

The Noncommissioned Officer as MORAL Exemplar

Major Kenneth R. Williams, U.S. Army

N WAR, TRUTH IS THE FIRST CASUALTY," according to Greek tragic dramatist, Aeschylus (525–456 BCE). To be sure, war places Soldiers under physical, emotional, spiritual, and moral forces that influence them to violate their personal and professional moral identities. Such violations often have significant, far-reaching effects to the Army's long-term detriment. The Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) corps can and ought to have a positive moral influence on the Soldiers it leads.

Today's highly deployable Army needs NCOs who view themselves as moral agents and moral exemplars. In the following discussion, I attempt to outline reasons for this need and an ideal for what an NCO as a "moral exemplar" should entail.

Why Does the Army Need NCOs to Be Moral Exemplars?

The introduction to Field Manual (FM) 6-22, Army Leadership, lists two characteristics of the ideal Army leader as "[of] high moral character" and "serves as a role model." Questions raised in the current operational environments over the last several years indicate why emphasis should be placed now on developing NCOs as moral exemplars. Military service is filled with ethical problems that today have strategic ramifications beyond their normal moral implications. Opportunities for moral collapse abound in complex environments, and there are critical utilitarian reasons for avoiding such failures. Moral collapse has a far-reaching influence not only on unit climate and relationships, but also on mission success, public support of military operations, and relationships between U.S. forces and those of other nations.² The nature of the "three block war" requires that NCOs, and the Soldiers they lead, be deeply grounded in ethical principles that enable morally adaptive functioning.³ Soldiers must transition from combat to establishing and maintaining law and order, providing humanitarian assistance, and engaging in nation building, while applying not only the technical skills needed, but also the moral principles required for such a transition.

Protracted conflict has always had an adverse effect on combatants' moral judgment and behavior.⁴ Nontraditional enemies are elusive, and conflicts can often escalate quickly. Soldiers under such conditions are often tempted to view the local population as the enemy. Because of long exposure to the stresses of trying to discern the enemy, discipline in adhering to protections for

Chaplain (Major) Kenneth R. Williams is the brigade chaplain, 14th Military Police Brigade, Fort Leonard Wood, MO. He holds a B.A. from Ouachita Baptist University, an M.S. from John Brown University, and an M.Div. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served in various staff positions in the continental United States, Korea, and East Timor.

PHOTO: A U.S. Army NCO conducts an after-action review during a training exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, LA, 15 July 2009. (U.S. Army, PFC Aaron J. Herrera)

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noncombatants may slip. The prohibitions laid out in FM 27-10, *The Law of Land Warfare*, and in rules of engagement have less purchase in such conditions. The extreme "otherness" of an indigenous noncombatant population cannot help but influence a young person thrust into combat. Highly lethal and disproportionate methods may become more acceptable in mitigating risk at the expense of unintended casualties. In such conditions, a combatant can readily fall into bad-faith and become careless about the innocent population. Reducing the impulse to carelessness is morally and strategically paramount; there should be an active effort to inculcate a moral perspective in the force through front-line leadership example.

The Army continues to experience a significant number of moral failures. During the first four years of the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, over 100 crimes occurred, including rape, murder, assault, and theft.⁶ There continue to be a significant



SFC Matthew Solomon, drill sergeant, C/787 MP BN, discusses personal conduct with a group of Soldiers being reclassed as MPs. The most powerful influence on Soldiers' moral behavior is the example set by an NCO. Soldiers acquire self-discipline by observing the example of their NCO.

numbers of sexual assaults, sexual misconduct, and other crimes. The Army places great importance on programs designed to prevent such moral lapses. Emphasizing the NCO as a moral exemplar can help reinforce the modern strategic necessity that Soldiers rigorously conduct themselves according to moral expectations.

Soldier moral development. A study of initial entry training indicates a limited effect on Soldiers' moral development with no significant change in the pattern of moral decision making. The study's results also indicate a significant influence leaders have in both positive and negative ways, shallow internalization of the Army's moral code, and the need for continued moral education following training. Ethics educators have strongly asserted the effectiveness of mentors in facilitating moral development. The most effective influence on the moral development of the members of any organization is the first-line supervisor.

Ethical analysis. In their study of moral exemplars, Ann Colby and William Damon developed five criteria to describe a moral exemplar:

- Sustained commitment to moral ideals or principles that include a generalized respect for humanity or a sustained evidence of moral virtue.
- Disposition to act in accord with moral ideals or principles, implying consistency between actions and intentions and between the means and ends of actions.
- Willingness to risk one's self-interest for the sake of moral values.
- Tendency to be inspiring to others and thereby to move them to moral action.
- Sense of realistic humility about one's importance in the world at large, implying a broader concern than one's own ego.

A moral exemplar ideally possesses highly developed ethical behavior and understanding. In addition to the five criteria listed above, a moral exemplar engages in four processes, also known as the four-component model of moral action: ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical motivation, and ethical character:¹⁰

• Ethical sensitivity involves an awareness of the moral problem, an understanding of the factors involved and the causes, effects, and consequences of various choices, especially the effects on the people involved. A moral exemplar is able to understand the perspective of another person.

- Ethical judgment involves the ability to determine which choice is most morally justifiable. Moral exemplars are experts in moral decision-making processes.
- Ethical motivation involves one's level of commitment and personal responsibility to moral values and moral action. Moral exemplars are able to sustain their moral commitments because they incorporate moral values into their self-identity.
- Ethical character involves persistence and determination in pursuing moral goals, i.e., the ability to exercise self-control in order to fulfill the moral course of action.

Understanding the code. A moral exemplar is thus ideally an expert in the theory and practice of ethics. Therefore, to ask that an NCO be a moral exemplar is to say that an NCO should be expected to practice the skills related to the Army's moral codes as exemplified in the Soldier's Creed, the Warrior Ethos, and Army Values. An NCO should go beyond memorizing the Army's moral codes. He should internalize them as elements of his personal identity to really understand them in the context of his or her own life. An NCO should therefore understand the logic, not simply the rules by which he or she must soldier.

It stands to reason that a person who has decided to enter a professional career field should strive to live up to the standards entailed in the profession. Swearing an oath to support and defend the Constitution and to obey the legal orders of officers who have sworn that oath is the baseline requirement for the military profession in the United States. A military career thus begins with an explicit moral foundation, as the Constitution entails commitment to all the international treaties regarding Just War as well as to the rights and values Americans see as fundamental. As such, an NCO has a unique value system and professional identity. 11 Failure to live up to these standards is to be a mountebank, a charlatan who does not understand the most basic requirements of the profession.

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Upon entering the profession, then, an NCO takes on both the profession's and the society's expectations of ethical identity and behavior. An NCO, as a professional, should consciously deliberate integration of both personal and professional moral codes and identities. Determining if one's personal identity and one's chosen professional identity are compatible is essential. One must have examined one's own life, fully understanding the ethical implications of continuing to be what one is, or to move forward, morally, in another direction. If the military institutionalized this process of integration, the NCO corps would develop a much more constructive and confident professional ethical posture.

Describing the Morally Ideal NCO

Integrating Colby and Damon's five criteria with the four-components model produces seven extrapolations for describing the ideal NCO as a moral exemplar:

- Moral commitment.
- Moral sensitivity.
- Moral judgment.
- Primacy of moral values.
- Moral inspiration.
- Humility (eschewing airs of moral superiority).
- Character.

Moral commitment. A sustained commitment to a moral lifestyle is ideal. Ethical reliability cannot be found in isolated and convenient spasms of moral actions. Action should correspond to principle. Such sustained commitment should stem from respect for all people as individual ends in themselves, just as one sees oneself (that is to say, not merely as the means to an end). Therefore, this criterion obviates discrimination associated with racism, sexism, and other such generalizations. The NCO, as moral exemplar, ought to commit to this primary moral principle as a matter of personal integrity. Such an NCO's personal life should thereby serve as the foundation for commitment in professional life. One must first commit to just and fair treatment for all people regardless of one's bias or prejudice. One must discipline oneself to habitually aligning personal action toward others with the principle of treating each person as an end in themselves and not as a means to an end.

Moral sensitivity. Moral sensitivity requires discernment, the ability to identify the moral issues and forces at play in a moral dilemma. ¹² A moral

exemplar should be able to put himself in the position of others and see things from others' perspectives. This skill involves not only engaging in empathy for others, but also in being sensitive to the need for taking moral action. Perspectivetaking ability also recalls the sense of reciprocity that should extend to the local nationals of the countries in which U.S. forces are deployed, and even to the enemy. Perspective-taking and empathy serve to prevent one from committing immoral acts (e.g., war crimes) against these persons.

Moral sensitivity also involves, as aforementioned, "knowing the codes, regulations, and norms of one's pro-

fession, and recognizing when they apply." Therefore, a morally exemplary NCO would be well-versed on the principles of the Just War tradition, the law of land warfare, the Geneva Conventions, and the Army's moral codes. As suggested earlier, moral sensitivity does not mean simply having superficial knowledge of or having memorized these standards. It means being able to apply them to a variety of situations with knowledge of their ethical logic. FM 6-22 emphasizes this requirement: "To be an ethical leader requires more than knowing Army values. Leaders must be able to apply them to find moral solutions to diverse problems." All of this implies a higher degree of ethical education than the Army currently employs.

Moral judgment. Moral judgment involves the ability to think critically and make decisions based on a commitment to ethical principles, to cultivation of virtues (through reasoned values), and to one's moral sensitivity. ¹⁵ Both general principles and specific rules influence moral judgment. Moral judgment entails decisions based on personal interest and benefits, on maintaining the current order of social life, or on core principles and values. The Army's pattern of moral judgment appears to be based mainly on rules, regulations, and standard procedures. In a recent paper I discussed the moral



SFC Keven Jaques, a member of the Corrections Committee of the Basic Military Police Training Division, instructs Soldiers on conducting a forced cell move of a detainee. Relating the Army values and the Warrior Ethos to the moral treatment of detainees prepares Soldiers for facing moral dilemmas without violating the Army's moral code.

judgment of Soldiers in military police initial entry training. My study indicated their moral judgment at the start of training and at the conclusion of training was assessed at:

- 42 percent maintaining the norms (rules-based).
- 28 percent personal interest.
- 24 percent principle-based. 16

The study showed no statistically significant change in moral judgment as a result of military police initial entry training. Although such a study has not been conducted on other populations, there is reason to believe that similar results will occur.

While rules are necessary for structure and order, a rules-based approach is often inadequate for resolving moral puzzles and apparent dilemmas. Rules often come into conflict. Often, one can find a reason to rationalize going around a rule to act in self-interest. A professional takes such ethical judgment seriously, wary of simplistic, superficial justifications for avoiding the implications of moral principle. As two noted experts have observed, "Professional practice is essentially a moral enterprise." The Army faces an adaptive enemy and changes in warfare; Soldiers must be able to "reason carefully about the dilemmas of one's profession . ." 18

Primacy of moral values. Colby and Damon's study indicates that to uphold their own moral

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values, moral exemplars are willing to set aside personal gain for the good of others. This does not mean that moral exemplars disregard their personal health and welfare, but it does mean that core values take precedence over personal benefits when one faces a moral dilemma. Moral exemplars fulfill their commitment to moral values.

For an NCO, being a moral exemplar epitomizes the Army value of "selfless service." An NCO chooses moral action over self-interest, does not use Soldiers for personal gain, and sees the Army's moral code as the overarching premise for long-term success, lasting influence, and making a difference in the world. When faced with a moral dilemma, the NCO defers to principle rather than acting in self-interest. For example, the NCO Creed states, "I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit, or personal safety. . . I will always place their [Soldiers] needs above my own." The Army Study Guide also enumerates this principle. 19

Moral inspiration. Colby and Damon's study recognizes that a morale exemplar influences the environment surrounding him. Influence is the essence of leadership. Another author defines leadership as "an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes." Similarly, a moral exemplar inspires others to higher performance through such associated influence.

Ideally, an NCO should facilitate change and growth, build a team, and motivate others to ethical development and moral action. Just as a moral exemplar displays such attributes in his or her life, NCOs should lead Soldiers to incorporate them in their lives. FM 6-22 emphasizes the power of the NCO's example:

Army leaders of character lead by personal example and consistently act as good role models through a dedicated lifelong effort to learn and develop. They achieve excellence for their organizations when followers are disciplined to do their duty, committed to the Army Values, and feel empowered to accomplish any mission,

while simultaneously improving their organizations with focus towards the future.²¹

Humility. Colby and Damon's study also emphasizes the element of humility. A moral exemplar strives for a realistic self-assessment and does not assume the posture of moral superiority. Such an exemplar gives credit where it is due and understands that he or she is not the fount of all wisdom. Humility is not a sign of weakness but of strength. It is the strength to proactively avoid self-deception by assessing and acknowledging one's own vulnerabilities and protecting against them by relying on the strengths of the other members of the team.

FM 6-22 indicates that all Soldiers are leaders, whether or not they are in a position of, or have authority for, leadership. Such "leaders without authority," also known as *informal leaders*, demonstrate leadership though a combination of self-confidence and humility.²² The words *humility* and *humble* have their root in the Latin word for earth.²³ An NCO must be down-to-earth.

Character. None of the above has any value unless one follows it up with action that is consistent with one's values and beliefs. It is not enough to have moral values and beliefs. An exemplar practices such values and beliefs in daily life. The ability to engage in action that is consistent with one's values and beliefs is often termed *self-regulation*. Self-regulation involves integrating the elements of moral thinking and moral emotions.

Moral character is one of the elements of the four-component model. According to FM 6-22—

Character, a person's moral and ethical qualities, helps determine what is right and gives a leader motivation to do what is appropriate, regardless of the circumstances or the consequences. An informed ethical conscience consistent with the Army Values strengthens leaders to make the right choices when faced with tough issues. Since Army leaders seek to do what is right and inspire others to do the same, they must embody these values.²⁴

Consistency carries with it the idea of *integrity*. In its description of integrity, FM 6-22 states—

Leaders of integrity consistently act according to clear principles, not just what works now. The Army relies on leaders of integrity who possess high moral standards and who are honest in word and deed. Leaders are honest to others by not presenting themselves or their actions as anything other than what they are, remaining committed to the truth ²⁵

To engage in moral action consistent with one's character, one must often demonstrate *personal courage*. FM 6-22 provides an accurate description of courage:

Moral courage is the willingness to stand firm on values, principles, and convictions. It enables all leaders to stand up for what they believe is right, regardless of the consequences. Leaders, who take full responsibility for their decisions and actions, even when things go wrong, display moral courage.²⁶

The four component model describes character not as a set of traits or qualities but as the persistence and courage to follow through on personal and professional moral values.²⁷ The NCO as moral exemplar ideally displays professional ethical skills that demonstrate character with consistent action. These skills enable him to—

- Act on the discerned primary moral value.
- Take the role of others.
- Conduct ethical and moral decision making.
- Execute appropriate force.
- Treat all with respect.

NCO as Exemplar

Building character involves developing expertise. An NCO is ideally a professional because he or she is an expert, i.e., the master. The subordinate is the apprentice. One applicable process of moral and character development is integrative ethical education, which approaches character development with three basic premises:

- Character is expertise development.
- Cultivation of character is the cultivation of expertise.
- Self-regulation is necessary for sustaining character.²⁸

Integrative ethical education thus involves taking a novice and creating an expert through *coached apprenticeship*. The NCO as a moral exemplar ideally serves as a coach or expert who guides the novice or apprentice to expertise. In this process of coached apprenticeship, the NCO serves as a personal example, as an instructor, and as the creator of a mastery climate.

Personal example. In coached apprenticeship, the novice junior Soldier observes the actions and attitudes of the expert, the NCO. Self-regulation is the result of observing the example of leaders and applying the moral code and the organization's policies and procedures. The NCO as moral exemplar provides the Soldier with a visible model. FM 6-22 states:

Living by the Army Values and the Warrior Ethos best displays character and leading by example. It means putting the organization and subordinates above personal self-interest, career, and comfort. For the Army leader, it requires putting the lives of others above a personal desire for self-preservation.²⁹

The personal example of an NCO cannot be underestimated. The results of my 2009 study reveal that the example of leaders in general, and that of drill sergeants in particular, had the most significant effect on Soldiers' moral development. If Soldiers are to be fully prepared for battle, not just tactically and technically, but especially morally, the Army needs NCOs as moral exemplars.

Methods of instruction. The downfall of many programs of ethical and character education is not content but methods of instruction.³⁰ The instruction that an NCO as moral exemplar provides must include specific elements.

A moral exemplar's methods are self-constructive. That is to say, one must will assimilation for oneself. Susan Martinelli-Fernandez, in referring to Immanuel Kant's notion of autonomy in moral education, asserts that autonomy does not mean that Soldiers have the right to act on impulse to accept or reject certain moral actions or rules.³¹ Autonomy means that Solders have the right, the freedom, and most important, the responsibility to participate actively in constructing their moral identity in the light of reason. Because moral action is principled, leaders can't force Soldiers to change. Soldiers must choose to change.

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However, leaders can create the conditions in which Soldiers are enabled, and they can choose to change. If leaders force-feed the rules, the motivation for engaging in or ignoring moral action is reduced to self-interest, avoiding punishment, or obtaining a reward. As Martinelli-Fernandez remarks, "The goal of moral education, therefore, is not merely to get the agent to follow the rules. It is the cultivation of moral agency, an agency that involves one's becoming an independent, right thinking and right acting person."³²

A moral exemplar must develop expertise in two dimensions: conscious, explicit understanding; and intuitive, implicit understanding. Instruction must involve both acquiring specific knowledge of the Army's moral code and developing the ability to apply it to a variety of situations. A moral exemplar develops a Soldier's ability for self-regulation and self-monitoring. Soldiers must be able to demonstrate moral character "when no one is looking." That means that Soldiers must internalize the Army's moral code. This self-regulation is best developed through observing the moral performance of a leader.³³

A moral exemplar's methods involve extensive practice. Units rehearse missions, and they should also rehearse moral dilemmas. Effective instructional methods challenge Soldiers' current patterns of moral thinking. If a Soldier's moral judgment is mainly rules-based, the NCO should present dilemmas that create conflict between the rules and guide him to apply moral principles and values to the dilemma. The most effective methods of facilitating expertise in moral judgment include dilemma discussions and role-taking exercises. The most significant element in the process is rethinking an issue by interacting with others.

In my study, Soldiers in focus groups indicated that much of present moral training consisted of correction rather than instruction. This focus on what not to do rather than what to do contributed to a key finding of the study—superficial internalization of

the Army's moral code. However, the instructional methods of the NCO as moral exemplar should include moral reasoning, the moral emotion of empathy, the discovery of meaning and purpose, rehearsal of difficult moral tasks, and the instructional methods must be somewhat pleasurable.³⁴

Mastery climate. A moral exemplar is a leader who creates a mastery climate that creates the conditions for optimal development.³⁵ In creating a mastery climate, a moral exemplar uses mistakes as learning opportunities. Everything that occurs is a learning experience about either how to act or how not to act. A moral exemplar makes developing unit cohesion a high priority. A mastery climate fosters positive relationships between peers because such relationships encourage cooperative learning and mutual encouragement.³⁶

Within a mastery climate, a moral exemplar reinforces behavior consistent with the organization's moral code through both public honors and private, personal praise. He solicits feedback from followers on the moral climate of the organization. He makes it safe to discuss issues with no fear of retribution. The exemplar focuses on improving the unit's performance and moral conduct, not on his or her Soldiers' personal feelings.

In creating a mastery climate, moral exemplars also encourage the novice-apprentice's active participation in developing moral character. The NCO's role in moral and character education is not about "imprinting the messages of a moral code" on the minds of Soldiers.³⁷ Nor is the NCO a marketing agent who uses posters and slogans in "a public awareness approach to values."³⁸ Quick-change approaches to moral and character education tend to produce moral agents who are "fair-weather" moral Soldiers. They adhere to their moral code in favorable situations but tend to fall in adverse or ambiguous situations.³⁹ Instead, the NCO engages Soldiers in dialogues designed to challenge their moral thinking.

A mastery climate involves the moral exemplar practicing leadership and communication styles that nurture relationships and education for expertise. This means that the leader-follower relationship must be interactive, not one-dimensional, in enforcing the rules and memorizing the code. The NCO's communication and leadership style must engage Soldiers in practice that leads to expertise.



SFC Todd Warner, drill sergeant, A/795 MP Bn, engages Soldiers in discussion of the Army's moral code to develop moral understanding. An NCO creates the conditions for optimal moral development, i.e., a mastery climate.

FM 6-22 states—

One of the Army leader's primary responsibilities is to maintain an ethical climate that supports development of such character. When an organization's ethical climate nurtures ethical behavior, people will, over time, think, feel, and act ethically. They will internalize the aspects of sound character.⁴⁰

And later, "Army leaders must consistently focus on shaping ethics-based organizational climates in which subordinates and organizations can achieve their full potential."41

Looking to the Future

Noncommissioned officers have a moral obligation to ensure that Soldiers are prepared for battle. Preparation for battle goes beyond tactical and technical proficiency to include the moral application of lethal force. This moral application is the fundamental basis of being a military professional. Increasingly, Soldiers are put in the position of making moral judgments and taking actions that may cause the deaths of their peers and innocent civilians, as well as the enemy. In addition, a Soldier's behavior on a daily basis must facilitate positive peer relationships to develop strong cohesion. Such actions must adhere to the Army's moral codes and norms in the Constitution. The most effective means of creating moral Soldiers is through NCOs who demonstrate high moral character every day. MR

NOTES

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 - 25. Ibid., para. 4-30.
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