

THE CASE FOR MENTORSHIP AND COACHING IN MILITARY FORMATIONS

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Who is investing in people now that they are on the team? Now is the time to place more emphasis on developing leaders through coaching and mentoring within the US Army. We are currently living in an environment of great uncertainty, wrestling with deep-seated and far-reaching social and political issues, including responding to the COVID-19 health crisis, improving diversity and inclusion in all facets of society, reforming law enforcement, as well as addressing the many other personal and professional challenges experienced by individuals. These uncertain times can bring stressors in our effort to gain experience, elevate awareness, and increase knowledge in our personal and professional lives. Ultimately, it is critical that we can engage with new ways of looking at the world, learning effectively from others in order to make informed decisions in the future. There is no doubt that developing leaders through coaching and mentoring can help, leading, as it does, to the sharing of experiences, perspectives, and lessons learned. Importantly, while this process does not necessarily provide immediate solutions to issues and challenges, gaining different perspectives from coaches and mentors provides significant value in helping leaders set their own foundation of understanding and be better prepared to solve the complex problems of today and the future.

Today, organizations emphasize the importance of talent management because it is an investment in people. How people integrate, engage with colleagues, and the resources that they are provided with in order to feel like a member of the team is important. Getting started in a

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new organization sets the tone for the rest of their tenure. How does an organization like the US Army invest early in one's career to manage talent properly? Using mentoring, coaching, and onboarding practices and programs from private companies, combined with assessment tools such as 360 degree surveys, cognitive and emotional intelligence tests, and human behavior tests will offer a variety of options to strategically maximize talent management in the US Army. The US Army, and most other military organizations, invests a lot of money training and educating personnel before they begin their first unit of assignment. Incorporating mentorship and coaching, along with the assessments mentioned above, will assist personnel in adapting to the Army life and profession to improve their contributions faster.

Furthermore, a mentorship and coaching program will also help the US Army to identify and develop talent, contributing to a more effective organization that is better able to address challenges and meet its objectives. Data gained with the help of technology and various knowledge, skills, and behavior assessments will provide the Army and leadership with a more comprehensive profile of individuals. This change will aid in making informed decisions on how an individual's career is most effectively shaped and talent enhancement achieved. With the Army's transformation to talent management and using "an individual's knowledge, skills, behaviors, and preferences (KSB-Ps) for the mutual benefit of the Army and the individual,"¹ it makes sense to have a mentorship and coaching program in order to maximize potential.

Starting habits for success

Feedback is a gift and receiving it is necessary in order to grow and learn. According to David Dorsey and Rose Mueller-Hanson, “effective feedback is honest, specific, strengths-oriented, and focused on behaviors rather than on personal characteristics. It is timely and a two-way dialog. It comes from a credible source who knows the recipient’s work and can provide useful insights to help the individual improve.”² Conversely, there is an assumption that everyone knows how to give and receive a professional feedback for the good of all parties involved. Mentors and coaches outside the mentee’s leadership chain who understand KSB-Ps can help the individual build upon strengths, identify weaknesses and blind spots, and engage in crucial conversations that a subordinate may not want to have with their supervisors. These conversations are essential to building trust between the Army and the individual. As stated in Army doctrine, “leaders create a climate of trust by displaying consistency in their actions, and through relationship-building behaviors such as coaching, counseling, and mentoring.”³

Mentors and coaches can have candid conversations with their mentees to help shape, push, direct, and guide them. Especially when it comes to career advice, young leaders should have the opportunity to talk with mentors and coaches without the ramifications of hurting their potential for promotion. This program does not need to rely solely on the individual’s chain of command but rather to complement their efforts towards a person’s development. The value of mentorship is deemed essential enough by Fortune 500 companies that 71% of them invest in a mentoring program.⁴ Of over 500 professionals asked about coaching, 65% indicated that they feel more engaged when working in companies with strong coaching cultures, and further studies have suggested that mentored individuals have higher reported intentions to stay with their company.⁵ As studied by Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations, mentoring programs can also assist with inclusion and diversity, helping to improve promotion and retention rates of minority men and women from 15% to 38% as compared to non-mentored minority employees.⁶ With talent management increasing organizational agility, mentors and mentees can share experiences and knowledge to improve the productivity and decision-making of both parties.⁷

New, junior, or developing leaders can find decision making difficult due to their lack of experience, knowledge, or confidence. Mentoring and coaching can provide people with exposure to various perspectives and tools to increase trust in their judgment and themselves.

Building trust is essential in any organization, and using an effective onboarding program with mentoring and coaching will only help the trust relationship within an individual’s team, unit, and Army. A structured onboarding program with clear goals, objectives, and meetings with mentors and coaches will give young professionals confidence in their own abilities. Additionally, mentors and coaches can help build a system or process to overcome blind spots and improve on strengths. As it stands, a person might receive notes, read manuals, conduct training, and an orientation to get them started in the right direction. They can then spend time day after day learning the job, what it entails, and over a while, gain experience. After this, the leadership will determine if the individual understands their role and responsibilities or needs help. In some instances, it becomes a sink or swim event. It does not have to be that way. Leaders and supervisors play a part and are responsible as well. Leaders should use this opportunity to get to know the people they work with and help guide their subordinates in continuing to learn about themselves. Young professionals having these resources at the start of their career will reduce the integration time into the Army and the process will also contribute towards their life-long learning. By investing time and effort at the start of an individual’s service, the Army will create an organization of leaders who can use mentoring and coaching effectively to enhance their careers and contribute positively to the effectiveness and agility of the Army.

No need to reinvent the wheel

Other organizations have been successfully bringing in and developing new personnel for many decades, and the US Army can draw on the ideas that have worked elsewhere in developing its own mentoring and coaching practices. With this in mind, what proven vehicles exist that help an organization to incorporate new personnel while using mentoring and coaching? Onboarding is one that is worthy of further consideration. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, “Onboarding is the process



by which new hires get acclimatized to all aspects of their jobs rapidly and easily, and learn the knowledge, skills, abilities (KSA) and behaviors required to function effectively within an organization.”⁸ Onboarding is a limited-time process that can last between three to twelve months. This timeframe is from the selection of a candidate until the annual evaluation. Onboarding is the “bridge” between the résumé screening, interviewing, and selection of a job candidate and the yearly review measuring how well that employee is doing in their job. Onboarding is more involved, and the focus is on interaction to get the individual integrated into the company. Onboarding would be an easy win-win for the leadership and new teammate. Organizations with a standardized onboarding process experience 62% greater new hire productivity, along with 50% greater new hire retention.⁹

Bank of America uses a timeline with two phases and onboarding tools to ensure executives stay on track with their progress. The goal of the first phase is to build critical relationships to learn the business and culture and become established as a leader.¹⁰ This phase covers the first 100 days but is flexible enough to support longer timelines depending on the events. During phase one, the executive will use a wide range of onboarding tools: written onboarding plan, initiate key stakeholder meetings (networking), new leader-team integration (team relationships), new peer integration session, meetings with a coach, senior advisor (mentor) meeting, key stakeholder check-in (development needs), CEO new executive orientation program (external networking), and a quarterly performance management session.¹¹ Phase two, execute and deliver, starts at day 100 and goes through day 180 and beyond. Phase two consists of the following onboarding tools: meet with a coach, review 180-day accomplishments, and discuss the results of a leadership model 360 degree feedback from subordinates, peers, and superiors on their progress to date.¹²

Using these tools provides valuable information on the executive’s progress, leader development, and assimilation into the organization. It also serves as a pre-emptive measure in case the executive starts to lose focus and requires additional leader engagement. Creating a

culture in the Army that supports a formal onboarding program like Bank of America would be a significant strategic complement to talent management and leadership development. Additionally, receiving insights from assessments will only further the data-rich approach to talent management.

Private organizations have been doing talent management for quite some time and have incorporated mentorship, coaching, and onboarding practices. These practices are focused on the development of the employee, effective use of resources, and confident employee integration into the organization. Mentoring cannot be focused only on the top talented individuals; all professionals need mentoring tailored to their specific needs.

Building cohesive teams for the future

More leaders who can appropriately leverage mentorship and coaching will empower individuals to continually seek ways to increase their knowledge and develop meaningful relationships. Every leader has the responsibility to lead the organizations that they are charged with and share lessons learned while adapting daily to any given environment that will enable growth personally and professionally. Instead of individuals feeling entitled, making unhelpful assumptions, or being happy to maintain what is ultimately a sub-optimal status quo, mentors and coaches provide the outlet to talk about topics or act as a sounding board without causing harm to their career. This relationship will open dialogue that will inspire confidence and encourage personal and professional growth. Over time, an organization will be able to adapt its individual and collective leader development plans in order to ensure the constant evolution of knowledge, skills, and behaviors. This program is a simple, yet effective, way to influence and support talent management that will improve the relationship between the Army and its people.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Department of the Army Headquarters, *The Army People Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, October 2019), 4.

² David Dorsey and Rose Mueller-Hanson, "Performance Management That Makes a Difference: An Evidence-Based Approach," *Society of Human Resources Management, Science-to-Practice Series*, 51 (December 2017): 17.

³ Department of the Army Headquarters, *Field Manual (FM) 6-22, Leader Development* (Washington, DC: US Army, June 30, 2015), 122.

⁴ Human Resources, Podcasts, and North America, "Workplace Loyalties Change, but the Value of Mentoring Doesn't," *Knowledge@Wharton*, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/workplace-loyalties-change-but-the-value-of-mentoring-doesnt/>.

⁵ J. Filipkowski, "Building a Coaching Culture" (Cincinnati, OH: Human Capital Institute, 2014), 1; Monica C. Higgins, and David A. Thomas. "Constellations and Careers: Toward Understanding the Effects of Multiple Developmental Relationships," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 22, 3 (2001): 223-47.

⁶ Kaitlyn Conboy and Chris Kelly, "What Evidence Is There That Mentoring Works to Retain and Promote Employees, Especially

Diverse Employees, Within a Single Company?," *Cornell University, Industrial and Labor Relations*, Fall (2016): 3.

⁷ Department of the Army Headquarters, *The Army People Strategy*," 4

⁸ Mohan Karambelkar and Shubhasheesh Bhattacharya, "Onboarding Is a Change: Applying Change Management Model ADKAR to Onboarding," *Human Resource Management International Digest* 25, no. 7 (January 1, 2017): 5.

⁹ Ron Carucci, "To Retain New Hires, Spend More Time Onboarding Them.," *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles* (December 2018): 4.

¹⁰ Jay A. Conger and Brian Fishel, "Accelerating Leadership Performance at the Top: Lessons from the Bank of America's Executive on-Boarding Process," *Human Resource Management Review* 17, no. 4 (December 2007): 448.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 448.

¹² *Ibid.*, 448.

