

Running Head: THE ETHICAL DILEMMA OF PROMOTION BOARDS

The Ethical Dilemma of Promotion Boards

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### Abstract

Although the Army uses regulations to govern the conduct of promotion boards in order to create an equal and fair environment for all Soldiers, Soldiers attending unit monthly promotion boards are continuously at the mercy of the board members' ethical beliefs and conduct. Promotion boards have the greatest impact on a Soldier's possible advancement to Sergeant and Staff Sergeant and yet it is the promotion board that can be influenced the most through the ethical dilemmas that board members must repeatedly contend with.

### The Ethical Dilemma of Promotion Boards

The current promotion systems used to advance Soldiers from Private to Staff Sergeant is fraught with ethical dilemmas for Commanders, First Sergeants, and recommenders alike. These dilemmas range from selection of junior enlisted Soldiers on the automated promotion list, the granting of Commander's points for promotion to Sergeant and Staff Sergeant, recommending Soldiers for promotion with waivers before they are truly deserving, and the failure to adhere to the promotion potential blocks on the Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Reports when recommending Soldiers for promotion. However, none of these ethical opportunities or issues can compare to the ethical dilemmas that face promotion boards members during the final selection process for Sergeants and Staff Sergeants. The many ethical issues promotion board panel members face, Soldiers attending unit monthly promotion boards are continuously at the mercy of the board members' ethical beliefs and conduct.

The Army uses regulations to govern the conduct of promotion boards in order to create an equal and fair environment for all Soldiers. These promotion boards are the final hurdles for Soldiers recommended for promotion to Sergeant and Staff Sergeant. As the final evaluation tool, promotion boards ensure that the most qualified and capable Soldiers earn their selection for promotion from a panel typically consisting of the most senior enlisted Soldiers within a unit. The design of the promotion board is to create an environment that is nonbiased and neutral affording every Soldier an equitable opportunity for selection to the next higher grade through demonstrated performance.

Unfortunately, Soldiers attending promotion boards are reliant on each board member's ethical beliefs and conduct, which could help or hinder a Soldier's career progression at any given time. Promotion boards have the greatest impact on a Soldiers possible advancement to

Sergeant and Staff Sergeant and yet it is the promotion board that can be influenced the most through the ethical dilemmas that board members must contend with.

Although the granting of promotion points by board members may seem like a procedural issue, it is possibly the greatest ethical issue each promotion board member encounters during every board proceeding whether they identify with it or not. The only procedural guidance presented to board members is that they can award each Soldier 25 points per topic for a total of 150 points. However, not all board members grant promotion points in the same manner and this is where the ethical dilemma emerges. As stated earlier, promotion boards ensure that only the most qualified Soldiers receive promotion and it is through the accumulation of promotion points that will eventually rank each Soldier against other Soldiers within their occupational specialty. This ranking will then determine the most qualified Soldier(s) for promotion. Some board members take the view that the Soldiers recommended to attend the promotion board are attending the promotion board because their superiors have already identified their potential for promotion and thus automatically grant each Soldier the maximum amount of points regardless of their performance on the promotion board. By granting the maximum amount of points or granting more points than a Soldier deserves, board members have failed to perform their primary duty in identifying the most qualified Soldiers for promotion and thus have violated army values and ignored the ethical conduct entrusted to them.

The second ethical issue faced by many board members is complying with guidance from many of the branch managers regarding the promotion of Soldiers within certain occupational specialties. With the retention of Soldiers at a premium, the lack of qualified Soldiers to fill Sergeant and Staff Sergeant positions, and the Army's goal of growing our own leaders it is typical of branch managers to persuade units to speed the promotion procedures of

Soldiers to greater ranks to fill vacancies. This can lead to promotion board members rubber-stamping Soldiers for promotion regardless of their actual potential and approving their recommendation for promotion based solely on their time in grade and time in service in order to fill the allotted slots within the Army with the appropriate rank structure as suggested by branch managers. By adhering to the recommendations of the branch managers, the promotion board members ignore their ethical duty to ensure only the most capable Soldiers receive a recommended for promotion to the next higher rank.

The third ethical issue that many board members face is recommending Soldiers from their own unit regardless if they deserve promotion or not. For example, during a recent promotion board a Soldier performed horribly during the promotion board procedures, however, this particular Soldier typically performed his day-to-day duties above and beyond that of his peers. Two board panel members split on recommending this Soldier for promotion with the final vote coming from this Soldier's First Sergeant. Typically, this First Sergeant would not recommend a Soldier for promotion who performed poorly on a board, however, this Soldier was from his own company and he was the initial recommender to send this Soldier to the promotion board. The First Sergeant was confronted with the ethical dilemma of either not recommending this Soldier as he would typically do or recommending him solely on his daily performance. However, if he recommended him based on his daily performance the First Sergeant would have neglected his duty and honor in ensuring an equitable promotion for all Soldiers. Luckily, the First Sergeant took the ethical high ground and did not recommend this Soldier for promotion, however, it is possible that many board panel members would negate the ethical repercussions and recommend this Soldier for promotion.

Another ethical issue typically faced by promotion board members is the overall recommendation of Soldiers for promotion to Sergeant and or Staff Sergeant who perform well on the promotion board and would thus be deserving of promotion, however, they are known to be circumventing Army values. For example, during a recent promotion board it came to light that a Soldier had misled the board members and was questioned about it by one of the panel members. The Soldier confirmed that they misrepresented the facts to the promotion board. The majority of the panel members recommended this Soldier with the justification that although the Soldier violated the Army values by initially misleading the panel members the Soldier demonstrated personal courage to admit their divergence from the Army values thus offsetting the earlier violation. The discretion used by the majority of the promotion panel members to recommend this Soldier for promotion is tantamount to a lapse in the ethical decision making process.

Even if the Army implemented a new promotion board system that eliminated board points and used the promotion board as simply a final recommendation for promotion, the promotion board would remain encumbered with ethical dilemmas. The removal of points on the promotion board would only alleviate one of the many ethical issues board members face. Although the issuing of promotion points on the board is the most common ethical issue encountered, board members would still encounter other ethical issues. As long as there is human involvement, even though senior leaders are required to be ethically sound at all times, there will remain ethical issues that board members must contend with. Although many of the ethical issues raised appear minimal on the surface, by ignoring these small ethical issues it can create a questionable ethical climate, which could lead to increased ethical violations within a unit thus having a negative impact on the morale and combat readiness.

### Conclusion

Although the Army has regulations governing promotion boards, promotion panels consistently face ethical dilemmas. Because promotion board members have vast discretionary power and there are no standard methods during the conduct of promotion boards the possibilities of ethical dilemmas will remain a constant. These ethical dilemmas cause Soldiers to be reliant on the ethical conduct of the panel members for their recommendation for promotion.