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Personal Ethics versus Professional Ethics

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We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.

—General of the Army Omar Bradley

INTEGRITY, honesty, and moral conduct are essential elements in a good leader. Most people would agree with that statement. Disagreement comes when these standards are applied equally to personal and professional lives. The general thinking of society today maintains that "if it doesn't hurt anyone else, I can do whatever I wish. What I do in my private life is my business. My employer has no right to evaluate or punish me for my private conduct as long as my job performance is not degraded." This philosophy is applied—especially in the civilian sector—to using drugs, drinking alcohol, having sex, lying, and cheating. Increasingly, the courts are agreeing with this position.

In the military, we take a different view. Drugs are not tolerated. Alcohol abuse can ruin a career. Sexual involvement with other people in the workplace is disciplined—and in many cases prohibited. Dishonesty is severely punished.

Since becoming a general officer, I have heard senior leaders say at various times to closed-door gatherings of general officers, "If you are sleeping around with someone other than your spouse, stop it! You will be discovered. If you insist on such conduct, have the integrity to resign and take off your uniform." These are strong words, and the implication is clear: for senior leaders, private and public lines are almost erased. We do not have the freedom to conduct ourselves any way we desire in private.

In the acquisition world, the ethical conduct of government officials has always been scrutinized carefully. Recently, a large volume of ethical guidelines was published. We were held accountable even before we read it. Conflict of interest, gifts, influence, meals, and privileges are covered. One officer remarked to me, "I wonder what was wrong with that one-page list called the Ten Commandments?"

The Tailhook incident, multiple highly publicized sexual harassment cases, and dismissal of senior leaders for sexual misconduct have led to the recent publication of guidelines on fraternization, sexual harassment, and sexual conduct. We have instituted mandatory training to implement these guidelines. Apparently, we need them.

The message is that we do have a problem. Something has changed in our society. We can no longer assume that ethics and integrity are givens for people who solemnly take their oath of office as military personnel. Thus, we must institute controls and accountability. In so doing, we are saying that private and professional ethics must be the same.

Although I have written extensively on this subject,[1] a conference held three years ago caused me to reflect on this issue in the military context. Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev of the Commonwealth of Independent States invited members of our Department of Defense to Moscow to participate in a congress entitled "The Moral and Spiritual Foundations of the Russian and United States Armies."

In this seven-day conference, attended by 550 of the top Russian field commanders of all military branches, participants explored rebuilding and ethical foundations. The Russians had lived 70 years with an atheistic philosophy mandating that internal ethics be governed by fear and reprisal. With the removal of restraints, they felt a need to build a new foundation of moral and ethical values, seeing in the US and in NATO countries a spiritual and ethical foundation that Russia did not have.

We can ensure ethical behavior only by means of law, fear, or personal convictions. Laws or regulations set guidelines of expected or prohibited behavior. Because we cannot prescribe every conceivable circumstance, such regultions are limited in their effect. Law is a last resort when private morality does not prevail.

Prof Edwin Epstein advocates corporate social responsibility because "being ethical heads off the law."[2] Similarly, Andrew Stark comments on external motivation for ethical behavior as being "nothing less than management tools such as authority, power, incentives and leadership. Relying on such motivational tools . . . is just a sophisticated form of coercion and therefore morally wrong."[3] Laws and regulations are limited and relatively weak. They are far from the solution to ethical behavior.

Fear is a powerful motivator. Repressive governments make it their primary tool of coercion

and compliance. In reality, it also affects much of our culture. Fear of career derailment, of public exposure, of court-martial, of job security—all provide significant motivation to restrain our baser selves to conform to some set of moral rules. Both fear and law lead people to live at the edge of these set boundaries, sometimes stepping over them or being overly scrupulous—not out of personal conviction of right and wrong but out of self-preservation. Fear and law are effective only in limited ways.

Personal convictions form the most effective basis for moral and ethical behavior. The dream of every commander is to have people who instinctively do what is right whether or not regulations give guidance. Unfortunately, personal convictions change with our society. Relativism—which holds to no clear right or wrong, especially in the areas of sexual and behavioral conduct—has captured most of the intellectual and educational community.

The United States Air Force Academy honor code—We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does—is simply not accepted by society as an appropriate standard. The response to people who would espouse any ethical norm is, How dare you tell me how I ought to live in my private life? Note again the implied dissection of private and professional behavior.

I like to think of each of us having an inertial guidance system able to sense when we are off course and then initiate immediate correction. We need a moral compass.

Personal convictions develop from family, community, education, religious/spiritual upbringing, and peer influence. We recogniz e these influences, for better or worse, as givens in the life of each 18-or 22-year-old who enters the Air Force. We live with the results and attempt to bring these young people from their current state of moral convictions to one that we define in our profession.

Prof Kenneth Andrews wisely notes that "moral character is shaped by family, church, and education long before an individual joins a company to make a living." [4] All of these influences are in trouble. The family structure and its influence are breaking down. Yet, the family is the bedrock of moral teaching. Although we cannot change a person's family background, we can do much to aid and abet military families to instruct and influence the next generation. I applaud all the efforts we are making today to make the Air Force more family friendly and family focused.

My childhood years were spent in a small Iowa farm community, where adults kept an eye on youngsters and enforced some semblance of moral restraint. That kind of community is disappearing, giving way to the declining morality of the inner city and metropolitan suburbia. Real community is a thing of the past. Once again, in our Air Force community, we have much more opportunity to build a place for our families. Our base commanders need to be empowered and encouraged to do so.

Education has lost its moral punch. Permeating our educational system is the belief that we must not teach moral values which delineate right and wrong. Chuck Miller writes that "a 1940 survey of public school authorities found their top discipline problems were talking, gum chewing, making noise, running, dressing improperly and littering. A 1986 poll of educators listed rape, robbery, assault, burglary, arson, bombings, murder, suicide, absenteeism, vandalism, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gang warfare, pregnancy, abortion and venereal disease." [5] We are living in a different world!

Religion and spiritual upbringing are still very effective, but decreasing numbers of young people fall under the influence of the church. In previous decades, parents sent their children to religious education even if the parents themselves did not attend. Such a sense of obligation to expose children to religious training and its consequent moral commandments no longer exists. This situation is exacerbated by the church-state debate, which presents even more of a barrier to the influence of the church.

The effect of peer influence is obvious: "Do not be deceived. Bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33). Most drugs, al cohol, sexual immorality, lying, and cheating result from the influence of peers.

There is a growing degree of cynicism and sophistication in our society, a sense that all things are relative and that nothing is absolutely right or wrong.

—Jody Powell
Press Secretary to President Jimmy Carter

To illustrate our national problem, Daniel R. Levine notes that "honesty and integrity have been replaced in many classrooms by a win-at-any-cost attitude that puts grades, expediency and personal gain above all else." [6] Moreover, "Moral standards have become so eroded that many children can no longer tell right from wrong," [7] says Kevin Ryan, founding director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University. According to Stephen F. Davis, a professor of psychology, "There`s no remorse. For students, cheating is a way of life." [8] Ryan further comments that "kids have no moral compass other than enlightened self-interest"; Ryan blames the nation's schools for abandoning their traditional role of providing students with moral guidance.[9] Similarly, Jay Mulkey—of the Character Education Institute of San Antonio—observes that "students who cheat in class may well cheat in their jobs or on their spouses. When you have a country that doesn't value honesty and thinks character is unimportant, what kind of society do you have?" [10]

Another illustration comes from a Rutgers University professor who conducted a survey of 31 highly selective colleges (14 with honor codes, 17 without). Thirty percent of the colleges with an honor code reported cheating on tests in 1995—up from 24 per cent in 1990. Forty-seven percent of the colleges without a honor code reported cheating on tests in 1995—up from 45 percent in 1990. [11] These sad statistics give some credence to having an honor code.

I am firmly convinced that integrity and ethics must be built from within, reserving the law and fear as last choices only. The real question is, How do we do this? I submit the following suggestions for consideration:

1. We must recognize that the young people we are bringing into our Air Force today, in the main, have not been taught ethics and morality. They reflect the national norm on cheating and lying. Simply giving them a new set of rules with warnings of punishment will not change them.

2. As these young people go through basic training and Officer Training School, we must not assume that they have a consistent foundation of integrity, morality, and ethics. We need to define and teach moral behavior—both public and private. We must do this repeatedly and consistently, giving it major emphasis.

3. We need to help our people build an internal moral compass, utilizing the Chaplain Corps for that purpose. We need to encourage and enable our chaplains to teach spiritual principles of ethical behavior—not just philosophy—from the viewpoint of their religious beliefs. The Ten Commandments and the book of Proverbs are a good place to begin, since they contain tenets accepted by almost all faiths. We certainly should not coerce people into religious instruction, but we can and should encourage them. I emphasize this aspect because religious belief calls for an internal transformation rather than just a change in behavior. Interestingly, hardly any secular literature even mentions religious instruction as part of the solution—a puzzling exclusion in view of the impressive historical place such instruction holds in forming the moral concepts of our nation.

4. Commanders and leaders at all levels must set an example. If our lives reflect morality and integrity, our influence will be great. Commanders need to speak out on these issues often, rewarding integrity and punishing lack of integrity.

5. We must have and practice a no-tolerance policy on sexual harassment—not because it fits the mood of the moment in our corporate world but because sexual harassment is *morally wrong*.

6. We need to help our Air Force families in their training of the next generation. Through our chaplains, counseling, and seminar resources, we need to work at building and preserving marriages.

In order to be a leader, a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have rheir confidence. Hence the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a

section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose.

—Gen Dwight Eisenhower

I began this article by contrasting personal and professional ethics. In our profession, they cannot be separated. We are on duty 24 hours a day. Personal ethics, morality, and integrity will strongly influence a person's professional ethical conduct. Integrity means wholeness or completeness—continuity of life in all its actions. As leaders, we want to exhibit that kind of integrity. As trainers of the next generation, we want to encourage that kind of integrity. We must not delude ourselves or the people we lead by thinking that we can practice conduct. □

Notes

1. Jerry White, *Honesty, Morality and Conscience* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Navpress, 1978).
2. Quoted in Andrew Stark, "What's the Matter with Business Ethics?" *Harvard Business Review*, May–June 1993, 39.
3. Ibid., 40.
4. Kenneth R. Andrews, "Ethics in Practice," *Harvard Business Review*, September–October 1989, 99.
5. Quoted in *Perspective: A Bi-Weekly Devotional Letter* 43, No. 12.
6. Daniel R. Levine, "Cheating in Our Schools: A National Scandal," *Reader's Digest*, October 1995, 66.
7. Quoted in ibid.
8. Quoted in ibid.
9. Quoted in ibid., 67.
10. Quoted in ibid., 70.
11. "Cheating Up on Campuses with Honor Codes," *USA Today*, 11 March 1996.

The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.

—Vince Lombardi

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