

Ethics, Power and the Forbidden Zone

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Oftentimes we as leaders face the difficult task of balancing our personal values with those of society and our organization. What might seem as a personal matter could also be assumed as a military item of interest. Additionally, issues thought to be of military concern, may be judged by society. An item of interest brought to the forefront in today's Army is the issue of sexual misconduct of our leaders. Sexual misconduct demands the attention of leaders in our Army. Sexual misconduct is a potentially explosive mixture of supervisory power, sex and unethical behavior which can brew unnoticed. This type of behavior can be a career ending experience along with loss of faith in our leaders. When sexual misconduct occurs, it can be termed "the forbidden zone". One would be mistaken to declare that this problem does not exist. At times, these same individuals who ignore the problem can unknowingly perpetuate its existence and become a deterrent to the solution. Those who seek exposure or appropriate actions for sexual misconduct are frequently labeled as a nuisance or annoyance. No issue is more important to operational effectiveness than the morale of our Soldiers. Nothing destroys morale more quickly than unethical sexual behavior.

The Army's position concerning ethics has not changed even though violations by military members are presented for the public's view on a regular basis. Ethics guide our behavior or in simple terms, they direct us to do what is right as leaders. On the other hand, our values are an issue of morality or inner judgments that determine how we behave. To be ethical, the leader must intend no harm and respect the rights of all affected parties. Ethics and values are not interchangeable. Values concern ethics when they pertain to beliefs about what is right or wrong, but most values have little to do with ethics. Similarly, ethical leadership emphasizes the importance of integrity, honesty and a consistency between our values and behavior. Luckily,

most ethical situations guide us to use ethical reasoning. Once defined by our personal and Army values, the right decision can be made.

The forbidden zone translates into unethical behavior by supervisors when they choose to step into an arena of sexual activity deemed unethical by the Army. An example would be inappropriate relations between a supervisor and subordinate. This type of relationship not only has a detrimental affect on unit morale, but violates the trust of the leader – led relationship. Although physical attraction to the opposite sex is normal, leaders must decide whether or not this attraction will lead them into unethical conduct. Biological urges that drive our behavior are not evil or socially unacceptable except in professional relationships. If one party has the ability to influence and the other is dependent, reliant and trusting, then biology can become a powerful motivator to the wrong behavior. Leaders must exercise control over their desires and not give in to inappropriate behavior. Even if leaders ignore the examples of their fallen comrades, ethics and values, they must come to realize that Army Regulation and the Uniform Code of Military Justice both offer clear consequences for sexual misconduct. Conduct must be professional, beyond reproach, and never offer even the slightest hint of impropriety.

Sexual misconduct usually involves a person motivated by power-power over another person's life. In fact, most sexual misconduct goes unreported because of a person's fear of their supervisor's power. An example is the well known situation where an NCO serves in a training capacity. These leaders have an enormous challenge of transforming civilians into Soldiers. They are granted authority inherent to their position and responsibility for their Soldier's livelihood. Some trainees view these leaders as pictures of perfection. In fact, Soldiers might even choose to one day emulate these NCOs. Leaders are empowered to accomplish missions

and take care of the welfare of Soldiers. Of course there is a natural power imbalance between a leader and subordinate. Most leaders are aware of their power as well as their limits and avoid doing wrong. Power can be used in a positive manner in order to obtain a certain desired behavior without the existence of an obviously abusive working environment. A leader who chooses to abuse power and enter into a sexual relationship with a subordinate should realize that their misconduct is not compatible with operational effectiveness. A consensual relationship between a leader and subordinate is never appropriate no matter the circumstances. Power, combined with sex creates an opportunity for unethical behavior.

The Army has come a long way to dispel outward forms of sexual discrimination. Ethical behavior is a wide lane to manage. Senior NCOs can do their part by mentoring, and setting the example for all to see. NCOs and Officers who choose to behave unethically will eventually learn that their decision was costly. We can do our part by teaching, counseling, motivating and by being positive role-models to young leaders. We as senior leaders must demonstrate ethical conduct in order to be successful and sincere in our line of work. Some are tempted to behave unethically because it is the path of least resistance. The boundary between what is ethical and what is not becomes hazy at times and leaders must guard against going beyond the limits of the boundary. No matter how successful we become, we must keep in mind life's golden rule.

In conclusion, we as professionals must behave ethically and realize the limits to our power. We are also responsible to ensure that we abide by policies governing our behavior. Living by a code of ethics is not easy. If nothing else, our conscious should guide us between right and wrong. Ethics is important in all that we do.