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Ethics and Our Values, Beliefs and Norms

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For many of us, life may have dealt us a good hand or a bad hand, but for some, the United States Army was the ticket to a better and more disciplined life. People reach out for structure and order within their lives to either cross hurdles or to accomplish their ambitions in life. My escape was the military. The military established a solid foundation for me and allowed for me to escape a repeating family cycle of early pregnancy and just working to get by. I am proud to wear the United States Army uniform as should all who don their uniforms daily. I am convinced that we are elite because we have rules, boundaries, limitations and ethical values to live up to on a daily basis. Therefore, my ethics paper will cover several ethical values that are truest in my heart and not focus on one specific situation or dilemma.

The main purpose should always begin with the definition of the subject area in which you are discussing, so what are ethics? According to Merriam-Webster collegiate dictionary, ethics are, “a discipline dealing with good and evil and with moral duty” and also, “moral principles or practice (pg. 246, Merriam Webster, 2004).” I will generally focus on the latter of the two definitions. Ethics are the standards for which an individual should act based on values. The U.S. Army did our service proud by establishing and implementing, “The 7 Army Values.” The beauty of the seven army values is that there is no escaping them. No matter how you perceive a situation to be, or even how bad circumstances may appear, an individual will always apply the seven army values. The seven army values are Leadership, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal courage (LDRSHIP). This acronym is embedded in our everyday thought process and is the deterrent when a situation presents itself and it boils down to setting the example and doing the right thing.

Leaders can easily set the climate for their organizations and their Soldiers to follow as long as they enforce the standards, and live by the standards that they are preaching to their

subordinates. Sergeant Major of the Army Preston stated, “Every leader must know the standard, be the standard, and enforce the standard.” For example, many of our leaders lead by the philosophy of “do as I say, but not as I do” “or rank has its privileges” and in many cases it does, but it also sets the premise for younger Soldiers to believe that it is okay to say one thing and to do another. Many of us have sat through safety briefings and given safety briefings as well, with the key component or subject area being drinking and driving. How can we say don’t drink and drive with a straight face knowing that our next stop is happy hour or right arm night at the NCO club? This places us, as leaders, in vicarious situations especially when trouble comes knocking at our door. Unfortunately, I had one of my fellow First Sergeants experience the wrath of do as I say and not as I do, and guess what? It cost him his selection for promotion to Sergeant Major and his First Sergeant position. So let’s not always consider doing what “our collar can afford to pay for”, but let’s ensure that we do the right things morally and ethically at all times.

Furthermore, sometimes as leaders, we believe that we are invincible and that there is this magical invincibility cloak that protects us whenever we twist the truth a little bit. This is absolutely and unequivocally not true. The reality is that we live in a glass house 24 hours a day and we are constantly being observed by our Soldiers, peers, seniors, subordinates, and the community. We are the first line of defense for our Soldiers, so our integrity, honesty and bearing must be of the highest quality at all times, no exceptions. Time has told us that little white lies do not get better over time. They only ferment, like fine wine, until the time is right and the cork is unhinged and the information is spewed out and all eyes are on you.

Unfortunately, I have another questionable ethics story to share with you and this involved a very promising Senior NCO within my command. To preface this story, I would like to say

that I believe when Leaders have to live a lie, they have to live a double life as well. For eight years, this promising, fast tracking, and extremely successful NCO was living a double life. To keep a long story short, this Senior NCO fabricated his entire military career about being a Ranger, having a Masters Degree, being wounded in combat, and some other lies were sprinkled in there as well. For eight years this Soldier kept that façade up in the face of his leadership without any shame whatsoever, until the truth was brought to light by someone outside of the command from the Soldiers past. At this time, I am very sorry to say this, but when it rained it poured and when all the dirty laundry was put in the wash, the real story went into the dryer and the Soldier was discharged with an Other Than Honorable release. Bottom line is never let questionable practices to interfere with how we expect our Soldiers to succeed. Tell Soldiers the standards are always through hard work and goal setting. Our integrity and accomplishments is how we make it to the top and not by falsifying our records and achievements.

Many people have lifestyles that they keep hidden from their Soldiers and their closest confidants. As a First Sergeant, I really found out that it is not our lower enlisted Soldiers that have problems, but it is our senior NCOs and leaders within the organization that have problems. Leaders who lead by presenting a facade are the worst caliber of leaders we can have in our Army, this is very unfortunate, but it is true. We have leaders who are in debt up to their ears, we have leaders that lie to get ahead, we have leaders that are functional alcoholics, we have leaders that are adulterers, we have leaders that are immoral and have taken indecent liberties with children, we have leaders that are infected with diseases and fail to disclose this information to their partners, we have leaders that are hypocrites and live only for the glory, we have leaders that utilize government property illegally, we have leaders that will lie and expect for you to lie as well for them in order to have the best statistics, we have leaders that put Soldiers in

compromising positions, we have leaders that encourage selfishness, we have leaders that commit physical spouse and child abuse and the list goes on and on. How do we prevent these types of leaders without ethics, morals and values to value anything else when they are untrue to themselves?

I would like to share one last story about ethics and how a Chaplain, one who is suppose to uphold faith and bearing for all to emulate could be charged with spouse abuse. Yes, spouse abuse and this situation had been going on for many years until his wife finally reached out for help and called the chain of command. The Chaplain is the one person in any organization that we look up to in matters such as this. The new question is, how do we get Soldiers to believe that the people we send them to are true to their being? The answer is, we cannot. There is no way to ensure that we have the best leaders and this story is an example of that, because no one would believe that this Chaplain, who appeared to be kind and pleasant at work, could be capable of spouse abuse. Needless to say, I am not sure about what happened to him in the long run, but I do know for a fact that he was removed from the organization immediately.

I can go on and on with different stories and experiences about people failing to adhere to the everyday principles instilled in them through ethical decision making, ethical dilemmas, values, beliefs, morals, norms and training. One thing we can be assured of is that, not only have the individuals above paid the price for their mistakes, unfortunately, so have their families as well. At anytime when you have to question the validity of something, or that gut instinct is telling you not to do it, or think it over, you might want to sit down and reflect on those values that are most important to you and apply them to your decision making.

We as leaders have to be the honest brokers by assessing and handling situations as quickly as possible and in the fairest and most impartial manner. We have to ensure that we do not

impose on our Soldiers situations that conflict with the good, order and discipline of the United States Army. We have to ensure that we do not give our Soldiers general duties that may conflict with their morals, values and beliefs, and especially the seven army values. We must never place our Soldiers in ethical dilemmas that will reflect negative on their morals, values, beliefs and especially on the organization.

In closing, as leaders, if we keep true to our words and deeds, honesty, bearing truthfulness, straightforward commentary and candid with our information, we will set the appropriate examples. If we uphold our integrity by being faithful to one's convictions and following the principles of acting with honor and maintaining independent judgment while performing our duties with impartiality will help to maintain integrity and avoid conflicts of interests and hypocrisy. If we uphold the meaning of respect, treat people with dignity, and honor their privacy, we should be able to maintain a work environment free of corruption, internal conflict and turmoil. A peaceful work environment that has standards of ethical conduct, morals, values and beliefs is a work environment for any Soldier, civilian and senior leaders alike to perform their duties.