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Why Ethics matter in the Army

Ethics in the Army is as important as leadership is to Soldiers. Ethics is defined as a body of moral principles that set standards of behavior. These standards reflect shared values expressed in a code of ethics that members of a profession or organization agree to uphold. The principals of leadership cannot stand-alone without ethics being at the core of its foundation. In an article written by Michael P Vriesenga titled “ Are Military Professionals Bound by a 'Higher' Moral Standard?” the following statement was made. “The military, a tightly knit, intense subgroup within the larger society, requires and maintains a higher moral standard.” The article correctly confirms the functional need for military professionals to behave ethically and morally within their calling.

A strong argument can be made that because military life is higher pressure than civilian life, and because interactions between military personnel are more intense, military culture requires a higher moral standard to maintain its integrity. This important point is not only true within the military, but is just as important in terms of how the civilian populous views our military. According to the 2002 results of a survey by the Gallup Organization, The poll, which asked respondents to rate the honesty and ethics of

21 professions showed that Americans thought the most ethical, honest professionals working in the nation today are nurses, military officers and teachers.

Given all of the negative publicity the military has endured during the Iraq war, and more specifically with what happened at Abu Ghraib prison, I am doubtful that the military would be looked upon so favorable in 2005 if the same respondents were polled. How the American people view our military impacts not only our public relations, but also our ability to maintain military personnel, as well as recruit new ones. Agree or disagree, this one fundamental point impacts the Army's ability to perform and sustain its basic mission, which is to fight and win wars.

When negative events happen that involve the misconduct of military personnel, it troubles me greatly. Misconduct by service members can destroy the unit morale, community relations, and give the military service and all of its members a black eye nationally and globally. I am proud to be a Soldier. As a leader, I have always been concerned with the image that I portray and the character that that I possess. Army ethics are intertwined with strong character. Character helps us determine what is right and motivates one to do it, regardless of the circumstances or the consequences.

From my very first duty stations to the present, I would invariably see written, or hear spoken, the phrase 'Do the Right Thing.' After all of these years of service, I wonder if those are just hollow words that attempt to mask the misdeeds of so many others. Or maybe those words are intended to make you stop and think? Either way, I've become

disillusioned by them because I've seen so many leaders apposing those same words, yet doing just the opposite.

Without question, I have had more good examples of ethical behavior than I have had of bad examples. Too many times I've been placed in an ethical dilemma and failed to do the right thing. One particular incident that comes to mind was during my tenure as a Drill Sergeant. One night my Senior Drill Sergeant asked me if I had any money because he wanted to go to the NCO club and have a few drinks. I didn't have any money so I told him 'No'. He walked over to the intercom system and called upstairs to the Platoon Guide and asked him to come down stairs. The Soldier came down stairs as directed as was told by the Senior Drill Sergeant 'Your Drill Sergeants want to go get drunk but we don't have any money. I want you to take my Drill Sergeant hat upstairs and pass it around for donations. I don't want any change put in my hat'. The Soldier took off abruptly and returned shortly with a hat full of money. The Senior Drill Sergeant thanked the Soldier and sent him back upstairs. The Senior Drill Sergeant evenly divided the money between the two of us, and we then went to the club. I was so stunned and afraid, that I said nothing.

The next day, I returned the money that the Senior DS had given to me to the Platoon Guide and asked him to return it to the Soldiers. I never told the Senior DS what I did, and prayed that he would never find out. In this particular instance I knew that what we were doing was illegal and ethically wrong but I went along with it mainly out of fear and influence. I had a moral responsibility to question the Senior DSs actions but I failed to

do the right thing. In my own way I tried to correct the problem by returning a portion of the money, but I knew that my ethical values had been breeched with those soldiers beyond repair.

Often times its difficult to avoid situations that place you in an ethical dilemma. Leaders must set the right examples and create the kind of culture that reinforces to Soldiers ethical values and morality. The Army has made tremendous strides in influencing the ethical behavior of our Soldiers with such things as the Seven Army Values, The Warrior Ethos, and the Soldiers Creed. However, the Army has long fostered a culture of good ethical behavior in its oaths of enlistment, NCO Creed...etc. The problem has always been the individual and how much they valued those words of ethical morality.

Suffices to say, our ethical and moral conduct is now on public display more than it has been for the past 30 years. It matters immensely what our actions are in Iraq and Afghanistan, or in our local communities, as these actions will define who and what we are as an Army. People will not want to be a part of an organization that demonstrates moral and ethical exhaustion, nor will they want to become a part of it. How we train our Soldiers, and conduct ourselves, as leaders will have a lasting impression on our subordinates, peers, and the American public.

The military culture does and should require a higher moral standard. This point is true not only of the individual's function, but of the functioning of larger military

organization. Soldiers must maintain moral standards consistently in their lives. Leaders must continue to inject moral energy into military society if we expect our Soldiers to behave morally and ethically.