

Senior Leader Ethics in the Army Today

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Ethics in the Army has been a major focus of our nation and our leaders since the beginning of the Iraq War. Serious ethical issues such as Abu Gharib prisoner abuse and basic training Soldier abuse happen because some senior leaders use their authority to behave unethical in small ways. This sets precedence and allows more serious unethical behavior to occur. Some ethical dilemmas are more serious than others but just the same, it is the question of “doing the right thing” regardless of the size of dilemma or the hardship that comes from it. Many leaders believe that small unethical practices aren’t the problem; a little white lie never hurt anyone. This is a dangerous attitude to have and an unethical precedence to set.

Field Manual 22-100, Army Leadership states, “The Army cannot tolerate unethical behavior”. Leaders constantly give and receive training on the Army Values and ethical behavior. Leadership should be easier with responsibility, authority, and rank to influence and make ethical decisions. As senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), we like to think we can make a difference in all aspects of Army life and operations. Many times however, senior leaders will use their increased authority or rank to take advantage of a situation. The increased authority becomes an abusive tool. Eventually, unethical behavior is common practice for accomplishing missions. Increased authority for some reason gives many senior leaders the idea that all previous responsibilities no longer exist. This should never be true.

Many examples of small ethical dilemmas can explain this concept. Take for example, the senior staff NCO who has the power to decide when and where the next staff assistance visit will take place. The staff visit from a northern brigade headquarters to a subordinate battalion located in sunny Florida will happen in the middle of winter, despite a major exercise that is

happening simultaneously. Another example is the battalion commander and command sergeant major (CSM) who don't attend mandatory Equal Opportunity or any quarterly training. These leaders create an ethical dilemma for the first sergeant who has to report numbers of trained personnel in Quarterly Training Briefs and Quarterly Narrative Statistic Reports. Soldiers also recognize that senior leaders don't attend this training. Therefore, they think the training is not important. These actions are very damaging when setting the precedence of "doing the right thing" or emphasizing the importance of training.

A platoon sergeant faces a dilemma when rating his squad leader in the inflated Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER) System. The ethical dilemma is that the squad leader is a good leader but not the best according to the instructions on the NCOER form. The platoon sergeant believes the squad leader should be promoted on the upcoming promotion board. He gives the squad leader a "1/1" rating and substantiates the bullets for an excellence marks in four of the five areas. He must do this because NCOs without "1/1" ratings don't get promoted, right? Certainly, every NCO in the unit cannot be "among the best" or have "1/1" ratings but every year the board members see these trends on the promotion boards.

The NCO who takes his last two years in the Army to get ready for retirement is another questioned ethical behavior. Suddenly the hard-charging NCO comes to a halt with any responsibility of taking care of Soldiers. He shows lack of concern in mission accomplishment. The only thing he has focus on is the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) seminars and the government contractor job waiting for him on the civilian side. To make this situation worse, the chain of command allows his prolonged absences. The CSM excuses him from any training requirements such as the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) and weapons qualification. By the

way, he reported as current and trained in these areas when reporting statistics in the Quarterly Training Brief.

Finally, the senior leader who turns a blind eye to the quality of life of junior Soldiers is the worst case of unethical behavior. This leader doesn't have time to focus on barracks issues or tensions among young Soldiers due to cultural differences. His excuse for negligence in these areas is always that it doesn't have anything to do with the mission of preparing to deploy. Meanwhile, the degradation of these serious issues will halt any mission accomplishment in the future.

Many leaders will say these ethical dilemmas aren't serious or "cheating a little" doesn't hurt anything. The small issue, such as a senior leader not attending mandatory training leads to major ethical problems, such as Abu Gharib prisoner abuse and basic training Soldier abuse. This happens when senior leaders accept the unethical behavior as a norm. Those leaders at some point set the precedence that it is acceptable to "cheat" in subtle ways. These senior leaders use their authority to act unethically. No one questions or challenges their decisions or lack of guidance. During these moments of unethical thinking or decisions, leaders who are senior to the leaders acting unethically turn a blind eye. Perhaps these leaders expect or even demand them to make an unethical decision. Many senior leaders in command also don't check their subordinates or assess their unit climates. This lack of responsibility in itself is unethical.

Actions that senior leaders would never accept in a subordinate are the very actions that many senior leaders do. Whether it is too much authority or forgetting their responsibilities, it is wrong. Many senior leaders get relieved when this happens, but more continue to act unethically until their actions catch up to them, if they ever do. Unfortunately by this time, these unethical

decisions or actions have severely affected our Army's reputation. More sadly, these actions have negatively affected or have cost Soldiers' lives. Senior leaders must never compromise their integrity in ethical dilemmas for the sake of personal profit, convenience, or complacency. We don't expect Soldiers to act this way based on the Army Values. Ironically, Soldiers will become the leaders we are by watching senior leaders today.