

Enlisted Promotions: Ethical Challenges

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Army NCOs face an ethical challenge when it comes to the promotion of enlisted Soldiers. The biggest reason for this challenge is the operational tempo and requirements the Army faces today. Multiple deployments and rapid personnel turnover have put a strain on the personnel system that hasn't been seen in decades. This strain forces NCOs to make difficult ethical choices as they guide Soldiers through the promotion process.

Filling Holes

While personnel turnover is nothing new, many military occupational specialties (MOS) have lost a greater percentage of junior noncommissioned officers since the Global War on Terrorism began in 2001.

Traditionally, NCOs spent several years training and mentoring Soldiers before recommending them for promotion. NCOs forced Soldiers to demonstrate that they could uphold the standards of the NCO Corps and lead others.

Today, NCOs don't have the luxury of carefully observing Soldiers over a period of years and then "culling the herd." Because of the holes in the junior NCO ranks, the chain of command often forces NCOs to send Soldiers to promotion boards who are either not ready to make that step or who have proved themselves incapable of being NCOs. This is the first of the ethical dilemmas in the process.

Every NCO looks at the Soldiers in his or her unit and sees one or more that they believe will eventually make a good NCO. Likewise, every NCO looks at the same group and recognizes some Soldiers that should never become NCOs.

The dilemma comes when the chain of command forces the NCO to send both groups to the promotion board.

Pencil Whip

SPC A has been in the Army for two years. During this time he has done the absolute minimum to get by and has never gone out of his way to improve himself or help others in the unit. He qualified expert with his M4 and scored 260 on the APFT without much effort. While he has had a few negative counseling statements for attitude and numerous minor infractions, he hasn't done anything illegal or immoral. He doesn't really want the "hassles" that go along with promotion, but the money would be nice.

SPC B has been in the Army for two years. He is the hardest worker in the squad and is constantly trying to improve. He learned the battle drills inside and out by working on his own and now takes the younger Soldiers through the process during every training session. His weaknesses are that he only qualified as a marksman and only scored a 230 on the APFT. He has been counseled about self-improvement and he's often seen out running after duty hours and goes to the weapons simulator every chance he gets.

If the chain of command demands that both SPCs get sent to the promotion board, many NCOs face an ethical dilemma. An NCO might feel that SPC B has a much greater potential as an NCO and take unethical steps to ensure that he is the one to get the promotion.

NCOs who take the plunge into compromising their ethics in this situation can alter or "pencil whip" APFT scores, qualification scores and so forth. This puts both the NCO and the Soldier into a compromising position, since the NCO can hold his act over the Soldier and the Soldier can threaten the NCOs career with the same information.

All of this happens because senior people in the chain of command make a policy decision that takes the recommendation for promotion out of the hands of the first-line supervisors and makes a "one size fits all" policy.

The same type of dilemma faces supervisors of SSGs or higher ranking Soldiers. Because of the OPTEMPO we have now, a lot of senior NCOs have retired or just refused to make that final “indefinite” re-enlistment. This has created a big vacuum at the top of the rank structure and promotions have come faster than ever. Since senior NCO promotions come from centralized promotion boards, the only thing the board can base its decision on is a paper trail. This has added to the ethical dilemma of NCOERs.

The Army has a long history of ethical issues with NCOERs. Unethical and lazy raters give unwarranted and sometimes blatantly false ratings to NCOs in an effort to get them promoted or to cover up the fact that they didn’t perform the required counseling, which is an ethical problem in its own right.

I often wonder what would happen if the NCOER had a signature block for the NCO’s subordinates. I think the rater would have to be more honest. Some raters try to give an NCO credit for something his Soldiers accomplished without much input from the NCO. I think the Soldiers might set the record straight.

Another ethical problem is that some raters don’t have the moral courage to stand up to their subordinates when it comes to the NCOER. The rater may create an honest assessment, but then they will let the subordinate talk them into a rating they don’t deserve.

Sometimes raters try to do the right thing and give legitimate assessments only to have more senior people, in and out of the rating chain, tell them to change it because it won’t help the NCO when the promotion board meets.

This happened to me personally. I gave an NCO an “excellent” for his job performance and “success” for everything else. The senior rater agreed with the ratings and added his bullets which said that the NCO had the potential for promotion but wasn’t ready yet.

A senior individual, who wasn't in the rating chain, sent it back and said I had to give the NCO one more "excellent" rating in some other category to make the NCO competitive at the promotion board.

I took all the NCO's counselings, APFT cards and so forth to this individual and told him I didn't think the NCO had earned anything other than "success."

My NCO took an APFT with the senior person's section the next week and ended up scoring 40 points higher than he ever had before. I didn't witness the APFT, but I was basically forced to change his rating once the APFT card was turned into the company because the SOP was that Soldiers got an "excellent" for scoring above a 270 on the APFT.

The "fill the hole" mentality that is currently the trend in the Army is causing NCOs to face even more ethical challenges. NCOs are forced to compromise their standards and send unqualified Soldiers to promotion boards or rewrite NCOERs so a body can fill a slot.

As senior NCOs it is one of our missions to ensure that all Soldiers follow ethical standards that support the Army values. Soldiers have to see us as ethical standard bearers for our units. We can not compromise those ethics when it comes to promotions. We must crackdown on any unethical behavior, regardless of who is performing the behavior or the reason.

Soldiers expect the promotion system to be fair. They deserve a level playing field where merit is the only determining factor for promotions. If we allow anyone to misuse the system, we have failed to take care of Soldiers and thus have failed our mission.

While we may feel the pressure to promote Soldiers to fill the voids caused by our current OPTEMPO, it is more important to do what is right than what is easy.

