An ethical problem facing the Army today

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A key ethical problem in the Army today is how the senior leadership functions. Having been in the Army for 22 years, I've seen more than my share of poor decisions being made. I have seen key leaders make poor decisions based on what they wanted to do and not what was good for the mission or personnel based on their rank and position. These types of decisions are counter-productive within an organization.

In the military you're taught that you must respect the rank, but it doesn't say that you have to respect the person wearing the rank. Too many leaders today have forgotten where they came from. We were all privates or lieutenants at one point and time in our careers. The military is not a democracy, but has a regimented structure. We all must follow orders, but when those orders are considered morally questionable and unethical, this becomes problematic throughout the entire organization.

When subordinates ask why a decision has been made a certain way, in some circumstances, the answer stated is "because he/she is the ranking person and they said to do it". That is a cop out and it doesn't explain the reason for the decision. If a Soldier asks a question, it's because he/she doesn't understand why or how the decision was made. They usually want to learn for their own personal and professional development. We must do a better job of explaining decisions. We mustn't lose sight of the fact that our actions will have an impact on future decisions. We are training tomorrow's leaders. I have found that if you take the time to explain why and how you reached that particular decision, Soldiers will accept that answer and follow without further questions.

If you make a mistake as a leader, you should acknowledge it and take corrective action. This not only demonstrates to your peers and subordinates that you are truthful, but also that you are not afraid to admit when you are wrong. This is not a sign of weakness, but of strength, morality, and conviction. If you have to state your rank and authority the possibility exists that you're not really in charge.

In today's society we have more and more of our key leaders being questioned about their decisions, moral obligations, and character. We have had answers that span from "I was unaware that was wrong" to the extreme of committing suicide. We are quick to condemn and persecute subordinates but tend to "cover up" anything embarrassing that might occur at the senior leadership level. Is this a double standard? Is this a "do as I say and not as I do" society based solely on public and professional stature? Do our leaders think it is beneath them to answer to subordinates and be held accountable for their actions?

Are people losing faith in our leader's ability to make sound decisions? Has our leadership forced productive Soldiers out of the Army? Soldiers are not dumb and for the most part they are well educated. You can't keep asking Soldiers to deploy over and over again without repercussions. You can sugar coat it any way you want, but the bottom line is that given the opportunity Soldiers are voting with their feet.

The reason for this is because we as leaders have failed them. We have made hollow promises and have changed the rules to accommodate our actions. By doing this we have given Soldiers no option but to terminate their service in the Army. Given the current situation of being at war since September 2001, this has had an impact on retention, but leadership has played the larger role in forcing Soldiers out of the Army.

The leadership's ability to regain what has already been lost is evident in today's Army retention and recruiting programs. The leadership's approach to the current dilemma faced by today's Army is to put more recruiters on the street to bring in more personnel. Statistics show that their plan is not working. They are actually using more money, additional training, and resources while yielding a small return. This is referred to as a bad business decision. In corporate America today there is an abundance of businesses that have filed bankruptcy because of poor business practices. This brings up many questions that need to be answered. The same soldiers that we have forced out for one reason or another are the voice of the military on the streets. Think about it, if you wrong one soldier and he/she leaves the Army with hard feelings, returns home and talks to ten friends concerning his/her version of their service in the Army, you have effectively used a disgruntle soldier for counter-recruitment purposes .

We should use more of our assets towards retention. The Army already has an investment in every soldier currently in the Army. If the leadership were to broaden their strategy by approaching retention more aggressively while truly considering Soldiers, they might be able sustain the force.

As leaders, we can't accommodate everyone with what they want, but at least we can show Soldiers that we are fighting for them and not giving lip service. We are told whenever going to another country that we are ambassadors so act appropriately and don't disgrace our flag. It would be good for a change if we followed this policy with our own Soldiers. Soldiers with families would like to watch their children grow up, in today's Army that's hard. When you are away from your family you can't get that time back. Some Soldiers feel that they have done their duty for God and country and now they must devote time to their family. I ask you this, "Do you blame them"?

I am not saying all the leadership is bad or is ethically wrong, but as leaders we need to keep each other in check so moral and ethical dilemmas are eradicated before inception. It only takes one bad apple to spoil a bushel. It is also imperative that before reaching a decision, staff the proposed action and see if it passes the common sense test. Do not plan in a vacuum, hasty decisions create a ripple effect that can eventually cripple an organization. Remember decisions made today are consequences that we must live with tomorrow.