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Ethical Decisions and Leadership

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to point out the ethical decisions that face leaders on a daily basis in the Army. The topic of this paper is the importance of the noncommissioned officer being the ethical standard bearer of the unit. Specifically, I will focus on the job as a leader and how ethics plays a very significant role in the development of young soldiers and future leaders in the Army. I will include how ethics plays an important role in counseling. The importance of ethics in the enforcement of unit policies and Army regulations, to include policy letters and published unit standards. This paper explains the ethical responsibility the leader has to train and mentor subordinates.

Ethical Decision and Leadership

Ethics is defined as a set of principles of right conduct. Another definition is the rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession. In the United States Army ethical training is a requirement. There are the seven army values to use as a guideline to conduct. I define ethics by having the discipline to what is right regardless of the situation. We as leaders must ensure that every soldier knows the standard in ethics and executes every task in an ethical manner. Ethics in the military is not a decision that we can pick and choose when to be ethical or not.

Senior leadership in every unit in the military must maintain a high ethical standard. On a daily basis we are faced with ethical dilemmas. The key to these dilemmas is how we respond to the situation. The right decision must be made every time when it comes to ethics. The way we react to and reinforce the standards in the unit is important to the process of how we teach subordinates what is right. All situations will not always be in black and white. Some of the ethical decisions we face while deployed may be different than the day to day situations we face in a garrison environment. Both are important and if we are unethical in one situation we will probably be unethical in others.

Discipline and many other words may be defined differently in different places throughout the army. In one unit discipline may be emphasized more on haircuts and uniforms. Other units may place emphasize on changing your socks one boot at a time or holding your corner. However in my opinion ethics is the same everywhere. Soldiers are always watching especially at the small unit level. How leadership reacts to ethical situations will influence and affect subordinates throughout their career. Throughout my experiences I believe that young soldiers that have been trained effectively in all areas especially ethics will be solid leaders.

Counseling is an ethical responsibility of every leader, it is part of doing the right thing weather you feel like it or not. Leaders owe it to our subordinates to counsel and be totally honest with our soldiers every single time. Often times we may not want to make time to counsel an individual. It is our duty to provide honest and constructive feedback to better improve the individual and the unit.

An example of this in my last unit was when the Noncommissioned officers on the detachment would depart for a course such as Ranger school. The individual may be the best individual on the detachment. His performance may have been superior at all times and his counseling reflected accordingly. However, I always counseled and felt it was my responsibility to inform this individual through counseling that quitting was not an option. At times this wasn't easy but this was the policy of the unit and I felt it was my responsibility to inform these individuals what were the consequences if they quit and did not have injury or legitimate reason. This did not affect most of the members in the unit. However, one individual challenged me and decided to quit for no apparent reason. Then the choice was not easy but there was only one solution and he was counseled and handled exactly the way the counseling stated prior to departure to the course.

Looking at the previous situation it is the responsibility of the leadership to ensure that every individual in the unit is set up for success. The proper training must be provided to help the individual excel in whatever course or training they are attending. If the individual has not been given sufficient time or is not ready due to whatever the reason. Then the leadership has the responsibility to tell higher that he is not ready. Not just say he is ready so that a slot will not be wasted. I feel this is also an ethical decision that must be made.

Counseling on a monthly, quarterly, or as needed basis leads us into another ethical situation leaders face in the army. Noncommissioned Officers Evaluation Reports have to be written ethically, not just to promote or not promote individuals but to preserve our promotion system. Raters need to be honest and just when writing these reports justified by honest counseling during the rating period. Almost every rater does a good job on this but unfortunately there are instances where false statements are placed on this form which is definitely a violation of ethics. Many times this causes major problems inside of an organization. There is a very easy fix to this problem on ratings and counseling. Be honest, be ethical, and do the right thing every single time.

Another area that I have experienced ethical dilemmas is in the unit policies. Whether you agree or disagree with unit policies your job as a leader is to ensure that they are enforced. If the unit policies are not correct or do not meet the common sense test than it is the responsibility of the leadership to question the policy. A policy letter is in place to reinforce or reiterate the unit standard and must be briefed and enforced at all levels. Policies apply to everyone in the unit regardless of rank or position.

An example of this is if a policy states an accidental discharge results in an automatic investigation. The leadership reviews the facts or results of the investigation and decides if the action was indeed negligent on the individual. If the individual was negligent and the investigation proves that then you are removed from your position or whatever the senior commander decides to do.

The problem I have seen with this at times is that when the violator is the senior ranking individual. The actions were not done according to policy and the proper reporting procedures

were not followed. This was a violation of ethics by every member who had knowledge of this incident. An incident like this causes dissention among the ranks at all levels.

The fix to this is being the standard bearer and keep all of the individuals under your leadership informed of all policies and standard operation procedures in your organization. Make it clear the ethical decision is easy because the standard in the unit is do the right thing every single time and that is the standard. Even the violator of the policy is clear on what the policy is and how will it be handled in the case there is a violation.

On the other side of the policy letter issue is the responsibility of the commander or the person writing policy letters. Every time there is a change of command or change of responsibility in a unit the commanders say, "All policies and standard operating procedures will remain in effect." We have all seen this on change of command ceremonies. Then the assumption is made that there is no change for now and that the new commander will review the unit policies and confirm this by placing his signature in the signature block.

Personally, I believe that leaders owe it to the members of their unit to review all policies and standards using the following method. Is the policy necessary to ensure the unit is a better fighting force or safeguarding the troops? Does the policy make senses? Have the members of the unit received proper training by the leaders at their level? Is the intent clear and everyone in the unit understands what the purpose is? The policies I am expressing here are of the tactical nature and are common in the unit which I previously served.

The leaders of individual units are responsible to make the right decision in every ethical scenario. This paper elaborated on a few specific instances where ethics are needed but the reality is that ethical decisions are made across the army on a daily basis both at home and

abroad. The ethical areas which I talked about in this paper I believe are critical to the power base and professionalism of our Noncommissioned officer corps.