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Rec for Haines Award

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Gifts for Superiors

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What is ethics and what situation constitutes an ethical dilemma? Webster's dictionary defines ethics as "a set of moral principles or values". An ethical dilemma is created when a situation involves an apparent conflict between two possible rights. Does purchasing gifts for your superiors create an ethical dilemma?

Regardless of what morals and values you were taught as a child, once you entered the military, you adopted the values of the Army. The Army respects the different moral backgrounds and personal convictions of its Soldiers so long as their morals and values are not in conflict with the Army values.

As leaders, we are obligated to provide Soldiers with situations that are morally and ethically right. Leaders must possess moral character, ethics and live the Army's values. How many times have you been placed in a position where your supervisor presented a situation that violated one of the Army values or presented an ethical dilemma? Many senior NCOs and officers, regularly violate those obligations.

Throughout my military career, I can recall two distinct incidents in which I felt went against one of the Army values or created an ethical dilemma concerning gifts. Despite the Department of Defense having guidelines, which outlines procedures for giving and receiving gifts, problems may arise. I'm sure at some point in your military career; you have been assigned to a unit where a leader of yours, the Battalion Commander or Command Sergeant Major, was PCSing or retiring. Normally, a senior staff member is tasked to solicit and collect donations from unit members in order to purchase the gift. Does this create an ethical dilemma for Soldiers within the Command and should units have standard gifts for departing members?

The Department of Defense follows the guidelines from the Joint Ethics Regulation. The Joint Ethics Regulation provides a source of standards for ethical conduct, ethics guidance, including direction in the areas of financial and employment disclosure systems, post-employment rules, enforcement, and training. The Joint Ethics Regulation provides the maximum dollar amount of a gift and the maximum dollar amount a person can contribute toward a gift. The regulation explains occasions, which allows a person to accept gifts and defines gifts.

Leaders receiving gifts from their subordinates, in my opinion, can create an ethical dilemma. Even though gifts are permissible by regulation, what about Soldiers who elects not to donate toward the gift? While serving as a First Sergeant at the Indianapolis Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS), I remember when my Eastern Sector Commander PCSed. The Eastern Sector CSM contacted each of the First Sergeants in the sector asking each MEPS to donate ten dollars toward the Commanders gift. Although the Sergeant Major did not instruct the First Sergeant as to how they would collect the ten dollars from members in their command, I did not solicit donations from my staff members. If Sergeant Major did not receive the requested donation from a First Sergeant, he would send an email stating he had not received monies from everyone. Sergeant Major did not identify the individual MEPS not making contributions toward the purchase of the gift, but would address the First Sergeants directly. The Joint Ethic regulation clearly states that donations must be voluntarily.

Again while serving as a First Sergeant, one of my additional duties was the Contract Operating Representative (COR) for the meals and lodging contract. As the COR, I was responsible for conducting inspections on the lodging facility the enlistment recruits

stayed at prior to processing at the MEPS. One Christmas, I received a huge gift basket filled with different cold cuts, crackers, cheese, and various cheese spreads from the contract hotel management. Many of the Soldiers and civilian employees did not understand why I was hesitant to accept the gift. They were solely interested in the contents within the beautiful basket. As the First Sergeant, this became an opportunity for some professional development training. Although the unit received ethic training yearly, the Soldiers and employees did not consider me to have an ethical dilemma.

I did not want to offend the hotel management by not accepting the gift, but I knew accepting the gift could create a dilemma. My supervisor immediately contacted our Headquarters legal section and discussed what course of action to take. The basket was placed in the unit's lounge so that everyone in the organization could partake of the contents within the basket.

Leaders would not create dilemmas for Soldiers if units allocated funds to purchase a standard gift for departing members. Soldiers, who are not financially able to provide a contribution, would not feel pressure from subordinates or peers. Standard unit gifts create equality throughout the unit and possibly eliminate personnel from receiving gifts in which they really don't want.

In closing, there is nothing wrong or unethical with Soldiers purchasing gifts for their supervisors. The purchase of gifts becomes an ethical issue when Soldiers are unduly influenced or coerced to do so. I believe Soldiers show appreciation to their supervisors by being devoted to duty and being loyal to them and this country.