

# MISCONDUCT



Stamping out misconduct across all echelons of the U.S. Army (Photo created by NCO Journal Staff)

## Ending Leader Misconduct

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**T**he Army's responsibility to care for Soldiers relies on upholding ethical conduct at every rank. Over the past few years, the Army made proactive changes to improve its leaders. Changes included additional trainings, as well as challenging leaders academically in senior leader courses to enhance critical thinking and ethical conduct. Despite these changes, senior leader misconduct remains a problem. A study commissioned by the Department of the Army at Fort Cavazos (then Fort Hood), Texas, revealed that between FY18 and FY20, 1,318 senior officials faced 2,745 misconduct allegations (2020b, p. 21). The report highlighted how leadership failures went unanswered and persisted throughout several harassment cases, indirectly impacting Soldiers stationed there and ultimately leading to a Soldier's death. Acts like these diminish the Army's public image, undermine American trust and impede good order and discipline. The American people entrust the Army with their sons and daughters; therefore, it is incumbent upon the Army to maintain trust by ensuring senior leader misconduct is studied, understood, hedged

against with programs and policies, and ultimately, stamped out completely. The evidence clearly shows misconduct happens due to both individual and external factors.

### Individual factors

Paradigms are frameworks, mental models or thinking patterns based on theories or shared assumptions, concepts and values (Chike, 2020, p. 86). Paradigms can be negative or positive. Through lived experience, leaders build paradigms to help them perceive the world in ways that make sense. These paradigms can be benign or harmful. Harmful paradigms can damage an organization's culture.

The Fort Cavazos study is a great example of paradigms in action. The findings revealed leadership failures were prevalent throughout the chain of command, especially in cases of sexual harassment. These failures created an environment of harassment where Soldiers refused to report incidents because of leader inaction or fear of retaliation for reporting. Leaders influenced the

environment with negative paradigms, creating unfavorable outlooks for the Army's sexual harassment program.

In one example, a female Soldier overheard her squad leader telling subordinate leaders that, "females were there for their entertainment" and "he did not want to lead female Soldiers." The leader further stated, "Since female Soldiers are here, they are our sexual objects" (the Department of the Army, 2020a, p. 109). This behavior sent Soldiers the wrong message and created negative paradigms within the unit. In addition, subsequent U.S. Army inspector general (IG) investigations found retaliation was prevalent at all leadership levels, from sergeants major to general officers.

**Cognitive Biases**

Cognitive biases are beliefs that can unconsciously influence how someone thinks, often to their detriment. These biases precondition people's minds and dictate how they act. Leaders with cognitive biases oftentimes ignore reality. Where you see bias, you will likely see misconduct. There are several biases, but the anchoring and sunk-cost biases are the most dangerous.

Anchoring bias refers to people's tendency to give disproportionate weight to initial information they receive in decision-making, whether said data is good or not. As a result, it becomes a reference point, or anchor, that influences people's perception of subsequent information. Leaders with anchoring biases often fail to recognize the value of people, ideas or objects.

Sunk-cost bias, or sunk-cost fallacy, is the tendency to continue with an endeavor we have invested our money, effort or time into—even if the current costs outweigh the benefits. For example, an employee you have trained (thousands of dollars in training/sunk costs) has proven ineffective in their position. However, you have already invested so much time and money training this employee, so you keep them around. The employee's inability to complete their duties will lead to more costs and degraded products and/or services.

**Narcissism**

Some Soldiers in the Army believe that having certain narcissistic traits is essential for leadership success. Research suggests that charismatic leaders are narcissistic because they appear excited, daring and willing to take risks without showing signs of hesitancy or fear. However, their visions lack collective appeal and consideration of the greater good (Braun, 2017).

The U.S. Army seemingly encourages the development of certain charismatic

traits, including certain narcissistic tendencies, because they help get the job done. Furthermore, it is reasonable to claim that toxic leadership and narcissism are interchangeable, as narcissism is a significant counterproductive leadership component. The Army becomes an unsafe organization to be in when narcissistic leaders are in charge. Narcissistic behavior's corrosive nature destroys unit morale, undermines discipline and discourages Soldiers from continuing to serve.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur was among the most decorated and influential leaders in U.S. Army history. However, he was known for his inability to recognize his mistakes, general pretentiousness, his desire for power and an ability to command excessive admiration for himself (Herman, 2016). During the Korean War, he lost his job for openly opposing policy and attempting to take military action against China and against standing orders. Many more examples of unfounded leadership hubris, ethical failure and ethical guidance can be found in a Department of Defense document (DoD, 2016).

Sometimes leaders seem to self-destruct upon reaching the pinnacle of their profession. Since there is no accountability, they often create and follow rules that best suit them. When left to their own devices, many leaders succumb to the temptation of having so many resources available. Leaders who achieve high levels in the U.S. Army are vulnerable to thinking their position has unrealistic privilege.



Command Sgt. Major Brian Bertazon (left), senior enlisted leader at the Military Intelligence Readiness Command (MIRC), speaks with junior enlisted Soldiers from 336th Expeditionary Military Intelligence Brigade at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, March 3, 2023. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Maj. Jeku Arce)



Sgt. 1st Class Randeem Espinoza, sexual assault reponse coordinator, 23rd Quartermaster Brigade, heads the Female Mentorship Program that engages Soldiers on a number of subjects of interest to them and their well-being. The program and its male equivalent are responsible for increasing trust between the command and Soldiers, making it easier to report sexual misconduct (U.S. Army photo by Terrance Bell)

According to Weigle and Allen (2017), "successful leaders reach for 'forbidden fruit,' succumbing to the temptation offered by access to valuable information and control over organizational resources" (p. 3). Senior leaders' blatant disregard for rules can cause an organization to deteriorate from the top down. Acting this way develops even more toxic characteristics. It is not always only the individual themselves, as external factors can prove massively positive or detrimental.

**External factors**

Leader misconduct may also occur because of external factors beyond their control. Leaders must maintain full engagement to lead Soldiers and monitor their actions. Failure to do so may result in a lack of confidence in leadership ability, dereliction of duty or perceived leadership inaction. The farther leaders are from Soldier activities, the less they can control.

Col. Herbert J. Slocum's response to The New Mexico raid of 1916 exemplifies the dangers of giving in to external influences. Slocum let his men pursue Mexican revolutionary Francisco "Pancho" Villa across the Mexico border after Villa's forces raided the town of Columbus in New Mexico. Slocum allowed his men to go after the raiders in retribution to maintain his Soldiers' loyalty and save face after the attack. Slocum and his Soldiers' actions could have started a war. This shows that even seasoned and lauded leaders can fall victim to circumstantial and environmental factors outside their control.

**Environment and Culture**

Environmental factors and organizational culture can also influence one's behaviors. "Cultures are

characterized by a shared set of beliefs, values, norms and symbols that unite a group. The five essential characteristics of the Army Profession – trust, military expertise, honorable service, stewardship and esprit de corps – are vital to the Army Culture" (Department of the Army, 2017). Esprit de corps signifies unit members' collective camaraderie and cohesion built upon mutual trust and commitment.

However, strong esprit de corps within a unit may also lead Soldiers to hide misconduct. An example of this behavior occurred in Iraq in 2006 when Soldiers raped and killed a 14-year-old Iraqi girl and murdered her family. The esprit de corps in the organization was so strong that Soldiers failed to report the crimes. The Soldier who ultimately reported the incident

faced ostracism and feared for their life.

While environmental factors and organizational culture impact everyone's decisions, Army leaders receive additional training with each promotion to improve ethical conduct. Recently, the Army developed a program evaluating first sergeants and above for leadership positions. During this evaluation, leaders undergo several tests to ensure those selected for leadership positions don't demonstrate negative character traits. Regular training is also conducted to educate and raise awareness. All Soldiers receive annual ethics training, and most organizations have leadership development programs. These supplemental programs promote leader effectiveness.

Externally, organizations can use staff-assisted visits, organizational inspection programs and command climate surveys to identify problems within a command. These tools allow leaders outside the organization to assess units' organizational climate and eliminate workplace misconduct. Leaders can also request an administrative investigation and take appropriate disciplinary action when misconduct is substantiated. But there could be a deeper issue at play with your Soldiers—trauma.

**Trauma**

Trauma is unique in that it makes a person feel threatened even after the event has passed. It disrupts how people process information, causing them to experience life differently. Experiencing trauma can cause individuals to develop ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are not socially acceptable. An investigation conducted by the U.S. Army found



that many military service members experience potentially traumatic events before joining, with 49% of female Soldiers and 15% of male Soldiers reporting experiencing trauma, including sexual abuse, before joining (Perales et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the Army trains these trauma survivors to become leaders without addressing said trauma. More work needs to be done.

## Solution

Several solutions may help eliminate senior leader misconduct. Firstly, treating all organization members with dignity and respect is necessary for preventing issues like sexual harassment, equal opportunity violations and even counterproductive leadership. Secondly, leaders should make operational decisions without letting negative individual factors cloud their judgment, following existing regulations and consulting with unit IGs on decisions regarding discipline. The IG's policy covers retaliation and whistleblower protection under the U.S. Army command policy. If leaders were more aware of this information, they could have mitigated or eliminated reprisals detailed in IG reports.

Too many leaders rely on prior knowledge, which ultimately gets some of those leaders in trouble.

The Army should also continue pre-screening command candidates. Psychological issues among its leaders could be easily identified by implementing a standard screening process and providing training programs to reform leaders with counterproductive traits. At minimum, the Army should also conduct psyche screenings before promoting leaders above the rank of sergeant first class.

## Conclusion

Despite efforts by the Army at every echelon, misconduct in the ranks persists. The U.S. Army must do much more to mitigate misconduct regardless of internal and external factors. Programs and policies that stamp out misconduct will only be partially effective. However, through careful screening and promoting a culture where empathy sits at the forefront of the culture, the Army could eliminate leadership misconduct.

So treat others just like you would want your loved ones to be treated. ■

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