



Realigning the Army's Ethical Compass

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There is concern across the Army of an ethical crisis among its leaders. A renewed emphasis on a discussion of the meaning of the Army profession and ethics has cascaded across the institution. We hope the Army Ethic may help guide individuals' characters and decision making.¹ The Army's goal is to build character and the discipline to enable individuals to make the right ethical choices.³ Current efforts are designed with the assumption that ethical decisions are consciously made.

Unfortunately, they do not take into account fully the underlying psychological tendencies that drive unethical behavior or situations that lead "good" people to make unethical decisions.⁴ We must come to a more complete understanding of why leaders may make corrupt, discriminatory, or unethical decisions.

"...[We] can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness."⁵

Research in socio-psychological studies show there are limits to the cognitive abilities of individuals in decision making and in determining their choices.⁶ We often lack all the information and time to properly frame the issue and develop the full range of options and consequences; this leads to choosing



solutions that are just good enough or that "satisfice."⁷
Exacerbating this is the brain's use of heuristics to simplify decision making--under certain conditions those heuristics are not appropriate and cause faulty judgment or biases.⁸ A few tendencies are highlighted to emphasize the importance of understanding our cognitive biases.⁹

Every day, we make decisions that are influenced subtly. When we read the plastic cards in our hotel rooms that previous occupants had reused their towels, the percentage of us reusing our towels increase by 26%.¹⁰ This is the principle that drives us to behavior that is similar to others, especially if they are like us.¹¹ Managing this principle can help in the development of ethical behavior.

How problems are framed affects our decisions. Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky showed that most of us tend to be risk adverse when presented with negatively framed problems and risk seeking with positively framed problems.¹² They presented respondents with a case in which a disease is projected to kill 600 people.¹³ They offered two choices: Program A [200 people survive (72% selected)]; Program B [one-third chance 600 people survive and a two-third chance no one survives (28%)]. However, when the choices were framed differently, a different situation arose: Program C [400 people die (22%)]; Program D [one-third chance no one dies and two-



third chance 600 people die (78%)]. The outcomes of programs A (72%) and C (22%) are the same while the outcomes of programs B (28%) and D (78%) are the same. The framing of issues is critical to how we choose alternatives in addressing problems.

If we are not checking for ethical violations, we may not see it. This is true especially if behavior is incrementally leading toward the "slippery slope" of unethical behavior.¹⁴ We are more likely to accept others' unethical behavior if it occurs gradually over time rather than in a singularly apparent event or choice.¹⁵ This slippery slope is exacerbated by a tendency to commit to a previous decision. We focus on information that confirms our beliefs for a previous decision and commit to a decision because we want to show consistency with what we have already decided, even if it may be wrong.¹⁶

The bias of overconfidence can be the "mother of all biases."¹⁷ It leads to "...the tendency to be too sure our judgments and decisions are accurate, uninterested in testing our assumptions, and dismissive of evidence suggesting we might be wrong...[and] to believe we have more control than we actually do."¹⁸ Other negative biases become greatly enhanced. Some researchers see ethical failures by leaders as being a "by-product of success."¹⁹ Context and situations affect ethical behavior. Overconfidence convinces us that we can be objective and immune to influences brought on by success. Evidence is to



the contrary.²⁰ Incentives and self-serving perspectives can twist the objectivity we believe we hold.

Finally, the fact is we are all capable, in certain circumstances, of making unethical decisions.²¹ The Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments are cases that showed situations can lead "good" people to do unethical acts even when they were against doing such acts.²² Even a single negative word description against another individual influences how we perceive that individual and affect our decisions and behavior toward that individual, often times unconsciously.²³

Unethical decisions are not simply conscious choices.

Setting the Azimuth: Developing an Ethics Strategy

Generally, people attribute ethical failures solely to an individual's volition. This leader is motivated by greed, a sense of entitlement of being in a position of authority or power, and a belief of exemption from rules and regulations.²⁴ This incomplete understanding has led to a call for an Army Ethic, more ethical training, and a greater "sensitizing" to ethical issues. Yet, evidence is inconclusive on whether studying about ethics and ethics programs increase ethical behavior.²⁵ Unfortunately, many ethics programs only address symptoms or portions of the issue leading to mixed results.

The development of an Army ethics strategy must be done in a holistic manner. It requires a valid "program theory"



determined by appropriate experts. This necessitates identifying, analyzing, and linking the needed inputs to the outputs of the strategy resulting in its outcome, ethical behavior. Frequently, we have a bias that assumes our choices and the consequences of those choices are related even when further study may show they are not.²⁶

Often, we make correct predictions despite incorrect assumptions or beliefs of how people behave or the way the world works.²⁷ However, in strategies with layers of complexity, wrong notions of cause and effect will undermine the strategy. Furthermore, because we place an inordinate amount of importance on individuals' personality traits, we frequently miss the importance of situations and context in affecting behavior.²⁸

Setting the Waypoints: The Components of the Strategy

The ethics strategy should educate leaders to better understand how decisions are made. It should create mechanisms within the Army's institutional structures that provide the right incentives to positive ethical decision making. The strategy should also facilitate developing a culture that promotes such behavior. An unbalanced focus on any one area likely will create an ineffective effort in creating the right behaviors.



- The Army should incorporate the study of judgment in decision making into the institutional education curriculum.
- Education should focus on critical thinking, heuristics, and the biases that drive decisions. This provides an understanding of how the brain functions and the cognitive biases that may impede ethical decision making.
 - Showing how framing an issue, perceiving an ethical issue in different ways, or using certain words leads to different decisions with differences in consequences can be illuminating.
 - Providing prescriptive decision making steps will be effective when leaders understand how judgment works and the underlying biases that may limit the use of such steps.
- Development of the knowledge of ethics.
 - Like the use of formulae in mathematics, having a contextual understanding of when, how, and why to use the ethical frameworks is effective. This is true especially in realistic scenario driven training.
 - A significant portion of the training should include examples of how ethical lapses occurred and how to avoid them rather than just focus on how to make good ethical decisions.³⁰



The second area is in creating mechanisms that provide positive incentives for ethical behavior. One area is with the leaders' evaluation system. Currently, the evaluation system is weighted heavily on performance and results. While the goal is for senior raters to evaluate potential, the propensity for leaders to evaluate based on results is undeniable.³¹ Shifting the weight to evaluating leaders on the process and logic of their decisions, as well as results, may provide a more conducive environment that alleviates the pressures for unethical decision making.

The incentive would be for leaders to be systematic in their decision making versus being compulsive or subjective. There would be incentive for leaders to reflect and think about the consequences of their decisions. Creating the right incentives is important in developing leaders with appropriate behaviors and reducing risk aversion.

The third area is in creating a culture of ethical behavior. Over time, the Army Ethic will help in solidifying the identification of the individual to what it is to be an Army professional. However, the level of identification to the Army Ethic will be only as strong as how Soldiers perceive leaders to be adhering to the Ethic and vice versa. What others think and do have an influence on our thoughts and behaviors. Ethical



behavior is likely to breed ethical behavior in others. We must be wary of attitudes and behavior that exhibit group think and therefore, incentives for individual thought should be encouraged.

Framing the issue of ethical lapses as behavior resulting from choosing to do wrong versus right does not adequately and clearly define the nature of the problem. Ethical behavior and decision making are complex and dynamic. There is a flawed assumption that making ethical decisions is simply a matter of an individual making the "right" choice. Developing an effective ethics strategy requires an insight into the cognitive limits to decision making, complexities of human nature, and the context within which leaders make decisions.

Notes

1. Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, Mission Command Center of Excellence, *The Army Ethic*, white paper (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2014), 11.

2. The Hippocratic Oath within the medical community is one example of a code of ethics. It is important to note that codes of conduct and ethic within the US military, other militaries, and professions have not prevented ethical lapses within those institutions and professions. Understanding why ethical codes of conduct and ethics programs requires understanding why unethical behavior occurs:



competing forces of the way an individual's brain functions, perception to the individual's situation and surroundings, and others' behaviors all play a role.

3. Raymond T. Odierno, "The U.S. Army: Trusted Professionals for the Nation," *Army Magazine* 64(10) (2014), 28. See the CSA's quote from that page: "At the heart of every soldier must be unwavering character. Character is what defines us. Character is about understanding the moral and ethical values that we represent as well as being able to navigate the ethical dilemmas that we face during our careers."

4. Max H. Bazerman and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "The Social Psychology of Ordinary Ethical Failures," *Social Justice Research* 17(2) (June 2004), 112. Additional studies on the role of situations and context that drive good people to behave unethically: Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007), 197. Furthermore, in this paper, I am not considering the ethical considerations of the "right versus right" choices. The focus of the paper is on ethical decisions that may lead to what the public generally sees as being corrupt or discriminatory.

5. Quote from Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), 23 (Kindle edition).

6. See Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice and Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 15; and Max H. Bazerman and Don A. Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 8th ed. (United States: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 3.



7. Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 5.

8. In their seminal work, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman showed there were three heuristics that underlie intuitive decision making: representative, availability, and adjustment and anchoring. Subsequent research has shown additional heuristics and biases that can cause faulty decision making. *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* can be found as Appendix A in Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011) starting on page 419 (Kindle edition). The article was originally published in *Science*, Volume 185, 1974. Additionally, Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, capture many of the current thoughts on heuristics and biases.

9. More examples of biases and how they can affect our decisions are listed in Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 7-10. Heuristics allow decision makers short cuts to deal with the complexities they face. While heuristics work favorably in many situations, the short cuts and biases can also negatively affect decisions. This is what leaders need to be educated on to ensure awareness of such situations. The important point is that the heuristics and biases can impede good decision making and can affect our ethical behavior.

10. Noah J. Goldstein, Steve J. Martin, and Robert B. Cialdini, *Yes!: 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive* (New York, Free Press, 2008), 11 (Kindle Edition).

11. Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), location 1926 (Kindle edition).



Some psychologists have noted that the principle of social proof is a psychological phenomenon that drives people to follow others' behavior. This is especially true in situations where a person is uncertain what to do (and therefore, looks to see what others are doing) and even more likely in situations where the person sees the others as similar to him.

12. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 436 (Kindle edition).

13. The description of the decision making case of the Asian disease and the details of that experiment are detailed in Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 435-436 (Kindle edition).

14. Ann E. Tenbrunsel and David M. Messick, "Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior," *Social Justice Research* 17(2) (June 2004), 228.

15. Francesca Gino and Max H. Bazerman, "When misconduct goes unnoticed: The acceptability of gradual erosion in others' unethical behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45 (2009), 717.

16. Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 127-130.

17. Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 14.

18. Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 15.

19. Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton O. Longenecker, "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failures of Successful Leaders," *Journal of Business Ethics* 12 (1993), 265, accessed 1 November 2014,

<http://ksuweb.kennesaw.edu/~uzimmerm/Notes/Ludwig+Longenecker,%20The%20Bathsheba%20Syndrome.pdf>.



20. Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 144 and 154.
21. Gino and Bazerman, "When misconduct goes unnoticed: The acceptability of gradual erosion in others' unethical behavior," 717.
22. In their books: Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974) and Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007), both Milgram and Zimbardo discuss the results of their experiments that played a tremendous role in increasing awareness of the importance of context and situation in determining one's behavior.
23. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, 19.
24. See opinions such as Paul Grossgold and Ritch Eich, "It's Time To Put A Stop To Ethical Lapses In The Military," *Forbes*, May 5, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/05/25/our-armed-forces-deserve-better-than-scandals/>.
25. Max H. Bazerman and Francesca Gino. "Behavioral Ethics: Toward a Deeper Understanding of Moral Judgment and Dishonesty." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 8 (2012), 89 and Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr. and Allen P. Webb, "Business Ethics: A View from the Trenches," *California Management Review* 37(2) (Winter 1995), 24.
26. Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 39.
27. Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*, 2nd ed. (Great Britain: Pinter and Martin Ltd, 2011), 7. An example of the successful predictions based



on incorrect beliefs is that of a ball rolling to a stop. Ross and Nisbett discuss the "intuitive notion of momentum" where the mistaken belief is that "...a force applied to an object gives it a store of energy that gradually dissipates. The correct notion (that of inertia) requires that objects at rest remain at rest and that objects in motion remain in motion, unless some other force is applied."

28. Tenbrunsel and Messick, "Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior," 229 and Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*, 4. Ross and Nisbett term placing too much cause to a person's disposition or personality as the "fundamental attribution error."

29. U.S. Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 (Washington, DC: GPO, 7 October 2014), 18.

30. Wendy Joung, Beryl Hesketh, and Andrew Neal, "Using "War Stories" to Train for Adaptive Performance: Is it Better to Learn from Error or Success?," *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 55 (2006), 296.

31. Bazerman and Moore, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 8.

In this section, Bazerman and Moore highlight the fact that because of the availability heuristic, managers tend to rate those in close proximity to them and their recent results more critically because they are more vivid in their memory. As they state, "These irrelevant factors (such as vividness) can inappropriately influence an event's immediate perceptual salience..." Therefore, a leader may base the rating predominately on a current result (both positive and negative)



while disregarding the vast amounts of previous results from the previous year of ratings.