

Ethical Fading: The Commonality of Consenting Deceit

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Unethical decisions have insidiously become a mainstay of the United States Army. They are so prevalent (and accepted) that what should be obvious to an ethical leader, has instead become a veiled choice of operation in the Profession of Arms. In response to the underlying current of this destructive action, it would seem the Army has mostly turned a blind eye toward the conduct as if almost denying its very existence. The Army must do more than recognize this significant issue, as in good faith it can no longer accept the status quo. Its failure to tackle this behavior head-on would result in further degradation throughout all levels of leadership, adversely affecting the relationship between the leader and the led, while simultaneously undercutting the Army's priority: the readiness of the force. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the ongoing problem with ethical fading through the perspective of the ethical lenses, discuss the military culture that tolerates it, examine the impact it delivers on readiness and relationships, and finally, to provide solutions to reverse course on the consequences of this negligent conduct. In the article *Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior*, when referring to this behavior, Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) state, "The end result of this con game is that ethical aspects of the decision 'fade' into the background, the moral implications obscured" (p. 223). This revelation alone, which is steep in reality, is an honest and forthright deduction to the import of the message, and conclusively the grave matter at hand. This paper will identify and define ethical fading, discuss causes through the ethical lenses of rules, outcomes, and virtues, and elaborate on how it impacts relationships and readiness of the force, while exploring possible solutions to the issue as a whole.

Ethical Fading

The demands of today's Army often place leaders in situations where the line between right and wrong becomes morally faded. The supposed ambiguity resorts in unethical decisions that on the surface seem harmless, however, the continued practice moves the line further toward nonexistence. In their report *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*, Wong and Gerras (2015) state, "We continue by examining the effect on individuals and analyze how ethical fading and rationalizing allow individuals to convince themselves that their honor and integrity are intact despite ethical compromise" (p. 2). Unfortunately, this conduct is pervasive across all formations, eroding trust and reputation at every level. The authors continue later in the report with their definition of ethical fading, stating, "Behavioral ethics experts point out that people often fail to recognize the moral components of an ethical decision because of ethical fading. Ethical fading occurs when the 'moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications'" (Wong & Gerras, 2015, p. 17). These are the exact reasons why the Army must face this matter vigorously. Currently, when so much is expected (and rightfully so) of the institution, it can ill afford to kick the can down the road, proverbial speaking. This is the era when the Army must course correct. The first step in this process is to identify the cause of the problem through the assistance of the ethical lenses.

Ethical Lenses

There are several reasons why ethical fading is such a rampant problem. However, the most prominent reason is the easy manipulation of data to reflect a favorable outcome. Whether it is a report for training that has a fast approaching deadline, or a situation that has potential for dire consequences, blurring the lines of ethics appears to be far too easy and commonplace. To

better illustrate this point, the following examples will be viewed through one of the three ethical lenses: the rules lens, the outcomes lens, and the virtues lens.

The rules lens states one perspective originates from the view of, "...the set of agreed-upon values or rules, such as the Army Values or Constitutional rights." (Army Doctrine Reference Publications 6-22, 2012, p. 29). When applying this perspective to the following situation, it is clear to see that the rules lens was ignored: at a recent promotion board, there were reports that the raters for senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were recording taller heights to keep their weight within the regulation (Wong & Gerras, 2015). The impacts of honestly reporting the true data of an overweight NCO would of course result in unfavorable action, and possibly early separation. The leaders who choose to change data toward a desired outcome are circumventing this process and violating the rules lens. The message, then, is that it is easier to change data than to follow Army regulations, or in this case, disciplined in physical fitness and healthy eating habits. This conduct also breaches another aspect of the rules lens: Army Values. Manipulating data in this situation goes against six of the seven Army Values: Loyalty, Duty, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage - excluding only Respect (there is an argument for encroachment upon that value as well).

The outcomes lens is based on, "...the consequences of the decision on whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number as most favorable." (Army Doctrine Reference Publications 6-22, 2012, p. 29). The application of this lens fits many aspects of unethical behavior in the Army. Leaders continually fall into the ethical trap of justification, convincing themselves that it is for the greater good, or the age-old adage, everyone else is doing it. This is a slippery slope, as its premise is that certain past behavior was accepted, and our current behavior is almost identical, so it must be acceptable to not only continue this practice,

but also condone that very practice (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). A great example of this is counseling on the Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER and NCOER Support Form). Army Regulation 623-3, Evaluation Reporting System, states that initial counseling is conducted within the first 30 days and then quarterly after the initial counseling. The Army's plan to ensure compliance is for the rater to digitally sign the counseling on this schedule. The problem with this regulation is that more often than not, it does not happen. It is common knowledge this is occurring as almost every leader has been involved with this process at some point in their career, and usually repetitively (Wong & Gerras, 2015). This widespread acceptance of known unethical behavior is a slowly spreading cancer that affects all involved, causing a detachment from ethical thought and action. It would be wise to assume that the negative effects of this practice have far-reaching consequences that would be difficult to quantify.

The third and final ethical lens is the virtue lens which expresses, "...the view that desirable virtues such as courage, justice, and benevolence define ethical outcomes" (Army Doctrine Reference Publications 6-22, 2012, p. 29). This lens enjoys vindication from the leader under such guises as empathy, genuine care and protection of subordinates, and accomplishment of the mission. Although examples of unethical situations examined through the virtue lens may seem rare, on further study they may be more common than first perceived. This could hold especially true in combat-related activities. For example, imagine that a leader in charge of a patrol captures an insurgent with intelligence of an attack on coalition forces planned in the next few hours, but the enemy refuses to give any information about the operation. Realizing there is not enough time to get him back to a base with interrogators to thwart the attack, the leader has two options: interrogate him on the spot (although there are strict directives that this course of

action is not permitted), or detain him and take him back to the base to hand over to actual interrogators. Obviously, there is a dilemma as the leader weighs the options, to include the possible second and third order effects of both courses of action. It is an ethical decision that may seem on the surface and in the heat of the moment easy to rationalize, nevertheless, the leader must use sound judgment before moving forward (Kem, 2006).

Impact

The first casualty to ethical fading is the relationship between the leader and the led, as this is where the decision to behave unethically is experienced first-hand and usually emulated. Unfortunately, the subordinate's belief system and comprehension of what transpired can negatively affect how they view the application of ethics. For instance, a leader may be under pressure to approve falsified paperwork to meet a deadline for a subordinate's packet submission as a one-time event. Yet, the subordinate may interpret that action as being okay when in a bind, and when put in other situations that call for unethical decisions. They may not have the experience or maturity to know that the one decision made by their leader was an isolated event and use their new learned behavior in any situation they deem appropriate. This is one reason the example of Army leaders in ethical decision-making is paramount and not to be taken lightly.

These behaviors also lead to the continued rejection of knowledge through self-deception and repeated exposure to ethical dilemmas (current state of Army leaders). An "ethical numbing" takes place and the ability to make ethically appropriate decisions becomes diminished. This is due to difficulty in noticing the ethical component of the dilemma, which in turn leads to further unethical behavior (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004).

The next casualty strikes straight to the heart of the Chief of Staff of the Army's number one priority: readiness. The main reason the Army has regulations and enforces them feeds straight into this concept. In reality, the evaluations, reports, and training records that fall victim to rampant ethical fading are all indicators the Army uses to measure the readiness of the force. When leaders falsify indicators across formations, a factual record is difficult to obtain. When the Army uses these markers to measure readiness, the accuracy of the actual readiness is skewed, and not in the positive. To undermine the Army's number one priority with unethical behavior is unacceptable. Ultimately, the actual cost of what many deem as a necessary evil is the most precious resource the Army has: even human life.

Solution

Pinpointing a single fix for this issue would not be effective, as the nature of the underlying problem transverses a spectrum of circumstances. Nevertheless, if not addressed effectively, the status quo will continue to degrade the morality of the force. If the Army desires to maintain integrity amongst its leaders and those that follow them, it will not tolerate this behavior. Despite the fact that many consider this is a "gray area", in truth, there is a distinguishable line. Over the course of several decades of ethical fading, that line is blurred and the leader's blindness toward the issue has set in. The learned blindness is a product of the process as well as the inability to do more than just recognize the problem while at the same time consciously ignoring it. In order to reverse course there must be a change in the Army culture.

First, the Army must realize that cultural shifts of this magnitude do not happen overnight. It took decades in the making and will require years to correct, combined with patience in the process. Second, this change must not be from the top down, but from the bottom up. This begins in open dialogue with lower-level and mid-level leaders focused on the issue

first and then ideas on how to address it. This strategy allows for buy-in at the foundational level that will prove crucial to implementation and success. The ideas will then be filtered up through operational leaders and then strategic leaders. Third, develop the plan after buy-in from all levels of leadership. Part of that plan will encompass new ways to incorporate ethical training into current training. Fourth, implement the strategy. Because the strategy started at the roots of the organization, commitment will quickly follow compliance. Fifth, a marked improvement of pride in the organization of the U.S. Army. This final step is crucial to the level of success achieved. Much like the assessment process throughout several leadership models that runs simultaneously to the various steps, a targeted approach to raise pride in the organization begins during step one of this strategy, and continues throughout the execution and beyond. Following these steps in this manner will successfully change culture.

**The above dialogue discusses ways to change the culture of the Army in relation to ethical fading as it is in an overarching Army problem. The application of these same steps at the unit level will also provide a degree of success. One of the major issues faced at this level is the high turnover of leaders, losing ones that have learned and developed ethical traits, to new leaders arriving without the same development. Nevertheless, a solid plan for the integration of incoming leaders will rectify this issue.

Conclusion

The U.S. Army has a problem that it has recognized but is not yet fully committed to solving. Although, the Army has come a long way with many successes over the last several decades, part of this rapid growth has a downturn or negative by-product manifested in the coinciding growth and perpetuation of ethical fading. One must ask, when did this behavior become acceptable? How do these actions better serve the Army? Where is the line or limit of

advance? If it is okay, when does it stop? The answer to these questions are obvious when written in black and white, but when not asked it seems the default is the sacrifice of ethics upon the altar of expediency. The Army and the people it employs would be better served to incorporate lasting change in the ethical environment. Although it would be a challenge, it would be a worthwhile endeavor as improving ethical standards through addressing ethical fading would create an ethics-based organization. This type of cultural shift would go far to eliminate many more issues than just ethical fading alone. Therefore, addressing this problem head-on would change the culture and improve the organization known as the U.S. Army for the foreseeable future.

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