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Tell Me What I Want to Hear

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Abstract

All ethical decisions made by our military leaders should be based on the Army values, the NCO Creed, the Soldier's Creed, and the Warrior Ethos. However, in many cases it appears that senior leadership is being told what they want to hear and not necessarily what the ground truth may actually be. Since the GWOT is a war of attrition commanders must be informed with the latest and most up to date information in order to make timely and effective decisions that affect the battlefield. NCOs have always been and will always be the entity on the ground that offers the truth regardless of whether the information is popular or not. It is imperative that this trend always remains.

Ethics: Tell Me What I Want to Hear

The Global War on Terror (GWOT) is an unconventional war that the U.S. military has had a tough time adapting to because of the tactics used by insurgents or terrorists. In some cases this lethargy in action could be due to inaccurate reporting. Most leaders have seen information that they have passed either not being actively taken into consideration or it has been modified or misconstrued. This is due to a recent trend in the “tell me what I want to hear” approach to reporting. Unfortunately, this can lead to misinterpretations at the highest levels of command with what is really going on in the battlefield. This is an ethical dilemma for leaders because inaccurate reporting or information can cost soldiers lives. One may ask well why or how does this occur?

In many cases it is mere miscommunication. Many “type A” personalities have trouble listening. Normally they are just waiting for their turn to talk. With that comes a price because only a portion of the message is accurately being received because the receiver is focusing on transmitting when he should be receiving. The major problem with this is when the conversation changes the other guy is doing the same thing. In other cases there are leaders concerned with personal issues such as their evaluation reports or the fact that maybe they haven’t actually figured out what is going on in their battlespace and due not want to look ignorant. In other situations there is the problem of the fog of war. During the heat of combat soldiers normally pass on information that they have gathered during their engagement and sometimes this can be equated to having tunnel vision. This equates to a partial picture and any assumptions outside of what actually transpired must be critically evaluated in a thorough and concise After Action Review (AAR) when the operation concludes. Then in other cases information is being omitted or modified to paint a picture that just may not be the truth on the ground. This could be done

because of political influence which is helpful for public opinion but doesn't help win the fight. This happens today because of the influence the media has when reporting on military operations in the GWOT.

Another reason this is occurring is because in this unconventional fight battlespace owners are the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) on their Areas of Operations (AOs). This is a decentralized fight and the information starts at the bottom and works its way to the top. In that flow there are numerous people that put their interpretations of what is going on into the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) process and when the information reaches the top it is misconstrued. On the other hand sometimes higher headquarters is not in touch with what is going on in the field and is slow to react to the information passed. In either case inaccurate information or information not acted on in a timely manner can prove to be deadly for troops out on the street. When accurate information is modified or changed in order to change the facts on the ground it is ethically and morally wrong.

This is an ethical problem for those that intentionally modify or omit information that has an effect on the battlefield. This information is vital for the survival of soldiers in combat and must be reported accurately in order for future generations to learn from history. If inaccurate reporting takes place then a distortion in history takes place and those that would use that particular piece of history for use in future world events will achieve a distorted effect or outcome. They will not understand why things worked in one situation but not in another. Accurate and timely reporting has always been the mainstay of the NCO. The NCO must always be able to analyze what the situation is on the ground and report accurately. Whether that information is favorable or not it must be reported accurately to avoid a misinterpretation of what is actually taking place on the battlefield.

Imagine for a minute that a piece of information is reported at the squad level during an operation in Iraq. Now that troop reports it and adds or takes away a little bit of information to make the information favorable. Maybe it's because he wants to impress his squad leader, maybe it is because he knows that the media is watching and he wants the information favorable in their eyes or maybe it is just the fog of war. Whatever the reason let's assume information is reported as mentioned above. Then that soldier reports the information to his higher. Now let's say that at each level that information is altered just a little bit. By the time that information reaches the Battalion or Brigade commander is he dealing with accurate information? What happens if this tainted information is acted on? The reason I point this out is that it is the responsibility of all soldiers, especially NCOs and leadership to report timely and accurate information regardless of it's potential popularity.

The enemy knows the will of the American people can be easily shaken and uses that against us whenever possible whether the accusations are truthful or not. The enemy does this by changing the facts in some situations to portray something that may not be accurate. This tactic is a very powerful tool. Let us not forget that this enemy attacked us on our own soil on September 11th, 2001. Although this does not justify unethical behavior it should remind us that although we cannot become the very thing we are fighting against we must remember that their tactics stop at nothing and are only limited by their imagination. We on the other hand fight according to the Law of Land Warfare and are guided by the Rules of Engagement (ROE). As NCOs we are responsible for insuring the accomplishment of the mission and taking care of the troops. As leaders we must insure that we go into every combat situation with the most up to date information with analysis on that information completed during the planning process. We owe that to our leaders and our soldiers.

The purpose of an insurgency is to topple an existing government. In the current fight in Iraq insurgents continue to fight to avoid defeat and prolong the war. They want to make sure that there is no surrender or peace in order to wear on the resolve of the American people. This fight is asymmetrical and information warfare is a critical part. America's soldiers must operate in the battlefield with truthful and unexaggerated information. To operate efficiently and effectively it is imperative for leaders to evaluate the ground truth and pass that information to higher. This information is just a piece in the overall picture. To get the big picture correct the information passed must be accurate and timely. It is the job of the NCO to make sure this occurs and that feedback on the information happens. It is imperative in the asymmetrical battlefield that the soldier on the ground is at least familiar with the big picture so when the battlefield changes the soldier has an idea of what is coming next.

Fighting the GWOT is an unconventional fight because the enemy uses our conventional thinking against us. This is no different than when the militias of the American Revolution adopted new tactics (guerilla warfare) against England's Redcoat Army. It was at that point in history that we were considered terrorists and not freedom fighters. The foundation of a just war is based on the concept that the people of a nation have the right not to be killed. They have the right to live their lives with at least a minimum of civil liberties and human rights. This security is currently happening in Iraq because of the surge operations in Baghdad and surrounding areas. With this surge comes new information from a population of Iraqis that never before braved the opportunity of conversing with American soldiers. This opportunity must be taken advantage of by America's soldiers and the information gained from these new areas must go to higher leadership accurately in order to shape the battlefield for future operations.

Let's not forget what Headquarters Department of the Army (2004) says about combat leadership.

When you are commanding or leading Soldiers under conditions where physical exhaustion and privations must be ignored; where the lives of Soldiers may be sacrificed, then, the efficiency of your leadership will depend only to a minor degree on your tactical or technical ability. It will primarily be determined by your character, your reputation, not so much for courage – which will be accepted as a matter of course – but by the previous reputation you have established for fairness, for that high-minded patriotic purpose that quality of unswerving determination to carry through any military task assigned you. – Former General of the Army George C. Marshall. (FM 22-100, p.2-3)

As NCOs we must always do our best to get the ground truth because in today's technological world the media drills the American public with a multitude of ethical violations by American troops when in fact that may not be the case. We owe it to our leaders and our soldiers to be truthful in everything we do.

References

FM 22-100, Army Leadership, (Headquarters Department of the Army, 1999). 2-9/2-35