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Ethics & SAF Values

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Abstract

Over the years, our society and military have changed. It has become more apparent that values and ethics represent a thin line between right and wrong with influence like materialism, achievement, wealth, and peer pressure. This paper presents my thoughts on the military values and ethics in my Armed Forces. I strongly believe that in order to be an effective and professional leaders, we need to enforce and place our values, integrity, and moral courage in top priority.

Ethics & Values

Ethics and values system are the cornerstone of all military organizations. History and case study have proven to us that it is not uncommon to see our seniors, peers, and our Soldiers walk along the thin line of ethical dilemmas in their daily business.

My definition of ethics and values reflect a leader's ability to lead, to make sound decisions, to judge right from wrong, and good from bad. The other definition that we commonly use is "firm and fair". It is always easier to say than put it into action because it takes a lot of moral courage even if it is a simple decision. As a noncommissioned officer (NCO), we are the first line manager and we are constantly scrutinized by our Soldiers and commanders on our professional managerial skills.

Effect on Soldier and commanders

I believe most of us have been into a situation as whether to reprimand or report the wrong doing of a senior commander. An example is the evaluator on Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) push up or pull up station. How many of us would tell them "no count" even if they are not making the standard, or telling them that they are an "immediate failure". In the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), failures are disciplinary dealt with, and for repetitive failures, some may even be dismissed from the Army. A lot of times, we have seen others turn a blind eye to it. Some individuals often place themselves before the organization or nation which often leads to unethical conduct like altering test results. It is sad to say that most in most cases they were the senior commanders. Knowing that a significant amount of time and money was invested to groom them, they are expected to uphold the core values and be the role model for junior leaders. In this case, that individual failed to lead according to the moral and ethical values of SAF. During my last tour as Command Sergeant Major in an infantry battalion, I had

to recommend punishment to one of my outstanding NCOs due to absent from place-of-duty without official permission. The decision that I made has affected his career advancement and promotion. Did I consider his future, his past performance, and my commanders and Soldier reaction if I were to give the punishment not according to “market rate” and I turned a blind eye? What would the Soldier, NCOs, and officers’ perception on me? Although the decision was an easy thing for me to make, but I still had the dilemma on how I can help him to avoid the punishment. Through this experience, I have reinforced my belief that a leader at any level will have to keep a clear line between boss and subordinates. This line allows us to hand out punishment or make decisions with less emotional attachment, but again it must be dealt with professionalism and organization interest.

Integrity is the next important military value of a professional Soldier. It takes maturity, up holding the honor, trust, moral courage, and commitment. But integrity can also fall onto the other side of the fence.

During one of our annual best unit evaluations, units competed amongst themselves in term of unit operation procedures, individual soldiering skills, training standards, safety standards, logistics, and administration procedures. The intent was to enhance combat readiness through a healthy competition environment to instill fighting spirit and professionalism throughout the SAF. This is the mechanism that SAF uses to gauge a units’ readiness short of going to war. The best combat units will be recognized and presented by the President of The Republic of Singapore during our Armed Forces Day. The best combat unit in the Army will signifies great achievement to the unit as well as to the individual. As such, most commanders will go all out to clinch the trophy. But there are some that will go the extra mile to straighten things out at all cost. They will loan stores equipment, if they cannot account for it, and worst

case is altering the data input to make it accountable. During one year, one highly regarded unit was found guilty on fabricating results in order to win the award. The unit commander was relieved from command and disciplinary actions were given to all those that were involved.

Self interest and achievement is always the evil of most causes but the worst side is not showing the unit's genuine status and operational capabilities. In war, deficiency of equipment and standards will cost the life of many Soldiers. I would instead suggest that we shall "win ethically with integrity", and not for personal gain. To achieve organizational excellence, sometimes blinds our thoughts and our ethical values. Do they think that they have infringed ethics and integrity? I am very sure that most of those commanders were well trained, with good academic records, and definitely sworn by the flag to pledge allegiance. But sad to say that they still made the mistake of crossing the evil line to win at all cost.

Society and leaders

Will money and life styles affect the military? These subjects have been the around with most people in today's modern society. One of the key success factors for Singapore's economy is competitiveness. Singapore's economy continues to strengthen over the years and civilian sectors are getting more competitive and stocks market rise. Since Singapore is a business hub in this region, information technology, job competition, cars, and housing are daily topics we discuss. As such, the Singapore Armed Forces takes a very serious view to indebtedness. It is definitely taking a toll on our military ethics and values system as indebtedness is becoming one of the hot topics in our forces as it has critically tarnished our image as professionals.

Materialism and temptation in a fast moving country like Singapore has caused a rise in indebtedness cases in the SAF and it will be the "must talk and must brief" topic come December of each fiscal year. One of the contributing factors lies in the society and life styles in

Singapore. It is only natural that most individuals seek and strive for a comfortable and socially respected life style, like going after the 5 Cs. These include certificate, cash, credit cards, car, and condominium.

Inevitably, active servicemen and women in the SAF have often got themselves into trouble in perusing their dreams. On this, I will classify them into the junior commanders and senior commander levels.

The junior commanders would spend most of their money in clubbing, latest cell phones, and computers. They will try very hard to own their first credit card (At least US\$18,000 per annum to qualify) and the trouble starts there. Due to the high over draft credit, bankruptcy, and finally dishonorably discharge from the forces. Others will borrow money from peers and subordinates to satisfy their needs.

As to the senior, they would like to own expensive cars, shares, and private properties to realize their dream. They tend to spend their future by applying advance credit or other forms of unsecured loans based on the both examples, they have violated all the SAF core values and the rights to lead mentioned as follows:

Leadership – As leader, they should not set a bad example to peers and subordinates. He shall demonstrate competence to lead and inspire others to excel.

Loyalty to Country – They are the protector of the nation. They shall not compromise their position in term of monetary issue and selfish acts.

Discipline – Leader shall have the self-discipline to control and manage his temptation. He is exemplary and responsible to showcase that he is a disciplined Soldier that they can depend on.

Professionalism – As a professional Soldier, they must make sound decisions to do things well and right. They must serve with pride and honor, and shall not cross the line of trust, and integrity.

Fighting Spirit – This is inner strength to win, commonly know as perseverance and determination. They show a very negative behavior in term of self-discipline and character. This will damage team bonding and greatly affect the fighting spirit.

Ethics – Ethics represents exemplary conduct and moral courage. It allows us to know what is right from wrong. We shall not misuse the authority against anyone. Commanders must be trustworthy and upright with unshakable character. They loose their moral ground to instruct and teach.

Care for Soldiers – Showing genuine concern of the Soldiers well being, training, and equipment support is one of the most important ways to improve morale and confidence. They loose the confidence from the Soldiers.

Despite these minority cases both examples have greatly tarnished the reputation of SAF. All banks will not hesitate to take legal action against Soldiers once they default on the payment. Although the stiff actions to punish indebtedness are good for the overall image of the SAF, we are also losing good potential leaders which SAF is currently needed. This poses an ethical dilemma for the organization on whether to offer help or to protect the image of the SAF. In my opinion, the SAF should allow some form of loan to first time defaulters and educate them along the way. Units can also invite professional financial advisors for counseling to those potential defaulters so that they will not fall into the financial trap and ruin their careers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, leaders are the guiding torch of your Soldier and the reflection of your action. We strive to develop leaders with professional ethics and values. Fellow leaders must have the moral courage to guide them back on course if they disorientate. We must stand firm to our beliefs in order to influence, build commitment, and finally improve the organization to a better fighting force.

References

All accounts based on experiences of the officer 1WO Teo S K