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Ethics and Dealing 1

Running head: ETHICS AND DEALING WITH SEXUAL HARRASMENT

Ethics and Dealing with Sexual Harassment

by

SGM Phyllis A. Neal

SGM Gonzalez

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Abstract

At one time in the recent past, sexual harassment in the military reached crisis status. Things have gotten better in the past five years; however, sexual harassment continues to be a problem in all branches of service. So, where does ethics fit into the continuing problem of sexual harassment? Why does sexual harassment continue to take place? How do we combat this on going problem? Lastly, is sexual harassment prevention linked with ethics? The writer will use information collected from research on this subject and offer the reader a logical conclusion to issue of ethics and dealing with sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment training is mandated by the United States Army to be conducted at least twice annually. The media is constantly reporting on incidents of sexual harassment. The Army has experienced the backlash of high profile sexual harassment cases, which have taken place in the last ten years. The incidents of sexual assaults have become a pressing issue not only in the Army but also in other military branches of service. The Army has a zero tolerance policy on sexual harassment. We have the Army values, Warrior Ethos, Soldiers Creed, NCO Creed and standards of conduct. Is the Army still experiencing sexual harassment incidents in the new millennium? The answer is yes, which begs the following questions. Does sexual harassment impact unit readiness? Why does sexual harassment continue to take place? How do we combat this on going problem? Lastly, is sexual harassment prevention linked with ethics?

Before getting into the weeds of this ethics paper a definition and statistics of sexual harassment necessary. Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination that involves unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a nature when: submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting that individual, it creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (Army Command Policy, 2006). Some statistics include the below:

Nine out of ten women under age 50 who had served in the U. S. Military and who responded to a survey reported having been sexually harassed while in the service. Nearly 1/3 reported having been raped (Murdoch and Nichol, 1995). A study of 160 female U. S. military personnel showed that 66.2% had experienced verbal sexual harassment, 33.1% had experienced physical harassment, and 7.3% were sexually assaulted (Wolf, et al, 1995). According to a 1995

Department of Defense study, 78% of women in the military had been harassed on or off duty by military personnel (Coburn, 1996). In the federal workplace, 66% of the sexual harassers were married; 37% of the sexual harassers were supervisors; 43% of the victims were “sure” the offender had harassed other victims; 3% were sure the offender had not harassed other victims. A 1998 survey of 20,400 military personnel found that the commanding officer’s attitude toward sexual harassment had a great influence on how much harassment female Soldiers in the unit experienced (Pryor, 1993). With these troubling statistics, one can only surmise that sexual harassment is a serious problem in the military. The question is how do ethics play into this whole crisis.

As senior noncommissioned officers we are charged with the responsibility of mission accomplishment and the wellbeing of our Soldiers. When sexual harassment takes place in our Army it directly affects unit readiness, which ultimately hinders mission accomplishment. General Omar Bradley stated that integrity, honesty, and moral conduct are essential elements in a good leader (The Secretary of the Army Senior Review Panel Report on Sexual Harassment, 1997). Many leaders agree with his statement; however, some leaders feel that these values do not apply in their personal lives as well as some aspects of their professional lives. Some maintain that if it doesn’t hurt anyone else, an individual can do whatever he or she wishes and that individual’s personal life is no person’s business. This philosophy applies in the civilian sector to some degree with drug use, alcohol use, having sex, lying, cheating, etc. This philosophy does not work with the Army. The Army requires a high level of professional skill, commitment, and willingness to give our full measure of devotion. A large part of mission success depends on the degree of trust and understanding that exists among Soldiers of an organization. Sexual harassment breaks down that degree of trust. Soldiers must function as a

team that is unified through trust, and loyalty. The shared values and shared risks of the military environment distinguish it from other large institutions (The Secretary of the Army Senior Review Panel Report on Sexual Harassment, 1997). Creating and sustaining unit cohesion is the responsibility of the leader. That said leaders must ensure that sexual harassment is eliminated because it tears away these qualities that are essential to unit readiness. There are several things that senior noncommissioned officers can do to combat sexual harassment.

We must build integrity and ethics within ourselves and impart the same towards our Soldiers. Laws and punishment should be the last reasons for us to do what is morally right. Given the earlier statement that moral conduct in the civilian sector is not what moral conduct should be in the Army, leaders must recognize that the young people coming into the military today have not been taught about ethics and moral conduct. This is not said to discount any efforts made by the families, churches, and community of these young Soldiers. However, Soldiers must understand and embody the values and standards of conduct commensurate with the Army values. Leaders must frequently and consistently define and teach moral behavior to these young Soldiers. Again, the fear of punishment as a consequence of not doing the right thing should not be our goal. We must instill in them what is morally right and more importantly the ability to make the morally right choices over the wrong choices.

The next and probably best thing we can do as leaders is set an example by being congruent with our character as professional noncommissioned officers. Soldiers look up to us and will emulate what we do including the good, the bad, and the ugly. If our lives reflect morality and integrity on and off duty, our influences will pay in dividends. If the reverse happens, failure as leaders is imminent. Simply put, if we exhibit the nonverbal, verbal, and

physical sexual harassment behaviors, we are sending the signal to our Soldiers that these are accepted behaviors in our Army.

Doing what is ethically and morally right regarding prevention of sexual harassment is directly linked to unit readiness. We are supposed to live by the Army values, Warrior Ethos and Soldier's Creed, which are also linked to unit readiness. When sexual harassment occurs we compromised all of these. Through examples the link or relation of all of these components are better understood. A Soldier sexually harassed by another member of the Army may lose Respect for their leaders, peers, and the Army. The harasser compromises integrity, honor, and duty. A third party witness compromises personal courage for not reporting the incident, as well as selfless service and loyalty. In terms of compromising the Warrior Ethos, the mission is not placed first and someone has left a fallen comrade. Lastly, the Soldiers Creed is compromised; someone did not act as a member of a team or lived by the Army values.

Sexual harassment is something not to take lightly. The Army has a long tradition with a high and demanding standard. The nobility of the Army resulted from the nature of war and the conditions of service. Soldiers are expected to possess military values in all facets of their lives. The military is not a job similar to those in the civilian sector but a way of life. Performance, professionalism, and standards of conduct are believed to be higher than those in the civilian sector; after all, based on our mission, they have to be. That said we must have instilled in us and must instill in our Soldiers ethical standards and moral obligations. Leaders and Soldiers should serve as a symbol of all that is best in the national character.

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