



Ethics Thought Paper: A Standard is a Standard

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A standard is a standard, and all standards must be enforced. The Army develops regulations to ensure that certain standards are met and maintained. Army regulations are law and will be followed by everyone. If Soldiers and leaders follow the established standards, they will not find themselves in an ethical dilemma nearly as often as they do if they fail to follow them. As Noncommissioned Officers (NCO) it is our responsibility to enforce standards established by the regulation, not create new ones. Neither you, nor I have the right to overlook the established standards as outlined by Army regulations. Similarly, we do not have the authority to arbitrarily create new standards for the purpose of making ourselves look good.

Sometimes, our superiors place us as leaders in ethical dilemmas. I will give you an example that happened to me. As a 1SG, my Battalion (BN) Command Sergeants Major (CSM) told me that in order for a Soldier to attend the Primary Leadership and Development Course (PLDC), they had to score a 70 on each event of the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) and had to tape at 2% below their maximum allowable body fat. He informed me of this because one of my Soldiers scored less than 70 points on his pre-PLDC APFT and I sent the packet forward to be processed. I obviously asked why considering both of these requirements are in direct conflict with Army regulation and I

had no previous knowledge, as I was new to the unit. The reason he gave was even more abstract in my opinion. He said that it was embarrassing to the unit if a Soldier either failed the APFT or denied enrollment for being overweight/body fat. I replied that it would be embarrassing to the Soldier, not to me. I further protested this additional standard by highlighting how unfair it is to the other Soldiers. My BN CSM asked, "How in God's name is it unfair to the other Soldiers?" First, Soldiers are supposed to be able to meet the standards all the time, not just when preparing for military Schools. I told him that another Soldier came to me after scoring a 307 on his Pre-PLDC APFT and asked if he could wait another month to attend because he wanted to work on his physical fitness. He said that he did not think he would get the "Iron NCO Award" unless he was able to get at least a 325 on the extended scale. The CSM looked at me inquisitively and asked, "I hope you told him no, I don't want any no-shows." I said, "Of course I told him no. I told him he will go when he is scheduled and he will get what he gets on his APFT." I continued by asking the CSM, "How can I tell SPC Jones 'NO' when he is exceeding, and even setting new standards and then turn around and give SPC Smith an additional month or more to make sure he can meet the minimum standard?" The CSM simply stated, "That's my policy!" and walked off.

I went back to my office and reviewed FM 21-20 and AR 600-9. There was no doubt in my mind that SPC Smith was within standards and should attend the next PLDC class.

I now have two very different courses of action (COA) of which to choose. I could blindly follow my CSM and enforce a policy that is not within the regulation, or I could follow the standards established by the regulation.

COA 1: If I followed the CSM guidance, I would be in violation of the established standards and therefore establish a new standard. I do not think that it is fair to allow a Soldier extra time to prepare for attendance at NCOES unless you are going to give all Soldiers the same opportunity. If I allowed Soldiers additional time to meet the standard, I would also have to allow Soldiers to pick which class they wanted to attend based on their personal schedules. What if a Soldier doesn't run well in the winter or colder months and requests not to attend until it warms up. Is there a difference, if so, what is it? Or, I have a Soldier that is scheduled to attend during the month of November and also has his family coming to visit. His wife just had a baby and several family members plan to visit for the holidays. The Soldier approaches me and requests to postpone his attendance at PLDC until January of the following year. Once the standard is changed for one Soldier or circumstance, you place yourself in a situation that requires you to review all the circumstances in order to demonstrate fairness and impartiality.

COA 2: If I follow the standards outlined within the regulation and go against my CSM, he will label me as disloyal. If I process the packet and send the Soldier forward, the CSM will have to make the decision and inform the Soldier instead of making me do it. What other bridges will I burn by doing this? How much of an impact will this have on the relationship between us? Will this bleed over onto everything else my company does and keep us from succeeding in our mission? These are the thoughts that go through your mind when you find yourself in an ethical dilemma.

In choosing the course of action that best represents the Army values, I chose COA 2. Once the Army system determines that a Soldier should attend NCOES, they should attend. If they are not able to attend because they cannot pass an APFT or meet

the Height/Weight standards, they should be processed within the guidelines of the regulation. If they meet the minimum standard, they should attend NCOES and take their chances. In the event they fail to meet the standard for attendance at an NCOES, they will be disenrolled and sent back to their unit. It will then be the responsibility of the unit to process them within the guidelines of the regulation and retrain them.

The next day after much thought, I returned to the Battalion CSM's office to discuss the issue again. I further explained to the CSM how I had analyzed the situation and was not comfortable holding the Soldier back until the next class since he had met the minimum standard. I further explained that after speaking with the Soldiers' platoon sergeant and reviewing the counseling packet, that I was convinced this particular Soldier had low personal standards and would require a substantial investment of coaching and mentoring to raise his standards. I was committed to spending the time and effort to do this upon his return from PLDC, but not before. The CSM reluctantly agreed to let him go under one condition, if he failed his entrance APFT it was going to be my responsibility to explain it to the Brigade CSM. I enthusiastically agreed by saying, "Gladly Sergeant Major, I can't take the APFT for him and neither can the Brigade CSM." Situation solved, no bridges burnt. The Soldier passed his APFT with the exact same score and I avoided a trip to the Brigade CSM's office.

The standards outlined within Army regulations are there for a reason. They are there to guide leaders in the development and enforcement of policies. Yes, there are always exceptions that require leaders to deviate from or request exception to our policies. However, to create a new standard for guarding against embarrassment to self or ones unit, or to avoid having to see the boss on an unfavorable topic demonstrates bad

judgment and a flagrant disregard for established regulations. Ethical leaders do the right thing for the right reason all the time, not just when someone is watching.