can understand and take responsibility for his/her actions. This reinforces
individual responsibility for self, as well as providing credibility to the counselor.

Responding

Responding skills are a follow-up to listening and watching skills. From time to time,
the leader needs to check his/her understanding of what the subordinate is saying. The
counselor’s response to the counselee should clarify what has been said. Responses
should also encourage the counselee to continue. As part of active listening, responding
skills allow a leader to react to nonverbal clues that the counselee is giving. The counselor
can accomplish the act of “responding” by questioning, summarizing, interpreting,
informing, and confronting.

• **Questioning.** This is key to the counseling process. The what, when, who, where,
and how questions fit most counseling situations. When used properly, well-
thought-out questions can actively involve the subordinate in his own problem. But
a leader who asks a constant stream of questions is saying, “I’ll ask the questions,
you give the information, then I’ll tell you what to do.”

Questions that ask for answers in the counselee’s own words are more effective
than those causing a yes or no response. A counselee’s answer to “How do you feel
about being stationed here at Minot?” will give more insight into the subordinate’s
feelings than “Do you like being stationed here?” Similarly, “What do you think
needs to be done next?” will get a more useful answer than “Are you going to do
something about this?” Questions that begin with “why” tend to put counselees
on the defensive. If asked “Why were you late?” the subordinate is likely to give
some excuse rather than explain what the real problem is. The counselor can be
misled by the quick and defensive answers to “why” questions. Some examples of
effective counseling questions are:

• What would you like to have happened?

• When do you think you will be ready for the next step?

• How did things get to be like they are?
• **Summarizing.** This pulls together all the information the counselee has given. It is also a way for the counselor to check his understanding of what the counselee has said. Summarizing is done by restating the message in the counselor’s own words and watching the counselee’s reaction. This prevents the counselee from rambling on once a topic has been thoroughly discussed. It clarifies what has been said and stimulates further discussion.

The leader may summarize the content and feeling of the counselee’s statements at various times during the counseling session. Summarizing is helpful:

- When a topic has been exhausted.
- When the subordinate tends to ramble.
- When planning steps are appropriate.
- To check that the leader understands what was said.

• **Interpreting.** This is similar to summarizing except the leader gives the subordinate a new frame of reference or way of looking at something. Its purpose is to develop a total picture of the problem so the counselee can view the problem differently than before. The leader may suggest how others may view the situation. It is hoped that the counselee will better understand the nature of the problem and be able to deal with it.

• **Informing.** This is giving information that may help or change the subordinate’s views. The information may have come from what the subordinate has just said. The counselee can also be confronted with information provided by the counselor. The information may be needed by the counselee to continue or may be in answer to something he has asked the leader. Informing can also be used to show the subordinate his behavior may lead to further conflicts, trouble, and confusion.

• **Confronting.** This technique openly presents the discrepancies between the counselee’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. This is not a put-down, but rather, a formal confrontation, which assists in examining the defenses counselees use to avoid facing their problems. It helps to identify contradictions, rationalizations, excuses, or discrepancies. The counselor must convey non-judgmental, accepting attitudes when confronting the subordinate. Effective confrontations present the discrepancy between the counselee’s message and actions. Ineffective confrontation is accusatory, disapproving, and judgmental. This technique is quite appropriate when contradictions between the counselee’s statements and actions are evident. For example:

- A person claims it’s important to be physically fit, but is 20 pounds overweight.
- A supervisor proclaims his/her interest in subordinates, but never takes time to answer their questions or help them when necessary.
• A contradiction between what the client says and apparently feels
• A person acts angry and upset, but says he/she is feeling fine.

Guiding

• Guiding skills can add structure and organization to counseling. A leader uses problem-solving and decision-making skills to help the subordinate reach a solution. It is relatively simple to use these skills when using the directive approach. It is not so simple to guide the counselee through the process of examining the situation, setting a goal, and then figuring out how to reach it. The counselee should be led through the stops in such a way that he/she figures out what needs to be done.

INTERVENTION APPROACHES

We must make a clear distinction between situations in which a supervisor must intervene and those in which the supervisor may intervene or refer the client to another source of assistance. Considering the situations the supervisor must intervene, it’s important to recognize it is part of the supervisor’s job to be responsible for the quantity and quality of subordinate production. It logically follows that the supervisor should intervene in job-related problems. This is the “must” intervention and was studied in Corrective Supervision.

On the other hand, when a subordinate is productive at work but is experiencing personal problems, the supervisor may not have a clear-cut reason to intervene. The decision to intervene normally depends upon whether the supervisor has information that may be helpful or because the supervisor would like to help. These situations are the “may” or “can” interventions.

It’s important to distinguish between “must” and “can” interventions because the degree of supervisory involvement and responsibility is quite often proportional to the degree to which the problem affects the job. This does not mean that a supervisor is unconcerned about personal problems but the supervisor may or may not always be the most appropriate person to intervene in their solution. Other individuals or support activities such as the base chaplain or social actions office, may be better equipped to assist with personal or family problems.
THE COUNSELING PROCESS

The process consists of four stages: identify the need for counseling, prepare for counseling, conduct counseling, and follow up.

Identify the need for counseling. Aside from organizational policies which may dictate when a counseling session must be done, you may conduct a session when the need arises such as developing the subordinate. This consists of observing the performance, comparing it to a standard, and then providing feedback in the form of counseling.

Prepare for counseling. To prepare for counseling, do the following as much as possible: select a suitable place for the type of counseling you'll be conducting, schedule the time, notify the subordinate well in advance, organize your information, outline the session components, plan your strategy, and establish the right atmosphere.

You wouldn’t want to counsel someone on a personal problem with other people around. Do it in private as much as possible. Make the time conducive to both of you. Ideally, you don’t want to rush the session. If you are short on time, reschedule the session if possible. Let the subordinate know in advance on what you want to see them about. This helps alleviate their stress and may allow them to prepare as well.

• Organize information. Solid preparation is essential to effective counseling. Review all the pertinent information you may have. Remember, you are asking to see them—so you know why the session is taking place. Focus on specific objectives and attainable goals. Outline the session using information obtained. Determine what to discuss during the session. Note what prompted the situation, what you aim to achieve, and what your role is as counselor. Ask yourself questions the counselee may ask you so you can be prepared.

• Plan the session. Decide which approach you are going to use—directive, nondirective or eclectic. The reason for the session will largely dictate your answer. Remember, you may use all three types during the session.

• Establish the right atmosphere. This helps promote two-way communication. If possible, offer the subordinate a seat and possibly something to drink. Try to sit in a chair facing the subordinate and not remain behind your desk. However, if the situation is such that directive counseling will be used entirely, staying behind your desk might be the best location which enhances your authority.

Conduct the session. Be flexible! Good leaders take advantage of naturally occurring events to provide subordinates with feedback. Even when you haven’t had the chance to prepare for a formal counseling session, you should follow these components: open the session, discuss the issues, develop a plan of action, and record and close the session. Ideally, a session ends with the subordinate’s commitment to a plan of action.
• Open the session. You should state the purpose of the session and establish a subordinate-centered setting. For example, an appropriate statement might be, “The reason I need to talk to you is because your duty performance hasn’t been meeting standards.” You both need to understand the issues. You do this by letting the subordinate do most of the talking. Use active listening, responding, and questioning. Be specific about the issue as much as possible.

• Develop a plan of action. This plan identifies a method for achieving a desired result. It specifies what the subordinate must do to reach the goals set during the session. It shouldn’t end with, “I’ll study harder next week.” Rather, “Next week I’ll study three hours a day and focus on the samples of behavior.”

• Record and close the session. It is really up to you how you document the session. The important thing is to capture the crux of the session and the plan for resolving the situation.

• Follow up. Be sure to observe and document relevant events after the session. Determine if the desired results are being achieved. Reengage with the subordinate on the progress of the action plan.

COMMON COUNSELING ERRORS

Effective leaders avoid common counseling mistakes. Ineffective leaders dominate the session by talking too much, giving unnecessary or inappropriate advice, not truly listening, and projecting personal likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudices onto the individual. You should also avoid making rash judgements, stereotypes, loss of emotional control, and being inflexible in your methods. Remember, every situation is different and requires different methods. There is no “one size fits all” counseling method.

As a counselor, you must also realize when the session and situation is becoming more than you can handle. As much as you’d like to help the person, you are not a marriage counselor or a mental health professional. When you come into a situation that requires that kind of expertise, you must use a referral agency.

REFERRAL AGENCIES

The purpose of the referral should be clearly understood by the counselee. The counselor should describe as clearly as possible what may be expected from the referral resource and why the problem is being handled this way. Often a personal note or a telephone call to the agency can serve as an introduction for the counselee. This personal interest isn’t only courteous; it also serves as psychological support. The following referral agencies
can provide invaluable assistance in helping to resolve personal problems. The coverage is intended to be neither comprehensive nor fully definitive. The purpose is to acquaint you with the agencies and their functions and to encourage you to use them when necessary.

**American Red Cross.** The American Red Cross supports and supplements Air Force activities that affect Air Force personnel, and their family’s, health, welfare, recreation, and morale. The Red Cross:

- Obtains reports for Air Force members and their commanders to assist in making decisions concerning emergency leave and extension of emergency leave.
- Provides supplementary reports to the commander having final authority when he/she needs specific additional data to make decisions involving deferment, humanitarian reassignment, and dependency discharge.
- Consults with and guides Air Force personnel and their dependents on personal and family problems.
- Helps to provide information on various community resources that are available for legal aid, general medical care, or employment.
- Makes grants or loans, on the basis of need, for travel and maintenance expenses of Air Force personnel due to an emergency in the immediate family that requires the member’s presence (leave and financial aid must be approved by member’s commander before the Red Cross will make the grant or loan).
- Makes loans or grants needed for basic sustenance when allotments are delayed or interrupted or when emergency needs arise.
- Helps Air Force personnel and their families communicate with one another in emergencies.

**Personal Affairs Branch (Military Personnel).** The Personal Affairs Branch provides information concerning:

- Survivor assistance to the dependents of deceased service personnel.
- Retirement and separation rights and benefits.
- Insurance policies, companies, and salesmen.

**Mental Health Clinic.** Refer to the clinic for:

- Adjustment problems.
- Evaluation for administrative boards or hospitalization.

**Base Inspector General.** The Base Inspector General investigates complaints of military personnel and their dependents. Every effort should be made to solve problems within the unit prior to referral to the base inspector. The base inspector general is responsible for handling problems concerning:
• Allegations of forced payments of donations, memberships, etc.
• Disciplinary matters involving mass punishment, cruel or unusual punishment.
• Duties when inequities, partiality, or discrimination is claimed.
• Inadequate or too restrictive living conditions.
• Quantity and quality of food in dining halls.
• Discrimination.

Office of the Staff Judge Advocate. Refer to the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate for:

• Advice and assistance on cases where punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice is indicated.
• Advice on problems involving civil law.
• Tax problems.
• Wills and powers of attorney.
• Claims involving damage to household goods during transit and storage, and damage to private property by military personnel.

Chaplain. Refer to the chaplain for problems involving:

• Marriage.
• Conscience or a need for moral or spiritual motivation.
• Religion.
• Adjustment to service; e.g., homesickness.

Conclusion

Counseling is a crucial skill for every supervisor. It allows and encourages the supervisor to get to know his or her subordinates. When done correctly, counseling can greatly enhance a supervisor’s ability to help subordinates work through problems and become self-reliant. If counseling is done incorrectly, it can greatly compound the problem. If you cannot handle the situation, find someone who can rather than making matters worse.

This lesson reviewed the basics a leader needs to be an effective counselor and has laid the foundational knowledge in the art of counseling. However, developing and refining these counseling skills only comes from practice. The bottom line is that as an Air Force officer you will probably be tasked with counseling subordinates many times in your career. Consequently, it would benefit you tremendously to get the practice now, instead of being caught off-guard and lacking the adequate counseling skills when you need them most.
Bibliography: