

Providing Career Counseling

(For further information on Career Development and Counseling, log on to:
<http://www.usapa.army.mil/cpol/dapam690-43/dapam690-43.html>)



Effective career counseling techniques

The following tips will help you counsel employees more effectively:

Establish trust. Fundamental to the success of counseling sessions is the degree of open and honest communication between you and your employee. You must be honest with the employee. Make it clear that the organization cannot make promises to the employee. In the end, the employee's career progress will depend on organizational needs, the degree of the employee's commitment to grow and develop, and how well the employee's strengths match organizational staffing needs. Employees may hesitate to talk candidly about career aspirations if they sense a lack of sincerity and honesty on your part. Initiate a climate of trust, warmth, openness, and support to encourage growth.

Play the appropriate role. Your role during the counseling session may differ from other roles you play in relation to your employees. During these meetings, you are acting as an adviser and partner in the career development process. You should downplay your role as performance evaluator, boss, or agenda setter.

Be an active listener. Listen to understand. Look for nonverbal clues to help interpret what is being said. Be alert to fluctuations in voice, hesitations, or other evidence of how an employee feels about what he or she is saying. One technique to help clarify these messages is to restate, rephrase, or give feedback about what you hear the employee saying.

Preparing for the counseling session

In preparing for the counseling session, the supervisor should do the following:

- a. Review the employee's records (Resume', DA Form 2302 (Civilian Career Program Qualifications Record), performance appraisal, IDP, etc).

- b. Develop session objectives (identify main issues, problems, goals, and motivations).
- c. Develop tentative counseling questions based on the stated objectives and anticipated employee responses to these questions. The following questions are useful:
 - (1) What are some of the knowledges and skills you are currently using on the job?
 - (2) Do you have any other knowledges and skills that you have developed, yet do not use?
 - (3) Could these be integrated into your current job?
 - (4) How could your goal fit into the Army's goals?
 - (5) What would you like to be doing in 1 year, in 2 or 3 years, and in 5 or more years?
 - (6) Do you think these ambitions will require further training and development, or will they involve off-the-job activities?
 - (7) How does your current job relate to your career goals? (Applies if employee has developed goals; alerts you to the need for goal setting if the employee has no answer. Prepare to help the employee develop a complete and realistic appraisal of all past work experiences and then relate them to future job goals.)
- d. List relevant personnel issues and programs, for example, mobility, Career intern program, methods of development, referral system, training resources, and knowledge of occupations within and outside the career program.

Initiating the counseling session

At the beginning of the session, you need to set the climate and atmosphere. This consists of greeting the employee by name, making him or her feel comfortable, and establishing the initial relationship and rapport. Encourage the employee to do most of the talking and thinking. The following are possible lead-ins to start the session:

- a. What would you like to get from this session?
- b. Is this your first counseling experience?
- c. Where would you like to start?
- d. Go right ahead.
- e. How can I help you?
- f. "Last session I noticed you said"... NOT: "What is your problem?"

Conducting the counseling session

Engagement. This can be achieved by stating the objectives of the meeting and identifying the main issues and problems to be discussed. Keep the employee "on the subject" during the session. Be an attentive, empathic "sounding board" for the employee.

Exploration. At this point, you are exploring whether or not identification of career goals has occurred. If the employee has not developed career aspirations or goals, then career guidance is

the type of counseling the employee may need. Indications that necessitate career guidance for an employee are as follows: the employee is just beginning to think about a career, the employee has little awareness of careers that may be satisfying, the employee is unaware of some of the consequences that accompany career changes, the employee lacks a thorough knowledge of what knowledges and skills need to be developed, or the employee possesses limited knowledge about what knowledges and skills are required in particular jobs.

If the employee has an established career goal, then the employee needs counseling on career development planning. In this case, the employee has made some career decisions and is ready to set specific development goals. Indications that the employee is at this level are as follows: a general awareness of the career area or desired job, identification of developmental experiences that will help his or her career, desires necessary experiences that provide proficiency as rapidly as possible in a new job, and knows what types of knowledges and skills are utilized on the present or future job.

Use effective counseling techniques

- a. **Phrasing questions.** One of the easiest ways to cut off any conversational flow from the employee is to ask a question that can be answered "yes" or "no". For example, the question, "So you want to start a new career?" is far less productive than the question, "How did you happen to think of starting this new - career?" This in turn may not be as effective as, "Tell me what you have in mind when you talk about starting a new career." Questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no" or some similar terminal statement should be avoided.
- b. **Considering past experiences with career counseling.** Many employees will have been counseled many times before. These employees will be comparing you with other counselors or supervisors they have known, good or bad, and providing you with their interpretations of what other counselors or *supervisors* have told them. At times, it will be necessary to ask employees what others have told them so that you will not be working at cross purposes.
- c. **Distributing talking time.** Many employees being counseled find it difficult to state what they mean concisely. Do not be in such a hurry that you talk over the employee who is fumbling for a word. A frequent error of inexperienced counselors is to put words into an employee's mouth, talk faster than the employee, or to take the conversation away from the employee. Granted, in directive-style counseling sessions, such as discipline or performance evaluation sessions, it may be necessary to "carry the conversation." However, in career counseling, most of the talking should be done by the employee.
- d. **Showing acceptance of employee attitudes and feelings.** At various points in the session, the employee may be trying to express the more deep-seated attitudes and feelings that control his or her behavior. Most of us do not find it easy to put into words some of our more private attitudes, resentments, conflicts, and uncertainties. The employee may also fear that you will not approve of what is said. You must indicate acceptance to the employee by not passing judgment on feelings and attitudes. For example, merely saying, "I see," or "I understand," or "yes," will serve to bridge the conversational gap and keep the employee

talking. Another effective method for handling such situations is to mirror the feelings and attitudes of the employee by paraphrasing what the employee just said.

- e. **Avoiding the appearance of cross-examining.** Do not fire questions at the employee rapidly. Counseling is not a cross-examination. When it is necessary to take notes or fill out a form, try to spread out the information-seeking chore throughout the session. Try phrasing questions neutrally. This prevents raising the stress level of the employee.
- f. **Handling silence during counseling.** Most people are embarrassed if no conversation is going on. Silences seem long and endless. The employee may be groping for words or ideas, or you may be studying an earlier bit of conversation. Do not be frightened if silence occurs during counseling. Do not fill the space with idle chatter that can break the trend of thought or interrupt the flow of feeling. If it becomes necessary to break a silence, ask the employee to tell a bit more about the point he or she has just made. This will give the employee a chance to begin talking again. Also, silence on your part can be used to keep the employee talking.
- g. **Admitting your ignorance.** If the employee asks questions for which you have no answer, you should say, "I do not know" rather than answer with vague generalities or in some other way try to cover up your ignorance. The employee will have more confidence in you if you do not hesitate to admit your ignorance. Because you do not know does not absolve you of the responsibility to obtain the necessary facts and pass them on to the employee.
- h. **Keeping vocabulary simple.** Attempts to dazzle the employee with your verbal dexterity will do little to resolve his or her problems. Thus, you should make every effort to determine the verbal ability of the employee being counseled. Why say, "He carefully eliminates all nonfunctional, incremental software, eschewing any conglomeration of flatulent garrulity, jejune babblement or coalescent inconsistency," when what is really meant is, "He keeps it simple and easy to understand?"
- i. **Avoiding the personal pronoun.** Beware of the personal pronouns "I" and "me." Their overuse can discourage the employee. The employee is really not interested so much in the supervisor's opinions and experiences as in trying to formulate his or her own opinions and ideas.
- j. **Limiting the number of ideas for each session.** Beware of information overload. Just as there is the danger of giving the individual a runaround, there is an equal danger in overloading the employee with so many ideas that he or she will forget most of them. Avoiding exploration of too many ideas during one session is particularly important when the ideas deal with emotional attitudes and feelings.
- k. **Probing too deep.** It does little good if you encourage the employee to "tell all." If, by over-sympathetic attention or excessive curiosity, the supervisor tricks the employee into saying too much about his or her feelings, the employee may leave with little likelihood of ever returning. The employee may feel guilty and ashamed at having exposed himself or herself.

- l.* **Controlling the counseling session.** If counseling is to lead to results that will change the employee's behavior, then you must keep control of the situation. This does not mean that you should dominate the flow of information, but you may have to pull the employee back from conversational side trips, fruitless arguments, or unsolvable problems. Expressions like, "We were talking about..." or "What was it you said... ?" or "How does this fit in with what you said earlier... ?" will serve to bring the conversation back on path. Set forth specific subjects for the employee to discuss and explore.
- m.* **Follow accepted do's and don'ts.** The information below provides some accepted do's and don'ts that should be adhered to during counseling sessions.

Closing the counseling session

Bring the session to a satisfactory end, wind up loose ends, make final summary remarks, make a list of followup activities, and clarify important points.

Followup after the counseling session

This includes necessary postsession activities such as writing a summary letter or memo, documenting the session results, processing papers, making decisions or recommendations, and arranging for a followup meeting if appropriate. Ask yourself the following questions:

- a.* Did the employee appear motivated and encouraged?
- b.* Was a good rapport established?
- c.* Was employee's knowledge of opportunities and self increased?
- d.* If the counseling session was not productive, was it due to a lack of preparation, differences in personality, or problems in communication? If a conflicting situation arises, consider delegating your counseling role to another individual.



Counseling “Do's and Don'ts”

Do

1. Collect and review information before the career counseling session.
2. Give the employee notice of the meeting, specifying time and place.
3. Tell the employee how long the meeting will last.
4. Give the employee a statement about the purpose of the meeting.
5. Prepare questions and subjects for the meeting that should be covered.
6. Greet the employee in a friendly, unhurried manner.
7. Have a chair ready and in a position where the employee faces the supervisor without obstacles.
8. Have the secretary hold all calls and keep visitors from interrupting the meeting.
9. Help the employee tell his or her story by being accepting, by being interested, and by letting the employee talk.
10. Give the employee a chance to pause and reflect.
11. Ask questions that are open-ended and that call for discussion or explanation.
12. Close the meeting tactfully, set a time for a followup if needed, and thank the employee.

Don't

- Search for or attempt to review information during the meeting.
- Call the employee on a moment's notice and expect a productive meeting.
- Abruptly end the meeting without notice.
- Leave the employee wondering what he or she may have done wrong.
- Wait until the employee arrives to decide what should be accomplished.
- Give the impression that there is no time for the employee, or that there is a big rush to get this over with.
- Have the employee sit on the opposite side of your desk with piles of paper between the two of you.
- Let your attention wander to other people or matters in the office.
- Prod the employee along, get the details wanted, and then talk about your own experiences.
- Talk rapidly, filling in all voids.
- Ask questions that are answered with a quick "yes" or "no."
- Hurry the employee out, showing lack of interest and giving a vague promise of a followup