

It's Time to Establish Ethics-Related Metrics

By Col. Charles D. Allen, U.S. Army retired

In July 2006, DoD initiated the “Check It” campaign as part of its internal management controls program and co-opted the military aphorism “what gets checked gets done.” To check that something is being done correctly requires measurement and metrics.

During the past decade, DoD has sought to measure the effectiveness of its counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also sought to measure the effect of fiscal year 2013 sequestration using varied metrics for readiness, modernization and force structure of the armed services. DoD is still struggling to find appropriate metrics to assess the efficacy of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program.

The difficulties in measuring these areas of strategic concern do not bode well for DoD as it strives to check the character of its leaders and ethics within the profession of arms to ensure that we are “getting it right.”

The White House and Congress have paid a great deal of attention to the ethical missteps and misbehavior of DoD leaders in the early years of the 21st century. In response, the secretary of defense in 2014 appointed a senior advisor for military professionalism to focus its efforts for military ethics, character and leadership development. In a report in September 2015, how-

ever, the Government Accountability Office found that DoD “has not fully implemented two key tools for identifying and assessing ethics and professionalism issues, and it has not developed performance metrics to measure its progress in addressing ethics-related issues.” In the years since the renewed focus, ethical issues have continued in operational and institutional settings throughout the Army as well as in other services.

Too Many Failings

News accounts of officer, enlisted and civilian personnel misconduct are, unfortunately, not infrequent and are generally met with cynicism. The perceived lack of accountability for senior leaders is aptly captured by author Tom Ricks’ quip, “different spansks for different ranks.” While the 2011 Army Profession Campaign and study sought to revive trust in the Army as an institution, there are still too many incidents of ethical failings within the ranks.

In early 2015, my U.S. Army War College colleagues, research professor of military strategy Leonard Wong and professor of behavioral sciences Stephen J. Gerras, revealed in “Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession” a pervasive culture of false reporting resulting from overwhelm-



Lt. Gen. Stephen R. Lanza, I Corps commanding general, welcomes Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., soldiers to a Junior Leader Army Profession Symposium designed to gather feedback on the Army ethic.



Leaders from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, discuss ethically challenging situations during a professional development program at Fort Campbell, Ky.

ing and burdensome requirements, and the accepted norm of telling higher headquarters what they want to hear.

Wong and Gerras are known to be provocative in asking tough questions and publishing research findings that are uncomfortable for military members. Ultimately, they challenge the self-image and professional identity of Army officers as well as the Army profession itself. Self-image and identity contribute to the frame of reference developed through career imprinting from the first unit assignment.

Monica C. Higgins, a professor in education leadership at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, offers that career imprinting is a “form of learning that encompasses the professional impression left on individuals by an organization.” Given that career imprinting influences individual leader choices and behavior in an organizational context, then it would also affect the ethical climate of a unit set by its leaders.

In an article last spring for the U.S. Army War College quarterly *Parameters*, I asserted that the Army’s recent focus has been on the lack of character of individual leaders and of their supporting staff to confront and mitigate unethical behavior. A missing component is an appreciation for a unit climate that discourages ethical behavior. Importantly, organizational scholars Linda K. Trevino, Gary R. Weaver and Scott J. Reynolds offer that ethical climate is “a shared perception among organization members regarding the criteria ... of ethical reasoning within an organization.” This perception is formed through the day-to-day experience of unit members of what is acceptable, and by observing the interactions of leaders and subordinates.

Lack of Survey Instrument

Unfortunately, neither the Army nor DoD employs a validated survey instrument to assess ethical climates within units. The Government Accountability Office noted that the senior

advisor for military professionalism office was completing an inventory of climate, professional development and psychometric tools that are used across the department to enhance interdepartmental visibility of these tools and promote best practices, and that the office staff “stated that while these tools could be used to assess ethics-related issues, none of the tools were designed exclusively for that purpose.”

It is puzzling that DoD would consider using survey instruments inappropriate to assess something as important as ethical climate. Rather than rely on anecdotal evidence or the gut feel of senior leaders far removed from units, it would be prudent for the Army to either develop a survey instrument or adapt an existing tool specifically designed to assess ethical climate. One such available

tool is the Ethical Climate Questionnaire, a valid assessment instrument that measures five dimensions of climate developed from scholarly research.

My sense of that aspect of a unit climate was not based on formal survey but from my own career imprinting with an assignment to a field artillery battalion in a mechanized division during the height of the Cold War. Imagine being a young lieutenant or junior NCO in Germany in the late 1970s, when Army units were stationed on overcrowded kasernes and subinstallations; units shared headquarters buildings, barracks, maintenance bays and motor pools. Our artillery battalion collocated its vehicle parking area with the division cavalry squadron and an engineer company.

With the shared parking, there were concurrent nightly guard mounts, ostensibly to protect the equipment from off-post outsiders. In reality, the unit guards were protecting their vehicles and equipment from “midnight requisitions” by other units. Many of us remember painting the bumper numbers on the canvas doors of our vehicles—jeeps, Gama Goats and GOERs—only to be dismayed when those items still disappeared overnight.

For proper supply accountability, Army regulations required hand receipts for property, and periodic inventory. Shortage annexes documented missing items and components for vehicles, sets, kits and outfits. It was common practice to update hand receipts after maneuver exercises, and record “field losses” on shortage annexes. Part of command supply discipline was to engrave unit designation on the components of the various tool kits. While the practice may have aided accountability during inventory, it was more likely to facilitate recovery from those who had “borrowed” the tool. I remember the absurdity as the maintenance sergeant attempted to engrave a set of Allen wrenches.

‘Get It Done’

A critical event for each leader was the unit’s annual general inspection. With its numerous checklists and metrics, the in-

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spection and the Army training and evaluation program were the objective measures of performance—for success and failure—and inevitably recorded on officer and NCO evaluation reports. In a zero-defect Army, failure had implications. “Can do” attitude morphed into “get it done.”

During the inspection week, there were the perpetually dispatched vehicles unavailable for inspection, relocation of storage containers holding excess parts and equipment, and the mysterious storage site outside the unit area. In a time of uncertainty and turbulence for the big Army, the impact at the unit level was the necessity to look good even when the resources were not available to be good. Hence, the “shared perception among organizational members” of ethical behavior was not consistent with the espoused professional ethics. While these recountings are anecdotal, they provide an indication of an ethical climate even without a formal survey instrument.

Army historians have documented the challenges and resultant shortfall in funding for training hours and miles (referred to as operating tempo), ammunition and fuel during the post-Vietnam War era. Perhaps the greatest shortfall was in the professionalism of the Army. This coincided with the end of a major conflict and the implementation of the all-volunteer force, with the attendant growing pains of the volunteer Army. As the nation tried to leave Vietnam behind, it also sought a peace dividend to assist in the recovery from the U.S. recession of 1973–75 and lessen the impact of the 1973 OPEC embargo that resulted in a fourfold increase in oil prices.

Accordingly, with the U.S. military withdrawal from Vietnam, by 1974 the Army faced a 40 percent budget cut and a 50 percent reduction in force structure from the Vietnam-era peak of 1.57 million soldiers in 1969 to 785,000.

The strain on the Army was palpable and confirmed in the Army chief of staff-directed Army War College “Study on Military Professionalism” in 1970. One of the study’s key findings was that junior officers were “deeply aware of professional standards, keenly interested in discussions about the subject, and intolerant of those—either peers or seniors—who they believe are substandard in ethical or moral behavior or in technical compe-

tence.” The study also related a “preoccupation with ‘measurable trivia’ ... devised by senior leaders” that contributed to “inaccurate reporting—rampant throughout the Army and perceived by every grade level sampled from O-2 through O-7.” Forty-five years later, the conditions reported by Wong and Gerras in “Lying to Ourselves” have either re-emerged or persistently endured in spite of efforts to maintain a professional Army.

Army Struggles for Relevance

In our current circumstance, the Army is once again struggling to establish its relevance in an uncertain and turbulent national security environment. The nation seeks to shift its balance to the Asia-Pacific region and away from the ground combat-centric operations in the Middle East. The scale of deployments for the Army has been greatly reduced, and another peace dividend is sought from DoD and the Army as the nation seeks to deal with its federal debt. Like in the 1970s, the decade-plus cost of operations for the war on terrorism and the 2007–09 recession have contributed to our financial concerns. As the Army reduces force structure from its active-duty peak of 570,000 to 450,000 soldiers by the end of fiscal year 2018, the competition for promotion and retention of talented personnel will increase.

With fiscal austerity comes greater scrutiny, along with calls for accountability and efficiency. As the Army goes back to basics, greater emphasis will be placed on fiscal responsibility, training management and command supply discipline. Each of these areas begs for metrics and drives the call for data and reports to higher headquarters. What can be measured will be reported with potentially little regard for the efficacy of the reporting. And increased accountability will drive the need for more compliance inspections, with the potential for zero-defect mentality to emerge across the force.

Such an institutional culture will have a direct impact on units and their people at the lowest level—for the lieutenants and sergeants who are the direct leaders of our Army. The career imprints for this generation of junior leaders will be based on their experiences and the ethical climates within their units.

Accordingly, the perceptions of Army personnel should be assessed and monitored as leading indicators of unethical behavior in their quest to accomplish assigned tasks and missions.

Whether in the operating or generating force, as important as what gets done must be how it gets done. One would expect that unit leaders will dutifully communicate the Army Values, but behaving in accordance with those values will be based on the perception of what is really important in the organization. ★

Command Sgt. Maj. David L. Stewart of the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, West Point, N.Y., delivers a message about trust at Fort Stewart, Ga.



U.S. Army/Sgt. Tara L. Cook