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Ethics in the U.S. Army

Charles Kidwell

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

Class #58

SGM Rodolfo Garza

7 Dec 07

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show that the military ethical standard is no different than the ethical standard in civilian life. The method used to assess the military and civilian ethical behavior is through my ethical experiences, observations, and perceptions. Great emphasis is put on military ethical standards from the time you enter the military and throughout institutional training. Our military education refers to the higher standard of ethical behavior within the military compared to civilian life. I disagree with that viewpoint as ethical behavior begins its formation from our values and beliefs from early in our lives. There is only one standard of ethics, the military standard and civilian standard has no difference. The standard will always remain the same because we all come from civilian society.

Introduction

The U.S. Army places great emphasis on military ethics from the beginning of our military service. While ethics is the cornerstone that forms our conduct and behavior, the U.S. Army stresses that standards of military ethics are much higher than in civilian life. By looking at some ethical experiences, observations, and my perception of military and civilian ethical behavior, there is no difference in the standards.

First coming into the military in the early 1980's, ethics was not stressed as much as it is now. The environment, culture, and social customs from where an individual is from forms the ethical beliefs that one's behavior begins. Even then I was taught that military ethics was at a higher standard than civilian life. At that time I considered my civilian ethical behavior to be equal to that of the military. I will be the first to say that I am not the most ethical person in the world, or even claim to be. However, I do consider myself to be fairly ethical and conduct myself accordingly compared to some personnel that I have encountered throughout my career.

Ethical Experiences

It was after about a year in the military before I realized that military ethics could be taught and encouraged, but trying to change an individual's standards of behavior was difficult if not impossible. If someone did not have a strong ethical foundation to begin with, it was not going to start at that point in life. Joining the military does not automatically give you a new standard of ethical behavior to maintain.

My first few years in the military unethical behavior happened off duty more often than it did on duty. The off duty unethical behaviors that I experienced were mainly from the junior to mid-enlisted ranks. My view was not only from a junior enlisted Soldier, but also from a mature point of view due to being older than most Soldiers of the same rank. Rarely senior enlisted

personnel were seen displaying poor behavior. I am not saying it did not happen, which it did, but it was not an everyday event.

A few years later in my career, I began to notice that unethical behavior was almost as common on duty as it was off duty. It also appeared to be working its way higher in ranks. The behaviors seem to accompany the “looking out for number one” belief. I relate this to promotions and advancements becoming more competitive and some personnel feeling they had to bring down someone so they could get ahead. I had several experiences in which some of my subordinate and superior leaders conducted themselves in a manner to make them look good at the expense of others. Their interests were not for the good of the unit or Army, but to make themselves look better at the expense of someone else.

One experience that I ran into was as a platoon sergeant. I had a male section sergeant who was having a relationship with the female platoon leader. The relationship was ongoing for a while unknown by anyone. When I had first heard rumor of the situation I confronted the section sergeant and was told that it was not true. I also approached the platoon leader and was also told the same thing. After a short time, a couple days, the section sergeant approached me and told me that it was true. The platoon leader came to me later and told me also that it was true. I was in the dilemma of making sure the interests of the platoon, unit, and Army were first, while trying to protect the rights of both individuals. While I felt betrayed by each, I had to maintain my ethical principles for everyone involved. I did take the issue to my leadership to allow proper actions to be commence.

The experience met with several factors of ethical behavior on the part of the two personnel and me. The first part was how I dealt with behaviors from two individuals that impacted the unit. As being part of the unit and put in the middle of an unethical situation, I was

being evaluated by my subordinates on my ethical behavior of handling the situation. The second part was how to maintain my ethical behavior and ensure the interests of the unit and everyone concerned was handled properly. It definitely put me in an ethical dilemma in coping with the circumstances.

With the above cases in point it definitely looks as if the level of unethical behavior is increasing along with the levels of rank of personnel conducting the behavior. I relate this to society and the acceptance of such behavior. The military is nothing more than a snapshot of a mass society. So as social behaviors change in civilian life it only makes sense that they will change in military life as we are products of our society. Maybe that is why greater importance was placed on military ethics at the entry of service level and increased in yearly training.

Some years later it looked as if ethical behavior dropped to even lower stages. Unethical behavior among senior enlisted personnel increased both on and off duty. With even more pressure to get promoted, more “back stabbing” to get ahead seemed to be the norm. The interesting part of this is these were the same junior enlisted Soldiers from years ago who had advanced through the ranks.

Involved in a situation myself, my subordinate leaders tried to get ahead at my expense. These were people I had worked with for many years, but for some reason felt the only way to get ahead was to try to discredit me. I stuck with my ethical principles and overcome the issues without any immediate cost. However long term cost may not be fully known.

Observations

Every day I observe many situations of behavior from junior enlisted to senior enlisted, on and off duty that does not surprise me anymore. Maybe I realize that due to the way society views acceptable behavior, it will not be any different than in the military. Not to say that the

military condones poor behavior, but that it mirrors the behavior in civilian life.

Throughout my career and attending schools through the noncommissioned officer educational system, I thought that unethical behavior would be uncommon within the courses. I did expect some at the first and second levels, but not at the third and fourth levels. As I observe behaviors, I have to wonder what type of example is being set for their subordinates. With these types of behavior happening within our professional education system, it would only make sense that it is worse in the units. Some would argue that this is the time to relax because of only being among peers, but within the unit they are different. Basic ethical behavior should not change due to the type of environment one is in. One may change certain aspects of their behavior to adapt into the environment at that time, but one's actions remain consistent.

Perception

My perception on military ethics may vary greatly than someone else's. I can only base my perceptions off of my experiences and beliefs. By trying to change my belief that military ethics are higher than those in civilian life is the wrong approach. From being in the military for several years and receiving numerous classes on military ethics, it has not changed my beliefs or behaviors. Especially when I see the difference of what is being taught and what is actually happening from my viewpoint. There are no differences of ethical behavior in the military than those in civilian life.

Conclusion

I conclude that standards of ethical behavior between military and civilian life are the same. Either someone is ethical or they are not. There can be certain elements of standards that may differ due to the type of environment one is in, but the standard remains the same. When someone enters the military their values and beliefs have already formed their ethical behavior.

The military society has changed along with the civilian society of today. Trying to change someone's ethical standards by embedding the training into our institutional development will not accomplish its goals. Through my experiences, observations, and perceptions, the military and civilian standard of ethics will remain the same.