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MISSION-CRITICAL COMMUNICATION

A Proposal to Teach Interpersonal Communication Skills at The Basic School

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Abstract: Institutionally, the U.S. Marine Corps views interpersonal communication skills as essential for effective leadership. Unfortunately, there is an imbalance between the Marine Corps' high expectations for communication skills and the communication skills training it provides. To correct this imbalance within the officer corps, the author proposes that The Basic School add instruction devoted to public speaking, delivering feedback, and leading difficult conversations. The proposal draws heavily from the field of leadership communication, including books, articles, graduate school courses, and existing Marine Corps training.

Keywords: U.S. Marine Corps, Department of Defense, leadership communication, interpersonal communication skills, public speaking, feedback loops, difficult conversations, professional military education, PME, military training, curriculum design, adult education, professional development

Introduction

For more than 2,000 years, communication skills have been taught to pupils around the world. In one of the earliest recorded exam-

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ples, Aristotle's students at the ancient Greek Lyceum learned how to persuade an audience by studying pathos, logos, and ethos (a.k.a. the rhetorical triangle).¹ During the intervening millennia, communication and leadership scholars have produced a significant body of work aimed at teaching individuals how best to communicate with, motivate, and lead their teams. This article uses Gail Fairhurst and Stacey Connaughton's term for *leadership communication*, to refer to the broad field of study that places communication skills at the center of effective leadership.² Additionally, this article will use the umbrella term *communication skills training* to refer to the variety of graduate schools and industry training programs that teach skills such as public speaking, delivering critical feedback, active listening, building rapport and trust, persuading an audience, leading difficult conversations, motivating teams, and using narrative to build resilience. Writing skills, despite being a critical component of communication, are not included in this proposal. Although it would be relevant to examine the state of communication training throughout the Department of Defense (DOD), this article focuses more narrowly on the communication skills training provided to U.S. Marine Corps officers, specifically newly commissioned lieutenants.³

Regardless of military occupational specialty (MOS), when a newly commissioned Marine Corps officer arrives to the Fleet Marine Force, they must rely on their leadership communication skills. Unlike many of their civilian workforce peers, Marine Corps second lieutenants immediately fill "middle management" positions that can place them in charge of 30 or more individuals. In many Fortune 500 companies, it would take years, even a decade-plus, for an employee to work their way up to the same level of responsi-

¹ Carlo Natali, *Aristotle: His Life and School* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 26.

² Gail T. Fairhurst and Stacey L. Connaughton, "Leadership: A Communicative Perspective," *Leadership* 10, no. 1 (2014): 7–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013509396>.

³ For a non-Marine Corps example, note the Air Force edited volume Megan J. Hennessey, ed., *Developing Military Learners' Communication Skills: Using the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2022).

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bility.⁴ For Marine Corps officers, however, commanding a platoon is merely the launching point of a career where success rests on communication skills. As a recent article published in *International Perspectives on Military Education* noted:

According to research conducted at Harvard and Stanford Universities, only 15 percent of [a military officer's] career success is provided by the hard skills, while the other 85 percent comes from so-called soft skills. In this context, we can consider that "soft skills get little respect but will make or break your career."⁵

Successful platoon commanders must apply "soft skills" to execute many of their responsibilities. They must deliver formal and informal feedback, build rapport and trust with their Marines, address interpersonal conflict, and lead difficult conversations on topics ranging from combat death to mental health issues. Although each lieutenant's experience will vary, all are expected, at a minimum, to address groups of Marines in public and to deliver one-on-one feedback to their sergeants and staff noncommissioned officers (many of whom have more time in service than the lieutenant) in private. In light of these high expectations, it is worth asking: How does the Marine Corps teach its lieutenants the leadership communication skills that are so critical to their careers?

The Basic School (TBS) serves as the six-month basic officer course that all Marine lieutenants attend after commissioning and prior to MOS school. The mission of TBS is to train newly commissioned officers to "prepare them for duty as company grade officers in the operating forces, with particular emphasis on the duties, responsibilities, and warfighting skills required of a rifle platoon commander."⁶ With how important communication skills are to platoon commander duties, it is surprising that stand-alone commu-

⁴ At large investment banks like J. P. Morgan Chase, for example, vice presidents who have been with the company 10 or more years could expect to lead as many as 30 individuals. Sean Ross, "The Hierarchy of an Investment Bank," *Investopedia*, 9 August 2024.

⁵ Maroua Cherni and Feten Slimeni, "Soft Skills in Favor of Advanced Military Education," *International Perspectives on Military Education* 1 (2024): 76–101, <https://doi.org/10.69977/IPME/2024.004>.

⁶ "The Basic School: Mission," TBS.Marines.mil, accessed 10 June 2025.

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nication skills instruction is absent from the TBS curriculum.⁷ It is even more surprising when one considers that, institutionally, the Marine Corps views communication skills as essential for effective leadership. For example, “Communication Skills” is 1 of only 14 attributes that the Marine Corps deems important enough to evaluate on the fitness report.⁸ Additionally, Marine Corps doctrinal publications such as *Warfighting* (Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication [MCDP] 1) and *Planning* (MCDP 5) highlight the essential role that communication—both implicit and explicit—plays in a commander’s ability to deliver intent and mission-type orders.⁹ Despite acknowledging that communication skills are critical for an officer’s success, the Marine Corps does not provide its lieutenants with stand-alone instruction in public speaking, delivering feedback to subordinates, or leading difficult conversations before they command a platoon.

The author proposes that TBS teach communication skills to address the institutional imbalance between the Marine Corps’ expectations of a new platoon commander’s communication skills (which are rightfully and necessarily high) and the communication skills training provided to newly commissioned officers (which is nearly nonexistent). The author proposes three areas from the field of leadership communication that TBS can integrate into its curriculum: public speaking, delivering constructive feedback, and leading difficult conversations. Additionally, the author offers potential options for reducing the current curriculum to allow for additional communication skills training. Throughout the article, the author draws from existing civilian and military communication skills training programs. The civilian programs include a Stanford University course titled *Interpersonal Dynamics* and a book in the *Harvard Business Review’s* 20 Minute Manager Series titled *Difficult Con-*

⁷ With permission from the TBS curriculum department, the author reviewed the “Basic Officer Course (Blank Slate) Program of Instruction v2024,” a nearly 800-page document that details each event in the TBS program of instruction.

⁸ The other 13 attributes evaluated on the fitness report include performance, proficiency, courage, effectiveness under stress, initiative, leading subordinates, developing subordinates, setting the example, ensuring the well-being of subordinates, professional military education, decision-making ability, judgment, and evaluations. *Navy and Marine Corps Publication 10835, United States Marine Corps Fitness Report* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, rev. 7-11).

⁹ *Warfighting*, MCDP 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 79; and *Planning*, MCDP 5 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 87–88.





versations.¹⁰ The military programs include courses designed by Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) to teach its leaders effective communication skills.

The following proposal is divided into four sections—Identifying and Analyzing the Problem, Application of Solution, Analysis of Solution, and Counterarguments—and a conclusion. In Identifying and Analyzing the Problem, the author examines the consequences of the imbalance between the Marine Corps' high expectations for officer communication skills compared to the minimal training that officers receive. In Application of Solution, the author presents three proposed training modules—one in public speaking, one in delivering feedback, and one in leading difficult conversations—for inclusion in the TBS curriculum. In Analysis of Solution, the author lays out why this proposal can be effective, such as the low bar for communication training that currently exists in the Marine Corps. The Counterarguments section addresses some likely objections to this proposal, for example, that there is simply not enough time at TBS for additional coursework. Finally, the author concludes by acknowledging some of the proposal's limitations and suggesting areas for further exploration.

Identifying and Analyzing the Problem

In 1999, the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Charles C. Krulak, ushered in the modern Performance Evaluation System (PES). During the ensuing years, the Marine Corps has used a standard administrative form—*Navy and Marine Corps Publication (NAVMC) 10835, Fitness Report*—to evaluate every Marine above the rank of corporal on 14 attributes, one of which is communication skills. Marines are evaluated against the following communication skills criteria:

COMMUNICATION SKILLS. The efficient transmission and receipt of thoughts and ideas that enable and enhance leadership. Equal importance given to listening, speaking, writing, and critical reading skills. Interactive, allowing one to perceive problems and situations, provide concise guidance, and express complex ideas in a form easily understood

¹⁰ "Interpersonal Dynamics," Stanford Graduate School of Business, accessed 10 June 2025; and various titles, HBR 20-Minute Manager Series (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014–16).





by everyone. Allows subordinates to ask questions, raise issues and concerns and venture opinions. Contributes to a leader's ability to motivate as well as counsel.¹¹

The institutional importance of communication skills is underscored by the NAVMC's language stating that communication skills *enable* leadership. The connection between communication skills and leadership also aligns with the organizational culture of the Marine Corps. As many leaders have noted over the years, the Marine Corps is a "people business."¹² This aphorism highlights a fundamental truth about the Marine Corps: in every leadership position from squad leader to Commandant, a Marine's success hinges on their ability to effectively transmit and receive ideas and emotions to connect with others (and sometimes to get them to do difficult things they might otherwise not). As Hollywood actor and retired Lieutenant Colonel Rob Riggle put it, in the Marine Corps, "If you can't communicate effectively, you will not lead."¹³ Through the fitness report's description of communication skills, the Marine Corps rightfully sets a high standard for its leaders. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps is deficient when it comes to training its newest officers to meet this standard.

The imbalance between expectations and training exists throughout the Marine Corps. TBS demonstrates one of the most acute examples of this imbalance, and—as the initial training ground for all Marine officers—it also offers one of the greatest opportunities for rebalancing. When each class of more than 200 newly commissioned second lieutenants attend TBS, they do not arrive with a common baseline in communication skills. They bring a wide variety of experiences from their upbringing, their undergraduate experience, and their commissioning source. TBS is meant to provide lieutenants with the baseline of skills they need to serve as a provisional rifle platoon commander in the Fleet Marine Force. The baseline is provided by a dedicated staff of civilian curriculum

¹¹ *Navy and Marine Corps Publication 10835*.

¹² MajGen William F. Mullen III, "A Warrior's Mind: How to Better Understand the 'Art' of War," *Marine Corps Gazette* (April 2019): 22.

¹³ Rob Riggle quoted in Helio Fred Garcia, *The Power of Communication: Skills to Build Trust, Inspire Loyalty, and Lead Effectively* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2012), xvi.





developers, Marine instructors, and support personnel who plan and deliver a 28-week program of instruction (POI). The POI includes classroom instruction, practical application events, written tests, physical fitness events, sand table exercises, field exercises, and evaluated student leadership billets.

As in most Marine Corps schools, the learning progression at TBS begins with formal instruction, then moves to practical application, and, finally, evaluation.¹⁴ For example, land navigation is taught in the classroom, followed by multiple practical application exercises and a graded evaluation. Unfortunately, this progression is not used for communication skills. From day one of the POI, TBS instructors evaluate each student's communication skills on a "Billet Feedback Form" that borrows its "Communication Skills" section directly from the fitness report.¹⁵ Students are evaluated on how well they "communicate . . . provide guidance . . . and express complex ideas in a way understood by everyone" while they hold a student billet.¹⁶ But unlike land navigation, students receive no formal instruction before they are evaluated against the Marine Corps' standard for communication skills.

The imbalance between communication skills expectations and communication skills training at TBS is a problem for multiple reasons. First, evaluating a Marine's communication skills proficiency without training them to achieve the expected expertise goes directly against Marine Corps doctrine. Training and Education Command's *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual* is the foundational document on which all Marine Corps schools and courses are built. The manual outlines a direct connection between training and evaluation, stating that "the purpose of conducting evaluation is to develop and implement a strategy for determining the effectiveness and efficiency of an instructional program."¹⁷ Put another way, the only reason to evaluate a Marine within a school or course is to verify that prior instruction was effective.

In addition to contradicting doctrine, TBS's lack of communication skills training perpetuates the fixed-mindset fallacy that

¹⁴ "Basic Officer Course (Blank Slate) Program of Instruction v2024," The Basic School, TBS.Marines.mil, accessed 1 December 2024.

¹⁵ "Billet Feedback Form," The Basic School, TBS.Marines.mil, accessed 1 December 2024.

¹⁶ "Billet Feedback Form."

¹⁷ *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual* (Quantico, VA: Training and Education Command, 2004), viii.

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communication skills cannot be taught and that someone is either a “good communicator” or they are not.¹⁸ As two commanders noted in a recent U.S. Army publication, this fallacy is not limited to the Marine Corps: “There is a common misconception about interpersonal skills being viewed as static, immutable, and inaccessible to growth and development.”¹⁹ This fallacy about communication skills can ripple out and negatively impact an officer’s entire career. It can destroy individual initiative to improve one’s own communication skills, and it can make coaching someone on their communication skills seem worthless. Most importantly, the lack of communication skills training at TBS permits lieutenants to become platoon commanders without ever explicitly practicing some of the most common leadership situations that will test their communication skills (e.g., fitness report counseling). In the next section, the author outlines the proposal to address the imbalance between communication skills expectations and training at TBS.

Application of Solution

To balance the Marine Corps’ high expectations for officer communication skills with its officer communication skills training, TBS should borrow from the field of leadership communication and add classroom instruction and practical application exercises in public speaking, delivering constructive feedback, and leading difficult conversations.

Leadership communication is a field of study that has been embraced by industries, universities, and individuals all over the world. One leadership communication scholar noted that “people recognize the value of effective communication, and [every year] they buy millions of books, line up for hours of training, take online courses and work with coaches all with the goal of improving the way they listen, connect, negotiate and live.”²⁰ It would benefit newly commissioned lieutenants to deeply explore this literature—read entire books on effective communication, for example—but that is unrealistic for inclusion in TBS’s curriculum. To create a nar-

¹⁸ Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, 2006).

¹⁹ Richard L. Farnell and Michael A. Hamilton, “Lead Them All: The Importance of Interpersonal Skills in Leading Diverse Teams,” *Army.mil*, 7 April 2023.

²⁰ Jim Knight, “Better Conversations,” *School Administrator* 73, no. 2 (February 2016): 39–41.

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rower proposal, the author used their own platoon commander experience to conduct a job analysis of the platoon commander billet. As the *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual* states, a job analysis is performed to “determine what the job holder must know or do on the job” to inform what training should be delivered at the job’s preparatory school.²¹ The author identified numerous individual tasks that require a platoon commander to use communication skills such as delivering a range safety brief, delivering a five-paragraph order, or conducting a fitness report counseling. The author then grouped the tasks into three types of communication that every platoon commander in the Fleet Marine Force is likely to execute.

The first is publicly addressing Marines (a.k.a. public speaking). This type of communication is required from a lieutenant’s first meeting with their platoon and is a regular occurrence throughout their career. The second is delivering one-on-one feedback to a member of the platoon (a.k.a. delivering constructive feedback). This type of communication occurs during formal fitness report counseling sessions and informal one-on-one coaching interactions throughout the officer’s career. The third is leading difficult conversations. This type of communication occurs whenever the officer needs to have a difficult or emotionally charged conversation with a Marine or group of Marines. Because of the high likelihood that platoon commanders will experience all three types of communication, they should anchor the proposal for instruction at The Basic School.

The following sections detail the three proposed training modules—public speaking, delivering constructive feedback, and leading difficult conversations—for inclusion in TBS’s POI. Each of the proposed modules includes a one-hour period of classroom instruction and a shorter role-play-based individual evaluation. These modules are not meant to make lieutenants experts in public speaking, delivering feedback, or leading difficult conversations. Instead, they are meant to introduce future platoon commanders to a menu of best practices and communication techniques that they can refer to throughout their careers.

²¹ *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual*, iv.

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Proposed Training Module 1: Public Speaking

Like leaders and managers in professions around the world, new platoon commanders are presented with the challenge of how to build rapport with an audience through verbal and nonverbal public speaking techniques. There is a significant amount of literature on public speaking, including research into the efficacy of power posing, the impact of tone of voice, and entire graduate courses dedicated to public speaking.²² Fortunately, a one-hour period of instruction at TBS can be created from concepts that are already found in two Marine Corps-endorsed sources: the MarineNet elearning ecosystem and the Marine Corps *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual*. The MarineNet course titled Writing and Preparing an Effective Speech is a 25-minute, video-based module that references numerous public speaking best practices. The Marine Corps *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual* includes an instructor evaluation form with a checklist of verbal and nonverbal best practices for public speaking. These sources can be combined into a one-hour period of instruction that introduces newly commissioned officers to public speaking considerations before, during, and after they stand in front of a group of Marines.

The content of the 60-minute public speaking class would include four parts: preparation considerations, audience-centered considerations, verbal and nonverbal communication considerations, and rapport-building considerations. The audience-centered considerations include what the audience was doing prior to being addressed, what they will be doing after, their physical/mental state, the environmental conditions, the audience's ability to hear and see, and their level of prior understanding of the topic. Preparation considerations include practicing out loud beforehand and preparing a logically organized speech. Logical organization—according to the MarineNet course and *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual*—includes an orientation, agenda, and an explanation of

²² Graduate courses such as Presenting with Confidence are offered at Harvard University and "power posing" gained notoriety from Dr. Amy Cuddy's Ted Talk that referenced the following study: Dana R. Carney, Amy J. C. Cuddy, and Andy J. Yap, "Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 10 (2010): 1363–68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610383437>.





Table 1. Proposed public speaking module

TBS Training Module 1

Classroom (60 minutes). This classroom instruction focuses on how to stand up and connect with a group of people. Topics include:

- Preparation (logical organization, practice);
- Audience considerations (environment, timing, prior knowledge);
- Communication techniques: verbal (pace, inflection, volume, etc.) and nonverbal (body language, facial expressions, etc.); and
- Techniques for connecting and building trust/rapport with an audience (asking questions, showing appropriate vulnerability, humor, and identity anchors).

Evaluation (10 minutes). The evaluation for this classroom instruction is a practical application where each lieutenant practices holding their initial platoon meeting. This will be done with their TBS squad as the audience and an instructor as evaluator.

- Audience and instructor fill out evaluations on how well presenter used techniques; and
 - A peer will also video record the session. That presenter will watch it and also write a self-evaluation.
-

“what’s in it for me” at start of the presentation. It also includes a summary and concise takeaway at the end.²³ Nonverbal and verbal considerations while speaking include eye contact, posture, movement, gestures, facial expressions, appearance, nervousness, enthusiasm, volume of speech, rate of speech, voice inflection, use of pause, pronunciation, articulation, and pet words. Finally, considerations for building rapport and connecting with an audience include the use of questions, showing (appropriate) vulnerability, using humor, and using narrative to connect messaging to identity anchors.²⁴

Although it would be up to the TBS instructor to make the presentation work for their style, this content would be most effective if paired with video examples of polished and poor public speaking. This period of instruction should also be taught at the beginning of the TBS POI, enabling students to experiment with

²³ “Writing and Preparing an Effective Speech,” MarineNet eLearning Ecosystem, accessed on 4 January 2025.

²⁴ *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual*, E-3.

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the techniques that work best for them in different public speaking scenarios throughout TBS.

Following the classroom instruction, students would be evaluated on how well they can apply public speaking considerations in a practical application. The evaluation would consist of a role-playing scenario where each lieutenant practices holding an initial platoon meeting (with their TBS squad acting as their future platoon). A TBS instructor would fill out an evaluation checklist to rate how well the lieutenant employs the techniques presented during the classroom instruction. The evaluation would only last 10 minutes, enough time for the lieutenant to deliver some opening remarks and possibly get into introductions or other rapport-building work of their choosing. An important component to this initial evaluation would be that each lieutenant is filmed during their presentation. After the role play, the lieutenant would watch themselves in private while filling out a self-evaluation form similar to the one completed by the instructor.

Video self-analysis allows lieutenants to see the impression they make when they stand in front of a group of Marines without the self-deception that memory and first-person perspective can introduce. Self-analysis via video is also used in teacher training programs around the country to help educators hone their public speaking and presenting skills.²⁵ A 2016 study conducted with educators found that video self-analysis was one of the most impactful facilitators for self-improvement. One educator who took part in the study noted, "I think you are in the worst position possible to make any judgments about yourself until you see yourself from the different perspective video offers."²⁶

Proposed Training Module 2: Delivering Constructive Feedback

Similar to public speaking, there is a significant amount of leadership communication literature (research articles, books, TED Talks, and academic courses) dedicated to how to effectively deliver feedback. It is generally understood that there are different types of feedback such as coaching, appreciation, and evaluation.

²⁵ In addition to the video analysis in Jim Knight's "Better Conversations" research, the author has firsthand experience as a Tufts University graduate student using video recordings to evaluate classroom communication and teaching.

²⁶ Knight, "Better Conversations."





Coaching refers to feedback that helps increase someone's knowledge or skill. Appreciation is feedback designed to encourage and motivate. Evaluation encompasses summative feedback that tells someone how they performed compared to certain expectations or standards.²⁷ Due to their PES-mandated role as reporting seniors, all platoon commanders are required to deliver evaluation feedback to their sergeants and staff noncommissioned officers at the end of each reporting period. For this reason, the TBS lesson on feedback should focus on delivering evaluation feedback. At the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, the most popular elective for the past 45 years is a course titled Interpersonal Dynamics.²⁸ Along with a wide range of communication skills, this course teaches future industry leaders and CEOs how deliver effective feedback.²⁹ The curriculum of Interpersonal Dynamics—in addition to research from David Livermore, Valerie J. Shute, and Kevin Ochsner—anchors the proposed TBS period of instruction on delivering feedback.³⁰

The content of the 60-minute feedback class would consist of four parts: the psychology of why feedback fails to stick, premeeting considerations for delivering feedback, during-meeting considerations for delivering feedback, and accepting feedback. The psychology of why feedback does not stick would center around research from Kevin Ochsner, who discovered the fight or flight stress reaction that occurs when people are told they are going to receive evaluation feedback. Specifically, stress hormones flood the brain and only about 30 percent of all feedback is ever accepted.³¹ The instructor would also present students with informa-

²⁷ Evelina Vrabie, "The Three Forms of Feedback: Appreciation, Coaching and Evaluation," CTO Craft, accessed 10 June 2025.

²⁸ "Interpersonal Dynamics," Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, accessed 10 June 2025.

²⁹ Former Stanford Graduate School of Business Professor Ed Batista has made his course materials from Interpersonal Dynamics available on his executive coaching website. Ed Batista, "Interpersonal Dynamics Winter 2017 Syllabus," Ed Batista Executive Coaching, accessed 10 January 2025.

³⁰ Dr. David Livermore is a social scientist and author who specializes in cultural intelligence. Dr. Valerie J. Shute is an educational psychology professor at Florida State University and researcher who specializes in design, development, and evaluation of learning. Dr. Kevin Ochsner is a psychology professor at Columbia University and researcher whose work focuses on self-control, personal perception, and neuroscience approaches to emotion.

³¹ Karie Willyerd and Barbara Mistick, "How to Get Feedback When No One Is Volunteering It," *Harvard Business Review*, 14 April 2015.

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Table 2. Proposed delivering constructive feedback module**TBS Training Module 2**

Classroom (60 minutes). Delivering and receiving feedback. This classroom session focuses on how to give and receive one-on-one feedback.

Topics include:

- Why feedback does not stick (flight-or-fight response);
- Premeeting actions (give advance notice, private location, explain why);
- During-meeting actions (use specific anecdotes, focus on actions/results, use script); and
- Accepting feedback (ask, accept, appreciate, act).

Evaluation (15 minutes). The evaluation for this classroom instruction is a practical application where lieutenants practice holding a fitness report counseling with a sergeant squad leader based on a given scenario.

- A peer lieutenant role plays as the squad leader; and
- An instructor evaluates how well the above techniques were employed.

tion from Valerie J. Shute, whose research highlights the ways that feedback can actually inhibit learning when it is offered in a vague or imprecise way.³²

The period of instruction would then transition to some of the best practices for delivering feedback. Specifically, research-supported steps to take before and while delivering feedback. Before-feedback best practices include giving a Marine advance notice and explaining the “why” behind the feedback meeting.³³ During-feedback best practices include reviewing the meeting agenda, anchoring feedback in specific concrete examples, using precise language that distinguishes between the things the Marine did and the person they are, reading directly from the prepared notes and/or the fitness report, and asking for questions while seeking collaboration for a way ahead at the end of the meeting.³⁴ The classroom instruction would conclude with best practices for

³² Valerie J. Shute, “Focus on Formative Feedback,” *Review of Educational Research*, 78, no. 1 (2008): 156, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654307313795>.

³³ David Livermore, “How to Give Culturally Intelligent Feedback,” *David Livermore* (blog), 1 March 2024.

³⁴ Ed Batista, “Interpersonal Dynamics Winter 2017 Syllabus: Class 4, Feelings and Feedback,” Ed Batista Executive Coaching, accessed 10 January 2025.



receiving feedback. Specifically, the TBS instructor would review the so-called “four A” model (ask for feedback, appreciate feedback, accept feedback, and act on feedback) and reference *Harvard Business Review’s* “The Right Way to Process Feedback,” to explain how to put the four A’s into action.³⁵

Following the classroom instruction, the students would be evaluated based on how well they can apply the techniques during a mock fitness report counseling session. During the evaluation, one of their peers would play the role of a sergeant squad leader with whom the platoon commander has been working for the past six months. The student would be given a written scenario that describes a few positive and negative observations from the period of performance and an (already completed) fitness report to deliver to the sergeant. A TBS instructor would be in the room observing. The role play is meant to give the student experience sitting down face-to-face and delivering constructive feedback to one of their Marines. Additionally, it is meant to stress the responsibility of the reporting senior to hold an in-person counseling at the end of each reporting period—something that often fails to stick during the brief portion of TBS currently dedicated to the PES.³⁶

Proposed Training Module 3: Leading Difficult Conversations

There is no standard definition of a *difficult conversation* in the field of leadership communication. For the purposes of this article, the definition from *Difficult Conversations* will suffice. A difficult conversation refers to one where “one or more of you feels insecure in some way, and the stakes feel high.”³⁷ In the context of teaching future platoon commanders at TBS, this definition can be applied to a specific example: a conversation between a platoon commander and one of their Marines about a significant problem facing that

³⁵ Andreas Holmer, “4A Feedback Guidelines: Aim to Assist, Make It Actionable, Show Appreciation, and Choose to Accept or Discard,” *Medium*, 9 January 2023; and Cameron Conaway, “The Right Way to Process Feedback,” *Harvard Business Review*, 14 June 2022.

³⁶ Multiple observers have acknowledged the lack of effective PES training at TBS, including Barrett P. Dupuy, “Performance Evaluation System,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 98, no. 3 (March 2014): 74–77; and David R. Dixon and Matt Ford, “The PES,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 101, no. 4 (April 2017): 20–22.

³⁷ *Difficult Conversations*, HBR 20-Minute Manager Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2016).

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Marine. Conversations may include a platoon commander speaking with a Marine about their involvement in a criminal investigation, child custody or divorce, financial issues, mental health and substance abuse struggles, or the death of a friend or family member.³⁸ In addition to the main themes of *Difficult Conversations*, the TBS period of instruction would borrow heavily from a Marine Corps Recruiting Command course developed to teach effective communication skills to its new recruiting station staff noncommissioned officers-in-charge (SNCOIC). Together, these materials can be adapted into an hour-long period of instruction for TBS lieutenants on leading difficult conversations.

The content of the 60-minute leading difficult conversations lesson would be split into three parts: the first would introduce lieutenants to the variety of serious issues a platoon commander may have to discuss with their Marines, the second would present best practices for dealing with these conversations from Recruiting Command and *Difficult Conversations*, and the third would provide students with available resources and support they can recommend to their future Marines.

During the first part of the lesson, the instructor would make sure the students understand that being a platoon commander is not only about taking care of Marines in the field, but also about supporting Marines while they deal with sometimes serious personal problems (legal, financial, mental health, substance abuse, etc.) In this part of the lesson, TBS instructors would share stories of real-life struggles that they or their Marines had to deal with in the past and the role that an officer played in the situation. This will help expose lieutenants—many of whom arrive at TBS with limited real-world leadership experience—to the reality of leading Marines.

For the second part of the lesson, the instructor would review best practices for what to do during a difficult or emotionally charged conversation. The effective communication skills training developed by Recruiting Command's National Training Team is particularly relevant to this period of instruction. Because of the nature of recruiting, Marine Corps recruiters are often required to have deeply personal conversations with recruits and their families.

³⁸ Keith R. Aronson and Daniel F. Perkins, "Challenges Faced by Military Families: Perceptions of United States Marine Corps School Liaisons," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013): 521, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9605-1>.



Table 3. Proposed leading difficult conversations module**TBS Training Module 3**

Classroom (60 minutes). This classroom session focuses on how to manage conversations about topics they may not have imagined dealing with as a platoon commander.

- Spectrum of issues a platoon commander could deal with (child custody and divorce, criminal, mental health, death, etc.);
- Techniques for handling difficult conversations (active listening, questions, empathy, etc.); and
- Resources for support (community counseling, SAPR, financial, etc.).

Evaluation (15 minutes). One-on-one role play of a Marine coming into platoon commander's office and sharing a significant personal struggle.

- Instructor doubles as the role-player Marine;
- Evaluates how well the lieutenant employed techniques and shared resources with the Marine; and
- Not graded due to lack of standardization.

In the command's doctrinal publication, *Guidebook for Recruiters*, as well as the Basic Recruiter Course and multiple National Training Team courses, Marine recruiters are taught interpersonal communication skills relevant to difficult conversations. For example, they are taught specific ways to listen with purpose, sometimes referred to as active listening. Techniques to listen with purpose include observing body language, listening to find common ground, and asking questions to clarify or confirm during one-on-one conversations. The training stresses the importance of listening to make connections and "bridge gaps" instead of preaching.³⁹ Similarly, *Difficult Conversations* highlights the importance of refraining from launching into problem solving during a difficult conversation. Instead, it recommends avoiding projecting assumptions onto someone by using "I" statements, asking questions, and prioritizing empathy.⁴⁰ This part of the lesson would also present some ways difficult conversations are made easier if a leader has cross-cultural

³⁹ *Guidebook for Recruiters*, vol. 1 (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Recruiting Command, 2014), 7-3.

⁴⁰ *Difficult Conversations*.



understanding, which may require some self-study on the part of the officer after they meet their Marines.⁴¹

During the final part of the lesson, the instructor would review a list of resources that the DOD and Marine Corps makes available to all its servicemembers. For example, the lesson would review the services provided by an installation's community counseling center, the unit's sexual assault prevention and response (SAPR) representative, and the local Navy and Marine Corps Relief Society. The lieutenants would also be given this list as a reference to provide to their future Marines as necessary.

Following the classroom instruction on leading difficult conversations, each lieutenant would be evaluated based on how well they can apply the classroom instruction during a role-play scenario. The role play would simulate a Marine coming to talk to their platoon commander about a significant personal problem. A TBS instructor would play the Marine who comes in to discuss their problem. The lieutenant would be expected to apply some of the communication techniques reviewed in the classroom during this conversation. They would also be evaluated on their understanding of what type of services are available to the Marine. Due to the challenge of standardizing each difficult conversation, this practical application would be "feedback only" and not graded. The instructor would provide immediate feedback to the lieutenant in lieu of a graded evaluation.

Analysis of Solution

This proposal has a high likelihood for success because of its proven effectiveness in other industries and because the Marine Corps currently lacks communication skills training for its new officers. In some ways, Marine Corps leadership is unique when compared to the civilian workforce. For example, most civilian organizations do not deal with physical harm or death as a result of leadership decisions. In many ways, however, civilian leaders grapple with the same leadership challenges as the typical Marine Corps officer. Challenges like: *How do I connect with and motivate this diverse group of individuals? How do I get my message across effectively and efficiently?* Because of this overlap, it is a logical to assume

⁴¹ Melissa Hahn and Andy Molinsky, "Having a Difficult Conversation with Someone from a Different Culture," *Harvard Business Review*, 25 March 2016.





that a communication skills training program built from industry executive training programs will help new Marine officers effectively communicate.

Additionally, the proposed solution is likely to have an immediate impact because of the current low bar set for communication skills training in the Marine Corps. Beginning at TBS and continuing throughout their careers, Marine officers are evaluated on their communication skills. However, many have never been provided a period of instruction on how to effectively communicate. Equally as concerning, new lieutenants arrive in the fleet with zero experience putting a billet description in front of a Marine and saying, “This is what I’m expecting of you, so let’s go through it,” or “This is how you have done during the reporting period, but let’s go through it together.” As a minimum achievement, the proposed curriculum will correct the imbalance between officer communication skills expectations and training. It will also help new lieutenants understand what is required of them as a reporting senior and platoon commander in the fleet.

Ideally, the proposed TBS curriculum would have wide-reaching effects across the Marine Corps. After experiencing the communication skills curriculum at TBS, newly commissioned officers may be empowered to coach their noncommissioned officers in the communication skills they learned. This type of coaching has the power to chip away at the fixed-mindset fallacy of “you’re either a good communicator or you’re not” that exists today.⁴² Additionally, sergeants and above may receive more consistent fitness report counseling from platoon commanders who received the training (leading to clear expectations and improved morale). There are other potential positive effects. If platoon commanders are more comfortable speaking in front of their Marines, they are more likely to command respect. And if the platoon commander understands the resources available to their struggling Marines, they will be better prepared to take care of them.

Counterarguments

One of the strongest counterarguments against this proposal is that there is not enough time in the TBS POI, especially with the individual practical application sessions suggested above. However,

⁴² Dweck, *Mindset*.





certain portions of the POI could be reduced to allow for communication skills training and evaluation. The total time for the proposal's classroom instruction is three hours. While there are many ways to remove three hours of instruction from the current POI, the author recommends focusing on sand table exercises (STEXs). The Platoon in the Offense STEX and Movement to Contact STEX have many similarities in their learning objectives. By combining the two STEXs, instructors could save two hours.⁴³ The author also recommends reducing the Motorized Operations and Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain STEXs by 30 minutes each, thereby saving another hour. In addition to three hours for classroom instruction, this proposal requires time for three 15-minute evaluation sessions per student. That means for each TBS platoon, the POI must accommodate 30 mock initial platoon meetings, 30 mock one-on-one fitness report counseling sessions, and 30 mock difficult conversations. While this commitment sounds like a significant time burden, these evaluations do not need to happen in the same week. They can be spaced out during multiple weeks of the POI. The author recommends that each TBS company use about 30–45 minutes of company white space time per week to conduct these evaluations. While inserting additional requirements for each TBS staff platoon commander (SPC), these evaluations would also reduce each SPC's requirement to fill white space with their own instruction. Using STEX and company white space time is one of many possibilities to reduce the current POI. A more thorough evaluation of the POI by experienced curriculum professionals and instructors at TBS could uncover other opportunities.

Another argument against teaching stand-alone communication skills at TBS is that communication skills are taught later in an officer's career during instructor training and professional military education (PME). This is only partially true. As part of Marine Corps schools such as Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course, Operations and Tactics Instructor Course, MOS schools, and TBS, the incoming instructor staff receive training in certain communication skills. At TBS, for example, new instructors are put through intensive, monitored dress rehearsals before they are certified to teach students. During these dress rehearsals, instructors are asked to reflect on how their period of instruction went and are provided constructive

⁴³ "Basic Officer Course (Blank Slate) Program of Instruction v2024," iv-433.





feedback on their verbal and nonverbal presentation skills by an audience of certified instructors. Communication skills training is a focus of Marine Corps officer PME as well. Marine Corps University employs multiple communication-focused initiatives such as its Leadership Communication Skills Center and electives focused on emotional intelligence, communication, and resilience to adhere to the Joint Chiefs of Staff's directive mandating that Joint PME create leaders with "effective written, verbal, and visual communications skills to support the development and implementation of military strategies and complex operations."⁴⁴ Despite some opportunities to focus on communication later in an officer's career, these opportunities arrive too late. The communication skills training that officers receive if selected to become a school instructor is valuable, but it comes following an officer's platoon commander time. Similarly, the leadership communication topics that Marine Corps University explores are valuable, but only certain officers attend resident PME (and none attend before they command a platoon). This proposal advocates for correcting the sequence of communication skills training in the Marine Corps. From the first day they meet their platoon, all Marine Corps lieutenants should be armed not only with basic tactical proficiency from TBS and their MOS school, but also with basic communication skills proficiency.

Another argument against teaching stand-alone communication skills at TBS may be phrased as follows: Figuring out how to be a platoon commander is just part of the job. Communication skills have never been taught at TBS and officers still succeed. Why start now? It is true that lieutenants can survive their time as a platoon commander without ever receiving communication skills training. However, the average enlisted platoon member suffers when they are led by a poor or inexperienced communicator. The vast majority of Marines work and live at the platoon level.⁴⁵ As a result, most of the messages, information, and orders that come down from the highest levels of the Marine Corps and DOD are delivered to Marines by their platoon leadership. If the Marines Corps invests in

⁴⁴ *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1800.01G, Officer Professional Military Education Policy* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 15 April 2024), A-3.

⁴⁵ In 2022, of the 174,577 total active-duty Marines, 125,820 were between the ranks of private (E-1) and sergeant (E-5). See *2022 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022), 15.

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the communication skills of its platoon commanders, it will see an outsized positive impact on the average enlisted Marine's experience.

Conclusion

To rebalance the Marine Corps' high expectations for officer communication skills with its officer training, TBS should borrow from the field of leadership communication and add instruction and practical application exercises in public speaking, delivering constructive feedback, and leading difficult conversations. If the three training modules are implemented, officers will be better positioned to live up to the Marine Corps' high expectations for their ability to communicate. Better communicators would lead to higher morale at the platoon level, a stronger Performance Evaluation System (because reporting seniors better understand their responsibilities), and a professional officer corps ready to communicate in every clime and place, from the well-lit office to the crucible of combat.

This proposal has limitations that could be addressed with additional time and research. Importantly, it has not gone through the full five phases of Marine Corps Training and Education Command's *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual*, which is the "process for analyzing, designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating instruction."⁴⁶ The five phases exist to take a proposal like the one found here, verify its claims, and turn it into curriculum at Marine Corps schools. In conjunction with Marine Corps Training and Education Command and TBS, this proposal could be put through all five phases, starting with a survey-supported "job analysis" of the communication-enabled tasks that new platoon commanders execute. Surveys and focus groups could provide data regarding how well-prepared current platoon commanders feel to address their Marines, deliver feedback, and lead difficult conversations. The collected data could be used to move this proposal forward into the design, develop, implement, and evaluate phases of the *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual*.

Although this proposal drew largely from communication skills courses at top civilian universities and existing Marine Corps curriculum, further research could focus on how other Services teach

⁴⁶ *Systems Approach to Training (SAT) Manual*, iii.





communication skills to their leaders. Specifically, the U.S. Army has an extensive training curriculum focused on training the leadership skills outlined in *Army Leadership* (Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-22). The Army's doctrine features a leadership requirements model with competencies that include how to build trust, communicate, and give feedback.⁴⁷ The Army model may be relevant not only to inform a future TBS communication skills curriculum, but also to remedy the imbalance between communication skills expectations and training in the Marine Corps writ large.

About the Author

Timothy Morris is a major in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. He has served on active duty and in the Reserves as an air command and control officer (MOS 7202), weapons and tactics instructor (MOS 7277), and training and education officer (MOS 8802). He holds a master of arts in teaching from Tufts University, a master's in military studies from Marine Corps University Command and Staff College, and is a history PhD candidate at Kansas State University. Morris is a certified high school history teacher in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

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⁴⁷ LtCol Gerald F. Sewell, "Emotional Intelligence and the Army Leadership Requirements Model," *Military Review* 89, no. 6 (November 2009): 96.

