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Using an ethical framework for a more responsible online image

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In 2016, a former noncommissioned officer stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas, sold meth while in uniform to an undercover federal agent, resulting in his arrest and a 10-year prison sentence. The sergeant was in uniform when he met the undercover agent inside a restaurant. After making the deal, they walked to the parking lot where the agent exchanged $7,500 for a backpack containing one pound of meth. They also agreed for future transactions to be delivered by mail. Later that day, the sergeant posted an Instagram video of himself holding a stack of $100 bills stating, "This is what I'm about." The serial numbers of the bills in the video matched the serial numbers on the bills to the payment made by the undercover agent.[1]

This example is an extreme case of criminal behavior, and it is not the typical behavior of a U.S. Soldier. This event highlights the fact that some people will document their life on social media without thinking twice about the effects. This article will cover how unethical behavior on social media can affect the profession of arms and provide a framework to reach a more professional social media image. Ultimately, ethical leaders who are authentic and build trust within the organization place emphasis on the significance

of ethics, and create a climate which set conditions for professional behavioral outcomes.[2]

Background

To focus the conversation, we will examine decision making before posting on social media through an ethical lens as it relates to illegal, immoral, or untrusting behavior.

Social media is a common place for people to voice their opinions, debate any interest or support a topic of interest. Often people have trouble understanding the personal differences between a private post and an unprofessional post.

In 2014, a Soldier stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado, uploaded a seemingly private photo in which she showed herself hiding from saluting the flag during retreat.[3]

In a recent post on Instagram, a Marine sergeant major, at a birthday ball, is seen drinking beer straight from a keg while his Marines hold him upside down. Another example is a Facebook post of a photo showing a service member in uniform appearing to endorse presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders and a message that read vets4bernie. These posts and photos potentially violate military laws, policies, or organizational values. When using social media, military members need to decide whether their post represents the Soldier, the unit, or the Army in a professional manner.

Ethics and the Profession of Arms

The Army ethic is the heart of the Army and the inspiration for our shared professional identity — Who We Are – Why and How We Serve. It motivates our conduct as Army professionals, Soldiers, and Army civilians, who are bound together in common moral purpose to support and defend the Constitution and the American people.[4]

Soldiers serve our country and possess a moral compass which reflects their profession and the American people. Soldiers must recognize that nothing on social media is private, and every social media post may potentially portray the military in a negative and unprofessional manner. In most cases, a social media post is equal to making a public announcement on a busy street. When a person's online image includes the Army, the Soldier becomes an Army ambassador. Every post from a Soldier, or any person associated with the Army, has the potential to improve or degrade the image of the profession and the trust of the American people. Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey said it best: "I'm convinced that 99 percent of Soldiers wouldn't say that stuff in public. I believe American Soldiers are entitled to their own opinions, but when you put a uniform on [you represent the U.S. Army]."[5]

Ethical Decision-Making Framework

Most people listen to their inner dialogue, the voice of reason, whether perceived or real. It is what protects them from doing something risky or out of bounds. However, some people choose to ignore it.

In his article "Ethical Decision Making: Using the 'Ethical Triangle,'" Dr. Jack Kem, a supervisory professor of Joint, Interagency, and Multinational Operations at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, outlined the principles of ethical processing according to the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic.[6] It is summarized as follows:[7]

I. Recognize an Ethical Conflict

The first step is recognizing there is a dilemma; potentially, this is a pure reflection or query that leads to a choice of right versus wrong, perception versus opinion, or intuition versus facts.

II. Evaluating the Options

The second step is evaluating the act or event based on three ethical lenses:

1. Rules: this is principles-based ethics, evaluating a decision on established rules, laws, values, standards, regulations, or the Constitution.

2. Outcomes: this is consequences-based ethics, evaluating a decision by determining the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people.

3. Virtues: this is virtues-based ethics, evaluating a decision through a perspective of benevolence, justice, or altruism. At work, Soldiers should reconcile this lens against Army values and the warrior ethos. On a personal level, Soldiers should ask the questions: What would my family think? How does this reflect on me as a professional Soldier? How does this reflect on the Army? Would I do this at work or in front of my leaders/subordinates?

III. Committing to a Decision

The third step is selecting the best ethical action based on an internal moral compass and requirements of the Army profession. Also acceptable is considering alternative decisions and their outcomes in the context of who and how an individual or organization is represented.

IV. Act

The fourth step is taking action on a well thought out ethical decision. This step may seem redundant, but sometimes people take action against what they know they should do.

Example: Applying the Ethical Decision Making Framework

Spc. Smith's promotion to sergeant is an event to celebrate, that evening he and his friends (of various ages and ranks) gather to celebrate at the barracks. They eat pizza, drink alcohol, and capture images of the night that get posted on social media.

Step 1 - Recognize the dilemma:

Celebrating a friend's accomplishments is encouraged and acceptable behavior. However, Soldiers and leaders must understand behaviors change when alcohol is involved. Everyone present should be aware there might be perceptions of underage drinking or fraternization, and cameras capture reality, satire, and perceptions all the same.

Step 2 - Evaluate based on the ethical triangle:

Lens 1. What rules or laws regulate this behavior? The Uniform Code of Military Justice, Army Regulations, installation/organizational policies, or Department of Defense directives. This lens is the simplest of the three lenses. If a social media post shows activities that violate a law or rule, do not make the post on social media. When in doubt, do not post.

Lens 2. What is the greatest benefit to the most people? Soldiers need to express opinions as personal opinions and not as an endorsement of any larger organization. This lens is about thinking how to represent happiness, pleasure, dignity, and the like to the larger group. Therefore, a post that may bring negative consequences may not be the smartest choice. How may this post bring credit or discredit to the team?

Lens 3. What virtues apply here? This lens is much more personal, based on core beliefs and values. Sharing opinions, engaging in debate, or as in this case, sharing images of people having fun is not wrong. However, Soldiers should be respectful of other people, their privacy, and should keep true to Army values. A more straightforward way to look at this lens, since it is about personal values and beliefs, is thinking about "grandma's" opinion (or that of any person we respect) on this topic or post.

Step 3: Determine what to do:

How do I make the best ethical decision? It is acceptable to participate in a social function while enjoying alcoholic beverages. However, everyone involved needs to keep in mind policies and be aware of perceptions. Posting pictures of friends celebrating Smith's promotion is acceptable. Posting pictures of Smith passed out with writing on his face is not.

Step 4: Take action based on the decision process:

The fourth step is the action step, where action follows the thought and decision making process. Like Composite Risk Management, identifying the risks and controls does not take effect until one implements the controls. This step may seem simple, but sometimes it requires courage and maturity to take action on the responsible decision. Water, aspirin, and time can cure a hangover, but an unprofessional post or a post that reveals criminal activity will not go away. Think, type, post.

Application of Ethical Processing

The most important contribution Army leaders can make is to be role models of behavior that nurtures an ethical climate and rewards ethical maturity consistent with Army values.

Second, leaders must reinforce the ethical processing model frequently, to include before, during, and after training events. Leaders should consider using the following questions to help Soldiers reflect on their actions. How did you make that decision? Why did you choose that action versus the alternative?

During their Soldiers' reception and integration counseling, leaders must discuss acceptable behavior to include off-duty conduct and social media awareness. Leaders can use CAPE training support packages to facilitate relevant discussions and cultivate an ethical climate.

Leaders also need to reinforce ethical decisions in everyday activities. For example, when a Soldier conducts vehicle maintenance, following the manual step-by-step instead of by memory, the Soldier chose to follow approved methods as opposed to taking shortcuts. Praise these types of responsible decisions through positive reinforcement.

Third, we expect Soldiers to work in small teams and sometimes charge them with huge responsibilities. From simple to complex tasks, leaders need to reward Soldiers who make ethically based decisions and hold other Soldiers accountable for taking shortcuts and making poor ethical choices.

In the end, reinforcing ethical processing is not much different from training Soldiers to increase critical thinking and adaptability. When leaders provide constructive criticism and valid feedback, it results in positive behavior.

Conclusion

The bottom line: there is no such thing as a private post. Every post you make has the potential to represent you far beyond your network.

The Army acknowledges the importance of social media and encourages our commands, Soldiers, families, and Army civilians to use social media to share their experiences and provide information safely and accurately. To learn more about the topic of maintaining a smart social media image, please visit the Army social media website at https://www.army.mil/socialmedia. ∎

Additional Information:

To learn more on the topic of ethical processing, please read the article by Dr. Jack D. Kem, Ethical Decision Making: Using the "Ethical Triangle."

To learn more about the Army Profession, the Army Ethic, and character development, visit the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) website.

Notes:

1. "Former Fort Bliss soldier sentenced to 10 years for distribution of meth." Army Times, (2017), accessed May 15, 2018, https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2017/07/06/former-fort-bliss-soldier-sentenced-to-10-years-for-distribution-of-meth/.

2. Christopher M. Barnes and Joseph Doty, "What Does Contemporary Science Say About Ethical Leadership?" Military Review, Ethics Reader: Special Edition 2010, accessed December 22, 2017, http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20100930ER_art015.pdf.

3. Helen Pow, "Parade-shy private's shameful selfie." DailyMail.com, February 26, 2014, accessed December 22, 2017, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2568603/Soldier-ignites-online-firestorm-posts-selfie-avoiding-flag-salute-caption-I-dont-f.html.

4. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1: The Army Profession, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 14 June 2015), 2-1, accessed December 22, 2017. http://cape.army.mil/repository/doctrine/adrp1.pdf.

5. Koester, Martha C. Koester, "SMA at Solarium 2015: Cyberbullying is 'Out of Control.'" NCO Journal. June 4, 2015, accessed December 22, 2017, http://ncojournal.dodlive.mil/2015/06/04/sma-at-solarium-2015-cyberbullying-is-out-of-control/.

6. "Apply Ethical Processing," Center for the Army Profession of Arms and Ethics (CAPE), last modified 2013), http://cape.army.mil/army%20values/ApplyEthicalProcessing.pdf.

7. Jack. D. Kem, "Ethical Decision Making: Using the 'Ethical Triangle,'" CGSC Foundation, 2006, 8. http://www.cgsc-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Kem-UseoftheEthicalTriangle.pdf.

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