The drill sergeant statue overlooks the physical fitness field at the U.S. Army Drill Sergeant Academy in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. The statue was dedicated to the founding of the Army's first Drill Sergeant School and the first drill sergeant class. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Satomi Mack-Martin)

Drill Sergeant Misconduct

Analyzing and Tackling a Critical Recruitment Issue Part 2

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Letter From the Editor: *This article is the second in a two-part series analyzing drill sergeant misconduct. Part one focused on drill sergeant selection, training, certification, assignment, and challenges leading to misconduct, part two analyzes counterproductive leadership types, examines various theories, and offers recommendations for the way ahead.*

This follow-up article focuses on leadership and ethical theories and concepts. First, it analyzes counterproductive leadership types which enable unethical behavior. Next, the concept of groupthink offers insight into its pitfalls. The article also briefly examines who is fit to identify the positive and negative effects of placing someone in the right or wrong position within an organization. It looks at literature discussing ethical fading, ethical climate, and ethical leadership and their potential to foster a climate of unethical behavior. Finally, it provides recommendations through assessment studies, real-world training scenarios, and ethical climate studies to prevent or reduce drill sergeant misconduct.

Pseudo-Transformational Leadership

Pseudo-transformational leadership is the opposite of transformational leadership and results from unethical decision-making and behavior. According to Northouse (2018), "Pseudo-transformational leadership is considered personalized leadership, which focuses on the leader's own interests rather than on the interests of others" (p. 265).

Leaders who practice this type of leadership are motivated by power, focus on their interests instead of their followers, are exploitive, self-consumed, and typically have corrupt morals and values (Northouse, 2018, p. 265). In addition, pseudo-transformational leaders thrive in environments where they can project their authority to encourage dependency among their followers (Johnson, 2018, p. 246). They also have no reservation in projecting a false authentic image to manipulate followers to advance their own goals or unethical ends (Johnson, 2018, p. 246).

Johnson describes pseudo-transformational leadership as the dark side and uses the term to refer to unethical transformational leaders (Johnson, 2018, p. 246). One such extreme example of a leader used both by Johnson and Northouse is Adolf Hitler, who used pseudo-transformational leadership to manipulate followers and conducted some of the most unethical, immoral actions in history (Johnson, 2018, p. 246; Northouse, 2018, p. 506).

Another unethical form of leadership that negatively impacts the organization and its followers is destructive leadership.

Destructive Leadership

The body of research on destructive leadership is extensive and explains the characteristics of a destructive leader and the type of environment that fosters such a leader. Researchers developed the toxic triangle to understand the critical components of destructive leadership (Northouse, 2018, p. 499). It consists of susceptible followers and conducive environments at the bottom corners of the triangle, and destructive leaders are at the top (Northouse, 2018. P. 499).

Susceptible followers influence destructive leadership as either a conformer with low maturity or low self-esteem and colluder with unethical values and similar beliefs (Northouse, 2018, p. 499). A conducive environment to destructive leadership is one where cultural values are weak, and there are ineffective checks on leaders' power and authority (Northouse, 2018, p. 499).

Finally, at the top are the destructive leaders characterized by their need to use power and coercion to achieve personal goals at the expense of followers (Johnson, 2018, p. 6). The Johnson text references seven clusters identified by the Bond scholars that describe destructive leader behaviors and that leaders need only display one counterproductive behavior to be considered destructive (Johnson, 2018, p. 6).

Clusters one and seven are of particular interest to this article. Cluster one describes the type of destructive leader who is unethical, unwilling to adapt, fails to communicate priorities, often lies, and makes terrible decisions (Johnson, 2018, p. 6). A leader who bullies, continuously lies, and enjoys putting followers through periods of suffering and emotional anguish displays behaviors consistent with cluster seven (Johnson, 2018, p. 6).

Ethical Leadership Theory

Ethical leadership theory explains the relationship between an ethical environment and the leaders who must nurture it. According to Johnson (2018), ethical leadership theory "Was born out of the recognition that executive leaders are critical to the success of organizational ethics efforts and social scientists need to systematically study the ethical dimension of leadership" (p. 265).

Leaders establish and enforce their organization's ethical climate, and followers will look to them as an example of how to act in ethical situations. Research conducted through the social learning theory lens

Stacked Drill Sergeant hats sit ready to be presented before the Drill Sergeant Course class 008-16 graduation ceremony held at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, June 2016. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Brian Hamilton)

shows a strong connection between ethical leaders and followers' ethical behavior (Johnson, 2018, p. 266).

The idea is that followers learn by watching and emulating leaders they find credible, so the more ethical leaders are, the more ethical their followers' behaviors will be (Johnson, 2018, p. 266). Northouse says it is a leader's responsibility to assist followers struggling with ethical dilemmas and conflicting values (Northouse, 2018, p. 497).

Research also found followers who work for ethical leaders have higher job satisfaction and are less likely to engage in counterproductive behavior (Johnson, 2018, p. 266).

Finally, ethical leadership can positively influence the attitudes and behaviors of people outside the organization and is effective in multiple cultures.

The importance of ethical leadership is apparent when the risks of ethical fading are understood.

Drill sergeants supervise prospective Army recruits from U.S. Army Recruiting Queen Creek, cadets of Queen Creek High School's Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps and members of the Pinal County Sheriff's Office Explorer Program during the Mega Future Soldier Training Event at Queen Creek High School in Queen Creek, Arizona, November 2020. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Hernandez, 301st Public Affairs Detachment)

Ethical Fading

In some training environments, leadership may pressure specific individuals to conduct training which emphasizes end performance. This shift toward performance measurement creates an environment that hinges on changing motivations and practices among individual leaders. It creates a heightened sense of urgency and added stress for individuals who make potentially dozens of ethical decisions in a day.

According to a study on ethical perspectives in New Zealand, putting more attention on improving performance can lead to ethical failures or blind spots, where people engage in unethical acts without realizing it (Narayan, 2016, p. 376). This unintended consequence is further spread by organizations that reward unethical behavior because it provides higher short-term performance, often leading to ethical numbing or the desensitization of moral behavior in an environment.

Self-deception, enablers, euphemisms like aggressive rather than illegal, ethical numbing from repeat offenses, the belief that unethical behavior is not the root problem or yours to fix, and decision framing where an unethical decision seems ethical to an individual with a certain mindset are all symptoms of ethical failing (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004, p. 224-232).

Ethical blind spots and ethical fading contribute to systemic tendencies for unethical behavior. Organizational leadership must mitigate complex cognitive biases and encourage ethical decision-making with practical frameworks (Narayan, 2016, p. 370). These actions promote an ethical work climate. Leaders must also address individual value alignment.

Person-Environment Fit Theory

The person-environment (PE) fit theory refers to the compatibility or incompatibility that exists between a person and the environment, thus creating the right conditions for high performance and organizational loyalty from individuals. Research shows that when there is a good PE fit, individuals perform better, have a higher commitment level, and higher job satisfaction than those who do not (Scandura, 2019, p. 108).

PE fit consists of two subcomponents, person-organization (PO) fit, and person-job (PJ) fit (Scandura, 2019, p. 108). PO fit is how aligned an individual's beliefs and values are with those of the organization to which they belong (Scandura, 2019, p. 108). If an individual's values and the organization's culture are aligned, there is a higher likelihood of a positive work environment with a higher sense of ownership (Scandura, 2019, p. 108).

The second subcomponent is PJ fit, or individuals' desire for jobs that align with their personality (Sandura, 2019, p. 108). It requires an individual's personality, skills, and motivations to complement the job's characteristics (Scandura, 2019, p. 109). If individuals and their jobs are aligned, PJ fit reinforces good PO fit positive effects (Scandura, 2019, p. 109). On the other hand, a poor PJ fit can result in low job satisfaction and high burnout levels, all of which can affect an individual's physical and mental well-being (Scandura, 2019, p. 108).

The importance of proper PE fit is apparent in high-stress jobs which demand a lot from individuals. However, not all individuals are suited for all jobs so a poor PE fit can result in unfavorable outcomes. Regardless of PE fit level, groupthink can derail an organization's effectiveness.

Groupthink

Janis (1991) defines groupthink as "A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p. 9). Johnson says groups suffering from groupthink are often ineffective and engage in unethical behavior (Johnson, 2018, p. 301).

The most detrimental effects of groupthink are lack of alternative viewpoints, poor information discovery, failure to address ethical and moral implications, and ineffective risk analysis (Johnson, 2018, p. 301).

According to Janis (1991), "Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures" (p. 9). Janis references some of the biggest failures in history, like the Bay of Pigs disaster, the Vietnam War, and the attack on Pearl Harbor, as examples of the perils of groupthink (Johnson, 2018, p. 301).

Groupthink in Practice

Misconduct cases where organizations are plagued by ethical fading may also show warning signs of groupthink. Here again, drawing on the instance where the drill sergeant ran a vehicle over trainees, he and other leaders in his organization thought he had no choice but to drive the truck that day.

The idea there was only one option, and no other drill sergeant or leader offered an alternative course of action is a clear sign the organization suffered from groupthink. It is understandable how this happens in the IET environment where drill sergeants and senior leaders are together for long periods and often make decisions quickly to maintain group harmony at the expense of careful deliberation.

The Toxic Triangle

The IET environment is extremely vulnerable to destructive leadership because it typically meets the characteristics of the toxic triangle. First, it has susceptible followers in the form of trainees who are new to U.S. Army culture and rely on drill sergeants to instill Army values and accepted norms.

Suppose a drill sergeant is a destructive leader. In that case, the individual can take advantage of the situation and use power and authority to engage in unethical behavior at the expense of the powerless trainees. This type of situation leads to a destructive leadership environment, the second part of the toxic triangle.

Trainees have no power or authority in the IET environment since drill sergeants control every aspect of their lives for ten weeks. Drill sergeants who display destructive leader characteristics thrive in this environment. They can impose their will on trainees because their power is rarely challenged. Weak and ineffective senior leadership only frustrates this environment because there is little to no value and accountability enforcement for unethical decisions.

Drill sergeants supervise Soldiers conducting physical training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Drill sergeants are charged with training, educating, and caring for new Soldiers. It is their job to ensure they receive the best possible training and have a positive first impression of the Army and its leadership. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Trenton Fouche)

Graphic art created by the *NCO Journal*.

Recommendations

Issues related to drill sergeant misconduct are serious and can have severe consequences for the force and undermine the U.S. Army's reputation as a professional organization. Future assessment case studies, real-world training scenarios, and ethical climate studies are needed to prevent or reduce drill sergeant misconduct.

Assessment Program

Through research and study, we need to determine the effectiveness of the U.S. Army's efforts to do away with or reduce the number of counterproductive leaders selected for positions of authority. For example, the Army implemented the Sergeant Major Assessment Program (SMAP) to assess sergeants major readiness for assignment to critical positions within the force. SMAP consists of a battery of assessments designed to measure an individual's physical and mental fitness and communication skills, both written and verbal (DA, 2021, para. 2-3). The assessment also includes a series of blind boards to determine if individuals exhibit counterproductive leadership characteristics (DA, 2021, para. 2-3).

The Army uses a similar program to assess senior officers for command positions. Both programs are in the early implementation stage, and their effectiveness is yet to be determined. However, once the programs are up and running and future data reflects a reduction in senior leader misconduct, incorporating this type of program in the drill sergeant selection process becomes a viable solution to prevent or reduce drill sergeant misconduct.

Real-World Training Scenarios

Drill sergeant candidates are not currently put through real-world training scenarios or assessments to determine their leadership skills and ethical decision-making abilities in the IET environment.

A case study focused on training programs that in-clude real-world scenarios and assessments in the instructional program designed to gauge one's readiness for leadership positions and ability to make ethical decisions warrants further examination.

Analyzing law enforcement training programs that include rigorous assessments based on real-world scenarios is a possible focus area for this kind of research. Similar real-world training case studies could help determine if there are correlations between realistic training/testing and lower rates of misconduct in certain professions.

Ethical Climate

We should also investigate ethical leadership theory, especially leaders' ability to establish and maintain an ethical climate in high-stress professions. A deliberate review of drill sergeant misconduct cases and the organizations' ethical climate when the misconduct took place, would be beneficial for two reasons. First, it would offer insight on the presence of powerful or weak ethical leadership in the organization. Second, the research would assist in determining a leader's role in contributing to or helping mitigate misconduct occurrences. In addition, it would help to include other high-stress professions like law enforcement, healthcare, and other first responder organizations to identify commonalities in the causes of misconduct and what role ethical leadership plays in reducing it.

Conclusion

Like other effective professional militaries in history, the U.S. Army relies on highly trained, disciplined Soldiers to maintain a competitive edge over its adversaries. The heavy responsibility and burden of training those Soldiers rest on drill sergeants' shoulders.

Considered the absolute best NCOs the U.S. Army has to offer, drill sergeants go through rigorous selection and training requirements to prepare them for the challenges of the IET environment. Candidates who graduate from the nine-week drill sergeant course find themselves thrust into physically and mentally demanding conditions with a level of power and authority not normally experienced by NCOs in the regular Army.

They are responsible for every aspect of a trainee's life for ten weeks. This level of control creates a relationship of authority and obedience with trainees. A lack of oversight formed by competing requirements creates the conditions for possible unethical decision-making.

Like any complex problem, it is unrealistic to believe drill sergeant misconduct can be completely eliminated from the IET environment, but every attempt should be made to do so.

To address the challenges associated with this prob-

lem, the U.S. Army should invest in scholarly leadership and ethics research to thoroughly understand the root causes of unethical behavior and explore ways to effectively address them. By examining leadership selection, leadership training, and ethical leadership, the Army can find ways to identify commonalities in the causes of misconduct and explore ways to mitigate them. ∎

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