



Graphic by *NCO Journal* (U.S. Army photo by Chad Menegay)

*By Master Sgt. David R. Chadburn*

Loyalty is a hallmark of military service and is essential to developing the highly effective teams required for victory on the battlefield. The U.S. Army's inclusion of loyalty in such guiding principles as the Army Values, the Soldier's Creed, the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO), and the Army Civilian Corps Creed (Department of the Army, n.d.) highlights its importance.

danger to accomplish the most difficult of missions.

## The Problem

to be loyal to the “U.S. Constitution, the Army, [their] unit and other Soldiers” (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 2-2). This vague definition leaves Soldiers susceptible to misplacing loyalty.

Misplaced loyalty happens when Soldiers prioritize their loyalty to individuals over their loyalty to the higher Army service and its values (Doty & Fenlason, 2012). Misplaced loyalty can result in common unethical behaviors such as favoritism, failure to report misconduct, and retaliation against whistleblowers.

Loyalty to individual leaders and Soldiers serves as a barrier to reporting misconduct. Not reporting misconduct or disregarding it is a significant consequence of misplaced loyalty.

The Department of the Army (2020) identified that NCOs or higher leadership tend to protect each other by sweeping incidents under the rug. This behavior contributes to underreporting in sexual harassment and sexual assault situations. Another example is that of a platoon leader covering for an intoxicated platoon sergeant and excusing the NCO from physical training to allow the individual to sober up. Failing to report misconduct because of misplaced loyalty damages organizations.

Similarly, the role of misplaced loyalty as a contributing factor to retaliation further deteriorates trust and cohesion.

Misplaced loyalty to peers and leaders who are guilty of misconduct can cause Soldiers to retaliate against whistleblowers.

Two common categories of retaliation are social and professional (Farris et al., 2021). Social retaliation includes ostracism, harassment, and blaming by co-workers (Farris et al., 2021). Professional retaliation includes revocation of privileges, denial of promotion/training, and transfer to a less favorable position (Farris et al., 2021).

Squad members who victim-blame a Soldier for reporting his or her squad leader for sexual harassment is an example of retaliation based on misplaced loyalty. The negative behaviors associated with this shadow side of loyalty severely impact the Army.

## Impact

Placing loyalty to individual Soldiers and leaders in higher regard than loyalty to the Army institution creates

opportunities for unethical behavior. Misplaced loyalty has contributed to some of the most egregious criminal acts in the Army’s history.

Misplaced loyalty heavily influenced the events of the infamous My Lai Massacre in Vietnam, which saw the murder of more than 500 unarmed civilians and subsequent attempted cover-up by unit leaders (Berg & Rielly, n.d.), as well as the so-called Canal Killings in Iraq (Doty & Fenlason, 2012).

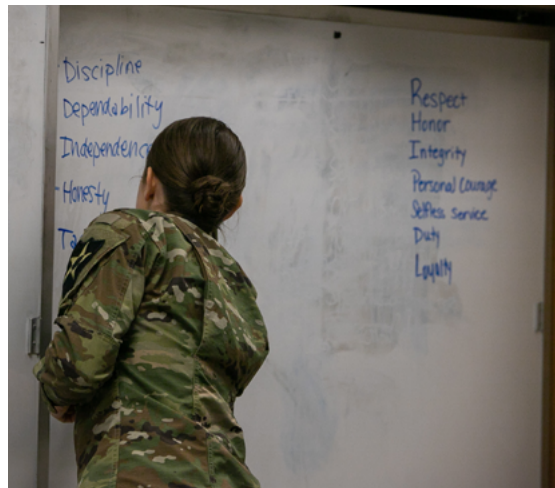
More recently, the Vanessa Guillen incident and subsequent investigation into the climate and culture at the former Fort Hood, Texas, highlighted the deterrent effects that misplaced loyalty had on sexual harassment and sexual assault reporting, as well as the retaliation victims experienced (Department of the Army, 2020). The shadow side of loyalty has corrosive effects on both individual Army units and the greater Army enterprise.

At the unit level, misplaced loyalty destroys trust and cohesion. Soldiers who misconstrue the Army value of loyalty may condone their peers’ unethical behaviors (Taylor, 2022). For example, if a squad leader sexually harasses another Soldier, some squad members could maintain their loyalty to the leader. Others might maintain loyalty to the victim, the principles of right and wrong, and the greater Army profession and ethic. This division in the squad erodes the trust and cohesion necessary for combat effectiveness.

The shadow side of loyalty can also harm the Army institution.

High-profile cases of misplaced loyalty undermine trust and confidence between the public and the Army. Perceptions of increasing politicization, leadership failures, Soldier support of extremist groups, the persistence of sexual assault incidents, and cases of senior leader misconduct have lent credence to public perception of the Army as a less-than-stellar organization (Mitchell, 2023).

For example, the lack of accountability regarding the Afghanistan withdrawal gives the perception that senior Army leaders only look out for their careers and their peers. The shadow side of loyalty has damaged the Army’s public perception and hurt recruiting. Identifying the root cause of misplaced loyalty is critical to eliminating its negative impacts.



A Soldier participates in a practical exercise on core values during a Warrior Resiliency Workshop. Comprehensive training on the Army Values is essential for building a foundation of ethical service. This training helps Soldiers understand the true meaning of loyalty. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Courtney Davis)



## Root Cause

The strength of the Army lies in its diversity. More than 1 million uniformed personnel make up the institution, all with different backgrounds, upbringings, beliefs, and value systems. As recruits transform from civilians to Soldiers through initial entry training, the Army introduces a new value system.

According to the Department of the Army (n.d.), “Soldiers learn [the Army] values in detail during Basic Combat Training (BCT), from then on they live them every day in everything they do – whether they’re on the job or off.”

It is unrealistic to expect that 10 weeks of Army BCT is enough time for Soldiers to replace 18 or more years of upbringing, experience, beliefs, and values with the Army’s seven core values. To put it bluntly, believing this brief introduction to the Army Values during the first phase of BCT is enough for Soldiers’ in-depth understanding and embodiment is naïve. Minimal initial training and a severe lack of sustainment training on the Army Values make Soldiers susceptible to misplacing loyalty during their career progression.

Inadequate foundational understanding of the Army

Values and ethics can compound over time and make leaders vulnerable to misplaced loyalty and unethical behavior. Doty (2020) notes, “Research suggests that as someone becomes more expert in their field they can become less ethical because they are solely focused on what they are good at or what they are doing.”

For instance, a platoon leader could become so focused on completing property inventories that he or she dismisses subordinate misconduct in filling shortages. That leader’s unconscious loyalty to subordinates would result in overlooking unethical actions to acquire the missing items. This lack of self-awareness and mindfulness would lead to actions without considering the consequences. Recognizing these root causes of misplaced loyalty enables developing a solution.

## Solution

By reframing its definition of loyalty and consistently training on Army Values, ethics, and self-awareness, the Army can counter the loyalty ethical dilemma.

The institution should alter its definition of loyalty to specify that Soldiers’ loyalty is to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, their units, and other Soldiers who embody



Loyalty to the Army’s values requires Soldiers to report misconduct, even involving their peers or leaders. Failing to report misconduct due to misplaced loyalty can damage an organization. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Maj. Joshua Frye)

the Army Values and ethic.

Values training must go beyond an elementary ability to recite the seven values (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage). It must include relevant historical and current examples of what loyalty is and is not. This training would form the foundation for appropriate loyalty and values-based service.

Leader values training should focus on ethics and self-awareness.

According to McGrath (2023), ethical leadership increases employee satisfaction and commitment, and creates a strong organizational reputation by fostering trust. This improved reputation builds confidence and attracts talent. Furthermore, ethical leaders influence ethical behavior in their peers and subordinates, reducing the propensity for unethical conduct.

Finally, developing self-awareness in leaders can mitigate the risk of unconsciously misplaced loyalty by ensuring leaders remain mindful of their actions and decisions. Self-awareness combined with a strong, ethical culture will keep leaders attuned to indicators of the shadow side of loyalty and enable them to take appropriate action to prevent its associated unethical behaviors.

## Conclusion

Loyalty is essential to the Army's ability to fight and win its nation's wars. The faithful commitment and allegiance to fellow Soldiers, their units, the Army, and their nation provide strength and confidence to accomplish challenging missions.

Soldiers and leaders must recognize the ethical dilemmas and adverse impacts that loyalty can present. Misplaced loyalty can lead to unethical behaviors like favoritism, failure to report misconduct, and retaliation.

These behaviors destroy trust and cohesion, damage public opinion of the Army institution, and are contrary



1st Sgt. Shawn Wood, 529th Support Battalion, kicks off 574th Quartermaster Company moral and ethics class at Camp Taji, Iraq, July 26, 2019. Effective ethical training equips Soldiers to confront and resolve the moral ambiguities that test their loyalty and decision-making. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Roger Jackson)

to the Army's principles and ethic. The Army can mitigate the dangers of misplaced loyalty by providing additional clarity and specificity to its definition of loyalty as an Army value. This precision can reduce the possibility of misinterpretation of loyalty at the most junior levels.

Additionally, consistent training on the Army Values, ethics, and self-awareness would ensure a firm foundation of values-based, ethical service from the individual Soldier to the greater Army enterprise. Ethical leaders instill ethical cultures and develop those positive attributes in others. The Army requires these types of leaders to ensure Soldiers understand, live by, and embody the Army Values and the Army ethic. ■

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