

SENIOR LEADER: SENIOR TEACHER

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The Army has few rivals in willingness to talk about ethics and leadership. Ethics and leadership are taught in our schools and preached in our units. We name years after leadership and years after values. We devise trendy slogans for rejuvenation and become "born-again" under this year's banner. Little changes except for the addition of another buzz-word to an already bulging, military-unique vocabulary.

Military leadership and military ethics have as many definitions as experts. Most definitions, however, share the idea that leadership involves the human process that welds individuals into cohesive units committed to achieving assigned tasks and that the welding process is contingent upon and congruent with commonly held, traditional military values. Hence, the ideas are joined.

Still, despite all the talking and teaching, there is a gap. The gap is between what we say and what we do. In the luxury of time during peace, there is danger in having too much time. Leaders become obsessed with what ought to be left to subordinates. Subordinates who are micromanaged by "time-on-their-hands" leaders, learn in turn to micromanage others. After all, if a colonel is doing my job, I have to find a captain's job to usurp to insure my importance. Meanwhile, we all attend professional development seminars or officer's calls in which we are taught not to do what we are doing and swear to each other we aren't.

Education, then, is not the prime mover of ethics and leadership teaching. While knowledge is a necessary condition for action, it is not a sufficient condition to cause action. This is why there are so many leadership experts and so few leaders.

Most leadership principles are common sense. Most principles involve performing ethically correct behavior. After a short time in uniform, most soldiers can articulate some kind of a leadership philosophy. It may only crudely state likes and dislikes, but it will explain expectations of the led for the leader. What is usually said is that the most important thing a leader does is doing not talking.

Words and actions together affect the ethical climate--the atmosphere--of an organization. The climate is either positive or negative. The climate encourages or discourages ethical behavior. Policy statements, verbal campaigns--words--alone cannot set a positive atmosphere. Subordinates at every level "first" watch the behavior of seniors. "Second," subordinates listen to seniors. What is done, or not done, is the pattern for action in the organization and action is the most forceful statement of what any group believes is important. What is said reenforces or contradicts action. If behavior is ethical and rhetoric emphasizes ethical behavior, the climate is positive. Ethical action is encouraged. If, however, action ignores ethical principles and language ignores or contradicts behavior, the outcome is cynicism and results in a negative climate.

A War College survey done in the late 70's reported that two-thirds of the junior officers surveyed believed that ethical behavior was discouraged and unethical behavior was rewarded. Correspondingly, this period of time is also identified as the era during which the moral health, the ethical climate, of the armed services was suffering and cynicism permeating the profession.

The military profession is many places. But the main place the profession is, is the unit. This is where actions occur. The unit, the working organization, is the primary school for ethics and leadership. The military school house is only the location that teaches the tools to analyze why a climate is positive or negative. Judgment in general terms is derived from the common sense and feeling. It takes absolutely no formal education to know there is something wrong in the following example:

I want no prisoners. The more you kill and burn,
the more it will please me. Make the interior of
Samar a howling wilderness. Kill every person
capable of bearing arms.

GEN Smith

It also takes no formal education to predict that this example sets the tone, the atmosphere, the prevailing conditions of the ethical climate as negative and potentially dangerous.

Likewise, it takes no formal education to predict that the following is an example of the kind of action that contributes to a positive climate:

LT. Thornton, take charge of these six prisoners, move them safely to the rear and turn them over to SFC Shakley at the battalion prisoner collection team located in the vicinity of Karlsburg, coordinates LV 7698.

1LT Overstreet, C/9/CAV

The ethical climate of the military exists in layers. Each layer acts as a filter and the climate is passed down or changed for better or worse. At anytime, any leader can try to protect the level below from the negative climate above. Likewise, any leader can transform positive intentions from above into a negative experience for those below. The insulation, though, can never be completely effective. The reason for this is that the major actor in each layer of the organization is the senior leader. By virtue of simple visibility, the senior leader's actions and words are responsible for the ethical climate of the immediate layer and will filter down to other layers in varying degrees depending upon force of personality. Every leader, then, teaches leadership and ethics. However, the most influential teacher is the most senior leader. Highly problematic in all this is that the primary teachers are the farthest away from any feedback about how they're doing.

It is my contention that most senior leaders are simply unaware of their role as the prime mover in establishing and effecting the ethical climate or their role as the prime teacher in the climate. Further, it is my contention that most senior leaders are oblivious to the extent of their sphere of influence in the realm of the ethical climate--until something goes wrong. To demonstrate this, I

am going to use Admiral Metcalf as a case study. The teaching point is not to make statements about the admiral's character. Rather, the teaching point is to demonstrate what happens and what the effect is on the ethical climate in the largest sphere when a senior "teacher" is overcome by events. Ultimately, this case study is a plea for all of us to see ourselves on the ethical stage of the profession and to remember that while each role is important, few plays go the distance when the main roles fail. And while the military profession will never fold as a "bad" play, a negative climate certainly impacts on the ability of the military to succeed.

HEADLINE: 11 February 1985--Convicted Soldiers Embittered By Admiral's Lighter Penalty
(Washington Post)

HEADLINE: 12 February 1985--House Says Probe of Admiral Showed Tampering
(Associated Press)

HEADLINE: 20 February 1985--Admiral Says Punishment Was Even Handed
(Washington Times)

HEADLINE: 16 March 1985-----The Admiral's Offense
(Baltimore Sun)

As mentioned before, U.S. Army War College studies done in 1979 and 1980 reported that a majority of junior officers polled perceived seniors as unethical and guilty of rewarding unethical behavior. This does not mean that seniors are unethical; however, it does mean that something is happening to cause the perception of unethical leadership. This perception is undeniably intensified by media coverage of incidents involving senior leaders.

It is far too easy to dismiss all this by saying, "If junior soldiers only understood the big picture . . ." or "If people read the back pages as well as the headlines . . ." But this exempts seniors and the military-at-large from responsibility for perceptions, rejects any effect of perceptions on the military or civilian publics and lends credence to the notion of an unbreachable gap between junior and senior ranks:

Three soldiers convicted of stealing Soviet-made automatic rifles from a warehouse in Grenada as souvenirs are in "limbo status" while their cases are appealed and are bitter that a Navy Vice Admiral and his staff were not punished for the same offense . . .

(11 Feb. 1985 Washington Post)

VERSUS

What the record discloses is that Admiral Metcalf acted openly at every step of the way. He left a paper trail a yard wide. By contrast, the court-martialed Marines willfully engaged in criminal conduct. The offenses weren't "the same thing at all."

(16 March 1985 Baltimore Sun)

A senior leader is an individual who has risen by virtue of rank and position above the crowd. Along the way, this individual assumes more and more authority and responsibility for increasing numbers of subordinates. He or she thinks, not just in terms of self, but in terms of ever-widening circles of people. Because ethics is the people aspect of reasoning as well as the implied component of effective military leadership, the ethical responsibility widens as well. The result is that the organizational demands outweigh personal considerations and the reasoning process resembles the "greatest good for the greatest number:"

(Admiral) Metcalf told an Army colonel to take Roble (his aide) to the arms cache, where he obtained the AK 47s and marked several with staff members' initials in hope of reserving rifles for them, the lawyer said.

10 May 1985 Washington Post

Versus

On his own initiative, Roble then a Lieutenant Commander, took additional weapons he intended as souvenirs for Metcalf's staff and, without informing the Admiral, tagged them with the names of several officers . . .

(20 July 1985) Washington Post)

For the senior leader, the professional life is an unequal balance between public and private self. The higher an individual rises, the more he or she becomes public. Public means symbolic, representative, synonymous with the military. In the publics' mind, for example, Rickover is the Navy, MacArthur the Army and Mitchell the Air Force. Although leadership at any level is important, the leadership of a senior is more important because it is more far reaching:

'Service personnel as well as the general public have complained of the smell of favoritism,' Aspin said. 'What can be done to ensure that the process is honest, but also perceived to be honest?'

(16 Apr 1985 Associated Press)

Versus

Once you examine the facts, it (the punishment) was pretty even handed all the way across the board . . . but it took a long time to come out, and they (facts) generally tend to find their way to the back pages . . .

(20 Feb 1985 Washington Times)

For the civilian and military public, incident reports were amplified by editorial comment about the admiral "who went scot-free for doing something that cost several soldiers

their freedom and military careers." (12 February 1985 Washington Post) The same editorial went on to explain that the admiral "was caught red-handed . . . got a slap on the wrist . . . quashed a probe of his war booty." The editorial closed by declaring, "It is the business of the public and everyone in uniform to know about the double standard of military justice." The counter claim was far less spectacular: "Those who were guilty of criminal activity were properly punished . . . Our system of military justice worked absolutely." (J. Lehman quoted in the Washington Times, 20 Feb. 1985)

Critical to the Metcalf case is an analysis of who is responsible for perceptions of wrongdoing and poor leadership at high levels and further, who is responsible for correcting perceptions that are not only wrong, but damaging to the military as a national institution and its ethical climate. Surely, the perceptions belong to the audiences in and out of the military who are media consumers. However, ownership of the perceptions is not at question. Rather, the questions are: "What is the responsibility of Admiral Metcalf for perceptions?" "What is the military's responsibility to actively pursue means to correct disinformation that causes misperceptions?" And, does anyone care about the impact of this situation on soldiers?

Assessing responsibility is a difficult task. Even if no answer can be agreed upon, it is difficult to deny that the primary influences on perceptions in this case are the Admiral and the military. Effective leadership is leadership

that bridges gaps and doesn't create them. Someone must be responsible to correct the perception that rank is a licence to demand a different standard of behavior from juniors than from seniors. Understanding the relationship between rank and perceptions about leaders is an essential first step to restoring faith in high level leaders and insuring a positive ethical climate.

The more senior a leader becomes, the more difficult communication becomes, as Admiral Metcalf discovered. Taking responsibility for perceptions is taking responsibility for the ethical implications of leadership. It is avoiding not only the act of wrongdoing but the appearance of wrongdoing as well. And above all else, it is avoiding the perception of rewarding unethical behavior in others by not loudly rebutting perception enhancing statements such as: "The Navy closed the case and promoted Metcalf to deputy chief of naval operations for surface warfare." (11 Feb. 1985 Washington Post) Proclaiming, ". . . Metcalf was moved from his position as commander of the Navy's 2nd Fleet to the Pentagon where he became the Deputy Chief of Navy Operations for Surface Warfare . . . but it is a virtual certainty, add knowledgeable Defense Department and Navy officials, that Metcalf will go no further," eleven months later was quite simply too late. (Norman Black, A.P. Military Writer)

Admiral Metcalf's problems began with his admitted unawareness of the illegality of his action. Such "unfamiliarity," Navy Secretary John F. Lehman said "was deficient for an officer of his grade and responsibility."

(13 February 1985 Washington Post) Several days later, in the Washington Times, Metcalf himself agreed that he should have known better and stated, "The responsibility was mine." Unfortunately, taking responsibility was not hyped with the same fervor as assigning blame and could not counter perceptions. Ramifications for the military began immediately. This incident will not be forgotten when the last case is decided because facts are not the paramount influence here--perceptions are. Juniors will cite this as one more example to prove that rank is a licence to a different standard of behavior. Seniors will cite junior's claims as further proof of the inability of juniors to see the "Big Picture" and civilians will cite the case as another indication of the services' inability to maintain credibility. Gaps will grow and bridges will be harder to build unless someone takes the responsibility to change perceptions that are not grounded in fact and takes the responsibility for perceptions as well as fact. Building or damaging a positive ethical climate is the primary business of leadership because actions teach.

Perceptions belong to the perceiver. Perceptions are, however, created by a variety of influences that act as filters for processing experience. Internal influences such as attitudes and beliefs are difficult to affect. External influences are the words and actions of others and are not difficult to affect. What is required is an analysis of how words and actions cause experiences to be filtered a particular way and in turn cause particular perceptions. For

the perceiver, the perception is reality. The more senior the source of the words and actions, the wider the realm of the perceived reality.

Vice Admiral Joseph Metcalf III is a public person by virtue of his rank and position. He was destined to become more public as leader of the Grenada operation. And, in early 1985, he was to become most public not for his successful command of the Grenada operation, but for his words and actions involving what the press dubbed the "Grenada Gun Case." The incident rippled. Metcalf, reality and perception, quickly became the filter through which experiences were processed and little heed was paid to recommendations such as that of James T. Kilpatrick writing for the Baltimore Sun:

. . . Get the other side of a story; and consider the possibility that an admiral may have been mistaken, while the poor little Marines were crooks.

(16 March 1985)

For the soldiers convicted of stealing Soviet-made automatic weapons from a warehouse, the Navy explanation that soldiers "stole" their captured guns from arsenals on the island, while Metcalf "requisitioned" his did little to dispel fiction and the perception of a double standard. More emphasis on the facts and actual disposition of cases would have helped:

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Offense</u>	<u>Punishment</u>
1 Vice Admiral	Bringing back AK-47s	Letter of Caution
300+ Enlisted	Bringing back AK-47s	Amnesty
4 Enlisted	Various offenses including stealing anti-tank rockets and grenades, attempted sale of same to unauthorized persons	Court-martial

(Letter to Congress from Secretary
Lehman dated 12 February 1985)