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Ethical Dilemmas in an Army at War

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Abstract

Balancing Soldiers' workload requires leaders prioritizing tasks with Soldier readiness and welfare in mind. Many factors like information technologies make that task a difficult one especially with the influence of email. Leaders at all levels face difficult ethical dilemmas while balancing Soldiers skills training, Army training requirements, and the care of family members. Serious issues like safety programs deserve to be placed at the center of attention, but instead we face realities that when discussed openly could make some of us look unprofessional and even not fully competent in our duties. Some leaders choose to sacrifice their personal agenda to fulfill mandates from higher headquarters while still taking care of Soldiers and maintaining combat readiness.

Information technologies, the increased workload created by the Global War on Terrorism, and personnel shortages have put a lot of stress on our Soldiers' lives. Commanders at all levels constantly face having to change their training due to unexpected mandates or situations that assume a higher priority than their scheduled events. This operational tempo causes leaders to struggle balancing mission requirements against the quality of the execution of tasks thus creating numerous ethical dilemmas.

Ethical dilemmas plague our ranks every day when leaders, forced to balance pre-combat training against garrison requirements, feel compelled to fill up their schedule thus working Soldiers longer hours and significantly decreasing the quality of their product. This happens, because the environment in which some Soldiers operate does not provide them time to execute all the tasks properly. If anyone will take the time to list all requirements for Army companies to maintain, one would easily recognize that the goal is unrealistic. Examples of this are systems of Safety, equal opportunity training, MOS qualifications, maintenance, health assessments, and much more. These, along with the current combat deployments, are examples of situations creating many ethical dilemmas affecting Soldiers in today's Army.

Senior Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) struggle to manage operational requirements against many Army mandates that in a perfect world will be necessary, but in today's combat situation represent an unrealistic set of requirements that continues to be "finger drilled" by many "Garrison Warriors." Common Tasks Training (CTT) standards, training in Nuclear Biological Chemical (NBC) tasks to include the NBC Chamber and NBC Marksmanship, and qualifying Soldiers for the many appointed duties required by Uncle Sam are examples of the dilemma of prioritizing tasks. Just as we modify those requirements, NCOs can use common sense to alleviate many of the burdens caused by a system that puts us all in frequent ethical

dilemmas.

Some of the things that information technology has brought to our lives have been unpredictable changes to training schedules. Any person with authority at division level can send out guidance for lower echelon units to execute regardless of their planned scheduled activities. The internet allows leaders and system managers at all levels throughout the Army to issue guidelines on a variety of issues. One of these issues is the execution of safety training and inspections designed to improve safety records and prevent accidents.

Unsafe acts usually trigger reactions that result in a phenomenon call a Safety Stand-down. These situations are loaded with ethical dilemmas that ironically at times force Soldiers to cut corners and sacrifice safety. At the most inconvenient time, one of this necessary but often reduced to “covering your rear end” events can cripple the execution of a very “sexy” operation. Ethical dilemmas seriously aggravate work related stresses and create bitterness that spreads through the ranks causing a negative effect in the unit’s morale. An example of this happened while I served as HHC 1SG of a light infantry battalion. A serious incident involving a deployed sister battalion triggered command emphasis on fixing safety deficiencies causing our entire division to “take a knee and drink some water.” Unfortunately, the mandate came during a weekend preceding a week-long battalion Field Training Exercise (FTX.) The staff had worked tirelessly on the orders process and the commander had already issued his Operations Order. In a non-combat commander’s short and precious command time, an FTX is like a Christmas toy just out of the rapper; they cannot wait to play with it. That is when guidance drifts to the dangerous waters of complying with the letter but not the spirit of the law. When Soldiers are required to receive briefings, log-on to a website, fill-out a survey, and be read a General’s letter on safety, while still adhering to the same execution timeline of an FTX, the leadership is

implying that a “thumbs up” is good enough to move on to better things. Of course, “better things” means the commander’s career progression. I know what you are thinking, “this writer has an attitude.” Well, sometimes reality has an attitude and if I did not care about my Soldiers welfare and the example that I was setting for them, going with the flow would have been the easiest thing to do. That is when leaders with nothing to prove and a lot to protect take the common sense approach. We sacrifice our own agenda to fulfill the selfish one. As long as the “big name” exercise takes place, we can all “high five” and trade digital pictures at the end.

As a 1SG aware of the situation, I remained professional when communicating with frustrated subordinate leaders, complying with directives related to safety, and convincing my commander to sacrifice training events already scheduled. We agreed to cancel some training in order to safeguard preparation time. Preparing for training entailed too many safety related issues to take away from the initial plan. As most Army leaders know, time to prepare and time to recover from operations are the most neglected periods of our training events. During the preparation phase of the operation, drivers dispatched vehicles, leaders inventoried equipment, new guidance was issued regarding changes, team leaders ensured that equipment was properly rigged and secured, and some of our perfectionist type of leaders were allowed to take their time to ensure future success. I was proud of my influence in the commander’s decision-making as well as his willingness to take my advice in consideration. I say that because company commanders are subject to a lot of pressure during their time alone with the battalion commander. We watched elements from our battalion send people to the motor pool during time allocated to safety briefings, some recalled Soldiers from home during the weekend to make up time and still meet the original timeline, and others followed directives making the whole unit accomplish fifty percent of each task standards.

Conclusion

The realities of war change the dynamics of many things written as standard procedure or scheduled activities. Soldiers find themselves having to do more with less and leaders must continue to apply their leadership abilities to accomplish the unit's goals while maintaining a combat ready force. This environment exposes leaders to many ethical dilemmas and causes frustration that requires good teamwork, flexibility, and Army values to achieve mission success and win in the battlefields.