The Importance of Teaching Followership in Professional Military Education

Col. Paul Berg
Army University

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Danny Miller (1992) coined the phrase "Icarus paradox" to describe how having a competitive advantage and superiority status can lead to an unforeseen failure of organizations and individuals that do not maintain situational awareness. Miller (1992) argues that people and organizations get caught in a vicious circle whereby "their victories and strengths so often seduce them into the excesses that cause their downfall" (p. 24).

Miller describes how Icarus, according to Greek mythology, flew with a great pair of artificial wings made from wax and feathers by his father. Ignoring his father's warning, he tried to fly close to the sun. As he neared the sun, his wings melted, causing him to fall to his death. The story of Icarus demonstrates that power and an overinflated sense of self-importance can blind people and organizations to their weaknesses and ultimately lead to their downfall. Could a loyal subordinate have convinced Icarus to heed his father's warning and fly at a safe level?

Subordinates must try to prevent their leaders from making wrong or unethical decisions that will cause them to fail. Effective and courageous followers will use professional dissent to challenge their leaders' poor decisions. By understanding dynamic followership, military organizations can treat followership like a discipline and improve leader-follower culture.

Army Senior Leader Issues

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, describes a leadership and followership framework by saying that, "Effective organizations depend on

the competence of respectful leaders and loyal followers. … Learning to be a good leader also needs to be associated with learning to be a good follower—learning loyalty, subordination, respect for superiors, and even when and how to lodge candid disagreement" (U.S. Department of the Army [DA], 2012, p. 2). This statement emphasizes that everyone serves on a team as either a leader or a subordinate, and effective teams develop mutual trust and respect, recognize existing talents, and willingly contribute for the common good of the organization. Unfortunately, several senior-level Army officers who were on the fast-track to the top organizational jobs have violated the Army's and the Nation's trust. They failed in their careers by engaging in unethical or immoral behavior such as gross abuse of power, bigamy, extreme toxic leadership, and criminal acts.

These officers serve as fitting examples of the Icarus paradox: their successes as military officers led them to believe they were above reproach—a weakness that led to their downfall. The challenge for our Army is correcting our moral compass and eliminating this type of behavior to maintain the trust of the American people.

Army leadership cannot allow moral decrepitude to impair the profession. Senior leaders are exploring new methods and strategies to help all Army leaders recognize vulnerabilities and prevent missteps in order to maintain public respect and trust (DA, 2013, pp. 1-2). The U.S. Army achieves credibility and legitimacy as a profession through trust from our society. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession*, states, "Professions earn and maintain their clients' trust through effective and ethical application of expertise on behalf of the society they serve. Society determines whether the profession has earned the status of a noble calling and the autonomy that goes along with this status" (DA, 2013, pp. 1-2). ADRP 1 identifies five characteristics that leaders must uphold to maintain public trust: trust, military expertise, honorable service, esprit de corps, and stewardship of the profession (pp. 1-5). When senior officers fail in one of these areas, society's trust in our Army erodes.

Another larger institutional challenge is apparent. If subordinates knew about the unethical decisions made by their leaders in recent events, why did they not counsel and guide their bosses to prevent them from failing? The Army must incorporate followership classes into professional military education courses to devel-

Col. Paul Berg, U.S. Army, is the director of academic affairs of Army University, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He holds a BBA and an MBA from the University of North Texas and an MS and a PhD in adult and continuing education at Kansas State University. Berg recently served as the commander of 1st Battalion, 223rd Aviation Regiment at Fort Rucker, Alabama. His previous assignments include four combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan with the 1st Cavalry Division and the 101st Airborne Division.

op effective subordinates who are better prepared to prevent senior officers from making unethical decisions. Education accompanied by a culture shift will lead to informed, effective followership.

Characteristics of Military Service Education

In 1867, Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman, who assisted in founding the forerunner of the Command and General Staff College, described subordinate leadership by saying, "we have good corporals, some good sergeants, some good lieutenants and captains, and those are far more important than good generals" (Hinkelman, 2006). Lt. Col. Sharon M. Latour and Lt. Col. Vicki J. Rast (2004) describe soldiers as simultaneously both leaders and followers from the day they enter military service, throughout their careers, and into retirement. Latour and Rast (2004) state that all Department of Defense educational curricula focus on teaching and developing leaders, but few of the military schools spend time developing effective follower cultures and skills. They claim the dominant military organizational culture encourages subordinates to adopt a follow me behavior through discipline and lawful orders. The research findings of Latour and Rast show that most teaching philosophies devalue followership in its contribution to warfighting. Latour and Rast (2004) conclude that the military services expend most of their resources educating a small fraction of their service members, communicating their value to the military institution, and establishing career paths for a select few while ignoring the vast majority of subordinates in the military service. In the Department of the Army Fiscal Year 2015, Lieutenant Colonel Centralized Selection List-Command and Key Billet, published 30 April 2014, only 13 percent of lieutenant colonels were selected for battalion commands, which meant the other 87 percent would remain in subordinate staff positions. This promotion rate supports Latour and Rast's thesis that the majority of military leadership educational classes are useful to only a small percentage of the force.

Moreover, the Army educational philosophy in entry-level officer and enlisted courses implies that by teaching soldiers to follow orders completely, they also learn how to become effective leaders. However, some challenges arise when some of those soldiers and junior officers become senior enlisted and field grade officers, and simply following orders is no longer acceptable behavior. Further followership development must be implemented into the organizational culture to develop effective followers at those levels.

Followership Importance in Relation to Ethics

James McGregor Burns (1979) wrote that "leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p. 2). Leadership and follower-

ship are complex fields of study. They are dependent on each other. There cannot be leaders without followers, and followers need a leader. If leaders fail because of unethical decisions, the subordinate staff officers should also be held responsible because they have a duty to be effective followers.

One of the most recognized authors on the topic of followership, Robert Earl Kelley, defines followership not as a subset of leadership but as an equal component to leadership. In his book *The Power of Followership*, Kelley (1992) introduces a new followership model to describe different followership styles in relation to leadership models. According to Kelley, "the primary traits that produced the most effective followers in an organization were critical thinking and active participation" (p. 92). Kelley proposes that an exemplary follower is an independent critical thinker who has learned to be a critical thinker through education and development. The exemplary follower is motivated, has intellect, is self-reliant, and is dedicated to achieving the mission of the organization. Critical thinking is learned behavior that must be accompanied with adequate reflection time. With this concept, the follower, or subordinate, must, as Kelley says, truly "not just follow orders without critical analysis and must participate with the superior for the good of the institution" (p. 92).

Ira Chaleff, author of *The Courageous Follower* (2009), is another key followership researcher. He uses the military to provide examples in his book of virtue ethics—examples such as German guards in concentration camps during World War II, and Lt. Calley and his platoon during the My Lai incident in Vietnam—to explain different levels of the leader-follower relationship.

Chaleff's followership model emphasizes that selective rule breaking is a key attribute of a courageous follower: "It is not ethical to break rules for simple convenience or personal gain, but neither is it ethical to comply with or enforce rules if they impede the accomplishment of the organization's purpose, the organization's values, or basic human decency" (p. 47). Followers must have the courage to oppose the boss when events require dissent for the good of the organization. Chaleff (2004) also emphasizes that organizations that have courageous followers will have no need for whistle blowers because the followers do their duty to prevent leaders from making unethical decisions. One of the key statements Chaleff (2004) makes is that "proximity and courage are the critical variables in the prevention of the abuse of power" (p. xi).

Dissent in Followership

The challenge for followers is approaching their superiors, looking them in the eye, and telling them that they disagree with a decision. The Army has some superiors who do not appreciate, acknowledge, or want to have anyone challenge their authority. They perceive questions on their decision making as sharpshooting

instead of analyzed dissent. However, morality and ethics require good followers to provide opinions, recommendations, and judgments to their superiors, using critical and effective reasoning (Chaleff, 2004).

Lt. Col. Mark Cantrell (U.S. Marine Corps) (1998) wrote an article about military dissent in which he says followers should make sure they have their facts straight, and they are certain the boss is wrong before they call attention to the issue and bring the correct information and guidance to the boss for his or her own good and future perspective. Military forces work under a distinct chain of command for daily operations, and the military culture promotes working with one's boss before going over the boss' head in that chain. Loyal dissent is expected to follow an ethical guideline to maintain an effective chain of command. Going around one's command is almost always discouraged. This can result in few courageous followers.

Military Education Opportunities

There could be many opportunities to teach ethics and followership at all levels of professional military education. Entry-level officer basic courses include leadership classes, but almost no formal academic classes discuss followership concepts. There are few lessons on how to provide negative feedback to one's boss when the boss might be wrong.

Due to many recent senior military leader investigations, ethics is becoming mandatory training, especially for field grade officers. In 2013, ethics classes were introduced into the Command and General Staff College curriculum by directive from the Department of the Army. This provides an excellent opportunity to address unethical decisions by senior leaders and the actions their staffs could have taken to prevent them. In the next few years, ethics training will also become prevalent in junior officer courses. For now, however, followership still remains an unpopular topic within Army academic circles.

Organizational Culture as Organizational Life

Many references to bureaucracy relate to how the employee becomes a part of the organization (or machine), and the employee's life is the job. The Army does this to soldiers by providing for every facet of life: medical care, housing, social events, and the work place. A bureaucratic culture in any organization can stifle creativity, honesty, and constructive criticism.

There are always asymmetric power relations in an army, a multinational corporation, or a family business that result in the vast majority working for the interest

of a select few (Morgan, 2006). The Army has a history of military prodigies who were chosen by current generals to rule in the future because of their connections, family lineages, and perceived entitlement of authority. The theory of the "iron law of oligarchy" is reflected in the military institution just as it is in political organizations and labor unions, where an elite group runs the organization while the premise of equal opportunity and merit is merely window dressing for the organizational culture and society (Morgan, 2006, p. 296). Perhaps this sense of elitism allows some senior officers to justify unethical conduct and encourages a lack of intervention on the part of their followers—any pretense of ethical behavior and morality is merely window dressing.

Conclusion: Effective and Courageous Followers

If Icarus' assistant knew the wings would melt from the heat of the sun, why did he not try to dissuade Icarus from attempting to fly toward it? If a leader is heading down a wrong or unethical path, then the subordinate follower's duty is to step in and prevent that action. Effective and courageous followers will use professional dissent to challenge their leaders' decisions. By understanding dynamic followership, military organizations can treat followership like a discipline and improve leader-follower cultures. Through education, soldiers and officers can learn how to be effective and courageous followers as well as good leaders, potentially preventing future unethical decisions.

In a cultural change, many retired Army officers are now addressing senior-leader ethical issues as problems of needing followership dissent. In his presentation at the International Leadership Association annual conference in Denver on 25 October 2012, Dr. George Reed described leadership through an ethical lens, where "well-meaning followers face conflicting loyalties as they balance their own sense of right and wrong with desires of leaders and the best interest of the organizations they ultimately serve" (p. 21). This statement suggests responsible subordinates must find a method to candidly voice their concerns to their bosses for the good of the organization.

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