

LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY AND ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

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“A man of character in peace is a man of courage in war. Character is a habit, the daily choice of right and wrong. It is a moral quality which grows to maturity in peace and is not suddenly developed in war”.

General Sir James Glover

This article explores the critical intersection of military leadership accountability and ethical decision-making, emphasizing the profound implications of leaders' choices on personnel and society. It argues that ethical decision-making is an integral aspect of military leadership, rather than a separate concern, and advocates for an interactionist perspective that considers the dynamic interplay of leadership, character, and situational factors. The discussion delves into the necessity of holding military leaders accountable for their actions and decisions, outlining mechanisms for enforcing accountability, including internal oversight, military courts, command responsibility, and transparency. The importance of ethical training for military leaders is underscored, highlighting various ethical frameworks that guide decision-making in complex situations. The article also examines the ethical dilemmas faced by military leaders and the impact of situational factors on moral choices. Ultimately, it posits that fostering a culture of ethical decision-making within military leadership is essential for maintaining trust, integrity, and operational effectiveness.

Key words: *military leadership, ethical decision-making, accountability, ethical training, leadership theories, moral dilemmas, transparency, military ethics, command responsibility, ethical frameworks.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership in the military is an essential aspect of ensuring operational success and maintaining morale among personnel. The decisions made by military leaders, especially in times of conflict or crisis, can have profound consequences for both their troops and society. Ethical decision-making in military leadership is particularly critical because of the high stakes involved, including loss of life, national security, and the well-being of soldiers and civilians.

Leadership and ethics are habitually treated as related to separate spheres. It would be better, perhaps, if leadership and ethics were treated as belonging to a single domain. Ethics is an aspect of leadership and not a separate approach that exists alongside other approaches to leadership such as the trait approach, the situational approach, etc. This holds especially true for the military, one of the few organizations that can legitimately use violence. Today, most militaries opt for a character-based approach for the ethics education of their leaders and espouse leadership theories that want leaders to be strong and visionary. Both the role of character and leadership are increasingly questioned, however, on the basis that situational factors are more influential than leadership and character. A closer look suggests

that an interactionist perspective, with leadership, character, and the situation interplaying, is more accurate. As Codreanu highlights (2019) leaders must be aware "... that oblivion of minor covert details concerning integrity transgressions triggers the most appalling disasters". Therefore, it is still good leadership that keeps soldiers from crossing the line between the lawful use of force and excessive violence.

Such intersection of military leadership accountability and ethical decision-making, focusing on the role of military leaders in guiding their units, making ethical choices, and being held accountable for their actions. It will delve into key concepts, theories, and real-world examples that highlight the importance of ethical decision-making and leadership accountability in the military.

2. WHY AND HOW MILITARY LEADERSHIP SHOULD BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE

Military leadership can be defined as the act of guiding individuals or groups of military personnel to achieve mission objectives, maintain discipline, and foster unit cohesion. A good military leader possesses technical expertise, emotional intelligence, and an ability to inspire and guide others under challenging circumstances. Effective leadership ensures that soldiers are not only

equipped with the necessary skills but also motivated and prepared to perform tasks efficiently and responsibly. The essence of military leadership lies in its ability to enforce the chain of command, build trust, and make decisions that are in the best interest of the mission, troops, and national security.

Accountability in military leadership refers to the obligation of military leaders to answer for their actions and decisions, particularly when those decisions have far-reaching consequences. A leader is accountable not only for their personal conduct but also for the performance of their unit or team. This accountability is enforced through military justice systems, which investigate breaches of conduct and ensure that responsible parties face appropriate consequences.

Military accountability is essential because it helps maintain order, discipline, and trust within the armed forces. It also ensures that leaders remain transparent and answerable for their actions. Ethical lapses or misconduct by military leaders can undermine public trust in the military and its mission. Therefore, holding leaders accountable is critical to maintaining the ethical standards of the profession.

Within the military, accountability is typically enforced through several mechanisms, for example *internal oversight* when

military leaders are often subject to internal review processes, such as investigations and tribunals, to assess whether their actions meet the expected ethical and legal standards, or *Military Courts* in cases of serious misconduct or violations of military law, leaders can be tried by military courts, where they may face penalties ranging from reprimands to court martial. *Command responsibility* can also be an effective mechanism for ensuring accountability were higher-ranking officers are often held accountable for the actions of the personnel under their command. This principle ensures that leaders remain vigilant about the behavior of their subordinates and finally most critical ones such as *transparency and reporting*. Transparency in military accountability is a key principle for ensuring that military operations, actions, and decisions are subject to scrutiny, oversight, and responsibility. This concept helps maintain public trust, upholds human rights, and reduces the risk of abuses of power or unethical behavior. Transparency involves documenting and reporting military activities, such as combat operations, peacekeeping missions, and logistical support, to ensure that actions are understood and can be examined by oversight bodies. This may include making public key outcomes of military missions, casualty reports, and operational objectives or allow civilian oversight

of military forces. This could involve independent committees, auditors, or government representatives who can assess military actions and decisions. These oversight bodies act as checks on military power and ensure that military leaders are held accountable to legal and ethical standards. In this context it would be also appropriate to note *external oversight by International bodies* like the United Nations, International Criminal Court, and human rights organizations often play a role in holding military forces accountable for actions that may violate international law, such as war crimes or human rights violations. Transparency helps ensure that military forces are not operating above the law.

Transparency is often enhanced by *public access to information* about military actions and policies is essential for transparency. This includes providing the public with insight into defense budgets, weapons systems procurement, and military strategies, though certain sensitive information may be withheld for national security reasons. In summary, military accountability through transparency is essential for ensuring that military forces operate ethically, lawfully, and responsibly. It also serves to protect the rights of civilians and maintain the integrity of the military institution. *Accountability in military*

leadership is necessary to uphold standards of conduct and ensure that leaders are responsible for their actions. An absence of accountability can lead to abuses of power, loss of trust, and even detrimental effects on military operations.

3. IMPORTANCE OF ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING IN MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Ethics, ethical behavior, ethical decision-making, and ethical leadership are important terms and concepts in today's world. All possible relations, behaviors and responsibilities – what can and should or even must be done, and what not – cannot be included in formal regulations. In the grey zone of non-existent regulations people behave according to their values, knowledge and skills, personal characteristics, or in general: their ethics. *Ethics is a set of moral principles – a theory or system of moral values. It is the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group. It is a consciousness of moral importance, and a guiding philosophy.* Ethics can also be defined as a set of moral issues or aspects (such as rightness), and the discipline dealing with what is good and bad, and with moral duty and obligation (Merriam Webster Dictionary). It is interesting to note that the relationship between the military and ethics is not one-dimensional. While many authors

and practitioners claim that ethics must be an important part of military work and military leadership, and of military organization in general, some see ethics and the military as incompatible, and the term military ethics as an oxymoron (Cook, 2015, p 36). However, Cook (2015, p 33–34) claims the opposite and gives some explanations: that there is no question that the military is oriented towards the public good; that military professionals consider the principle of discrimination (they discriminate between those who are enemy combatants and those who are noncombatants); that the duty of military officers is to take upon themselves any danger that the conflict introduces to noncombatants; and that military professionals must act proportionally – judgements must be made by a competent military authority on a case-by-case basis, and so on. The dangers of killing and being killed are additional strong factors in ethical military behavior.

Incidents involving military personnel testify to the importance of ethics in the military. The My Lai Massacre ((Vietnam War) (one of the most infamous ethical failures in military history)) in 1968, The Abu Ghraib prison scandal in 2003, the Haditha killings in 2005, the killing of 39 civilians by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016 is a recent example of such an incident. Failing leadership played

an important role in these examples, in the case of Abu Ghraib especially at the senior level. In all these cases, the victims were outsiders to the organization. But militaries also have to deal with serious misbehavior among military personnel in units that are not deployed and in that part of the military organization that is never directly involved in combat. Also in such cases of misbehavior military leaders are sometimes part of the problem. But peacetime incidents notwithstanding, it is because the military is one of the rare organizations that can legitimately use violence and that its leaders hence have to lead personnel that have used or experienced violence, which explains why leadership is so important in the military. There is a rapidly growing body of literature on military ethics, military leadership, and the ethics of military leadership that wants to contribute to a better understanding of the ethical challenges for military leaders but that also wishes to help the military leaders that actually face those challenges. Military ethics exists to be of service to professionals who are not themselves specialists in ethics but who have to carry out the tasks entrusted to the profession as honorably and correctly as possible. It is analogous to medical ethics or legal ethics in the sense that its core function is to assist those professions to think through the moral challenges

and dilemmas inherent in their professional activity.

In real life ethics is, in the military and elsewhere, an important aspect of leadership and not a separate approach that exists alongside other approaches such as the trait approach, the situational approach, etc. Now, the last few decades did bring a number of leadership theories that profess to be ethical, such as transformational, authentic, spiritual, and servant leadership. It remains somewhat elusive, however, what exactly the ethical element of these theories consists of. Paying lip service to the importance of values does not make these modern leadership theories more ethical. Ethical decision-making involves evaluating situations through a lens that upholds moral values, principles, and standards of conduct. In the military, ethical decisions often involve complex scenarios where leaders must balance competing interests, such as national security, the safety of soldiers, civilian welfare, and the preservation of human rights. Several ethical frameworks can guide military leaders when faced with difficult decisions, for instance:

Deontological Ethics framework emphasizes duty and adherence to rules or laws. Military leaders adhering to deontological ethics would focus on their responsibilities to follow the rules of engagement, adhere to military codes, and uphold

legal and moral duties, regardless of the potential consequences;

Utilitarianism in ethic focuses on maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number. Military leaders applying utilitarian principles may prioritize decisions that achieve the best outcome for the most people, even if they involve some level of harm or risk to a smaller group;

Virtue Ethics approach focuses on the moral character of the decision-maker. A military leader applying virtue ethics would prioritize acting with integrity, courage, and compassion, aiming to build a positive culture of leadership and ethical behavior within their unit;

The theory of *Ethical Relativism* posits that moral standards can vary depending on culture and circumstances. Military leaders guided by this framework might make decisions based on the context and specific ethical norms of the situation they are facing, although this may lead to moral ambiguity in certain cases.

Many moral philosophers appear to have a clear preference for one of the three main schools in moral philosophy, be it virtue ethics, rule-based ethics, or utilitarianism. Yet in real life, most people tend to see a role for virtues and rules alike while also taking the consequences of an act into consideration. It seems that those involved in Military Leadership and Ethics 11 military ethics education

are practically duty-bound to adopt a similar mixed approach. An ethics education of military leaders should, for example, have attention for rules, procedures, and codes but also for virtues and character. To state it somewhat schematically: military leaders should be an example by displaying virtues, but also maintain certain rules, and take into account the consequences of their own acts and that of their subordinates. At the same time, they should also have an eye for the situation and how it can adversely affect their own conduct and that of those they lead. Even in a time that leadership is increasingly questioned, sound leadership at all levels is what keeps military personnel from behaving unethically.

4. ETHICAL TRAINING FOR MILITARY LEADERS

Teaching ethics in the armed forces, and instilling ethical values in soldiers of different ranks, is undoubtedly a challenging task. There are numerous unresolved issues discussed by authors writing about teaching military ethics, which primarily address the following questions: *Why should ethics be taught in the military? How should ethics be taught in the military? Who should teach ethics in the military?*

Hartle (2004) articulated a vision in which war is a harsh event that creates moral ambiguity, confusion, and stress upon the conscience of

the warfighter. He also stressed the importance of values and ethics for the military profession as it acts in the most moral of professions, warfighting. Howard and Korver (2008) demonstrated that ethical reasoning and action not only prevent moral lapses and failures, but also serve as a tool for human moral flourishing and well-being. Connelly and Tripodi (2012) discussed the impact of moral incompetence, ambiguity, and moral failure on operations, and post-deployment reintegration, while Toner (1995) focused on describing the honorable and shameful in military conduct and action, prescribing a method that links moral and ethical ‘goodness’ to the military profession.

The opinions listed above present two main arguments as to why soldiers should be ethical and receive ethical education: the first is that the relationship between society and the military, encompassing support, the military’s responsibility to the parent society, and soldiers as citizens, necessitates ethical soldiers and leaders of character, while the second argument is rooted in the organizational culture of the military; specifically, the nature of military work often places soldiers in moral dilemmas. Ethically educated and trained soldiers should be better equipped to navigate such dilemmas.

Robinson (2007) wrote about two approaches to achieving ethical

soldiers: the first is by osmosis, which involves a slow, unseen, and gradual influence throughout one's career, and the second is the explicit teaching and training of ethics. Robinson also highlighted two types of ethics: virtue ethics, which focuses on character, and valuebased ethics, which encompasses the values upheld by society and the military.

The question of who can or should teach ethics in the military is not simple at all. Authors mostly mention philosophers, lawyers, priests (military chaplains) and military officers/commanders as teachers. When reviewing the subject of how ethics is taught, MacIntyre and O'Keefe, in *An Overview of Ethics Education* (in STO-TR-HFM-304, p 29), indicate that "some authors insist that the behavior of students does not improve measurably after following ethical education programs of study". But they add that "it would be premature to conclude that the teaching of ethics is a failed venture simply because overt signs of understanding are less than visible." Specifically, "moral behaviour consists of more than observable actions. It also includes less visible behaviours such as perceptions, decision making and motivation".

Aalto (in STO-TR-HFM-304, pp 34, 37) states that when thinking about teaching ethics in the armed forces and teaching military leaders,

we are again faced with whether ethics can be taught and, if so, how it is being taught in a military population. For example, is it teaching, training or education? He recognizes that teaching military ethics should be included in both training and educational aspects of training. He stresses that ethics teaching is also tied to a place, a time, and a culture, so an approach which works in one military organization may not work in others.

Since ethics is such an important element of military professionalism and a factor in military work and behaviour, the armed forces need, above all, ethical leaders. Foley and other authors, in a subchapter entitled *Social Psychological Perspectives of Ethical Leadership* (in STO-TR-HFM-304, p 16), point out that some researchers "suggest that the leader is the single most important determinant in shaping an organization's ethical climate, which has a significant impact on the ethical behavior of organizational members and the operational effectiveness of the military unit in garrison and in a theatre of operations."

Ethical decision-making is not an innate skill but one that can be developed through education, training, and experience. The military has long recognized the importance of preparing leaders to confront ethical challenges and navigate

complex situations with integrity. Ethics training programs, which focus on teaching moral reasoning, the application of ethical theories, and the development of leadership character, are critical in shaping the decision-making abilities of military officers. Military education aims to shape and mould the ethical character of individuals, which, in a mutually supportive and interdependent manner, influences the ethical character of the organization they belong to and the military institution they are part of.

5. ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN MILITARY LEADERSHIP

O’Keefe say (in STO-TR-HFM-304, p 30): “If we expect to encourage ethical behaviour, we need to first ensure that people can correctly identify dilemmas when they occur.”

Military leaders frequently encounter situations where ethical dilemmas arise. These challenges often involve a conflict between fulfilling military objectives and adhering to moral or ethical standards. One of the most critical ethical challenges for military leaders is determining when the use of force is justified. Leaders must navigate between military necessity and humanitarian concerns. Decisions regarding the

use of force, particularly in civilian areas, raise moral questions about proportionality, collateral damage, and respect for human life. In term of this military leaders must ensure that their subordinates act within the boundaries of international law and the rules of engagement. Kucera, in his text *Ethics and International Humanitarian Law*, deals with the dissemination of international humanitarian law (IHL) to the armed forces. Among other things, he stresses: “It is a legal obligation of military leaders to ensure that their subordinates comply with the rules of IHL. However, this obligation cannot be reduced to occasional IHL lectures.” (STO-TR-HFM-304, p 45).

Any breach of these rules, such as committing war crimes, can tarnish the integrity of the military and harm civilians. Leaders are responsible for preventing and addressing misconduct within their ranks.

Soldiers and military leaders alike may experience moral injury when they are involved in actions that conflict with their ethical beliefs. This often occurs in combat situations where leaders are forced to make decisions that have devastating consequences for others. Addressing moral injury is essential to ensuring long-term psychological and emotional well-being for military personnel.

The another ethical dilemma is moral choices and temptations even though the word *temptation* rarely appears and is even more seldom discussed in leadership development circles and ethics literature, actually every leader faces ethical and moral temptations associated with the position. Therefore, every leader must be prepared to answer this question: What are the specific moral and ethical temptations associated with the position I hold, and am I prepared to conquer them? The purpose of this article is to identify potential temptations associated with senior military positions and offer specific practices that can prevent leaders from engaging in wrongful, immoral, and unethical behaviors.

Despite this overarching organizational commitment to ethical military leadership, history shows that, without due diligence and moral courage, leaders with great integrity, high ethical standards, and effective training, operating in “morally sound cultures,” can still make less than fully ethical and moral choices with devastating consequences, especially at the senior leadership level. Research shows that any number of factors can erode or degrade the most principled leader’s character, causing questionable moral choices and unethical decisions when operating within the realities, dynamics, and pressures of the modern workplace.

In his book *The Lucifer Effect*, Philip Zimbardo identifies several workplace factors that can damage the moral fiber of individuals, including negative situational and environmental forces, lack of accountability, bad bosses, toxic organizational cultures, bad group dynamics, persistent personal isolation, a significant failure, and even success. These factors confront even the most upstanding leaders, potentially allowing them to be influenced or “tempted” to engage in unethical decisions and even activities that are knowingly wrong. Therefore, every leader must be prepared to answer the question: What are the specific moral and ethical temptations associated with the position I hold, and am I prepared to conquer them?

To understand the temptations associated with military command, the structured focus groups with 271 senior military leaders at 4 different senior Service colleges had been conducted. The participants were asked to anonymously answer the following open-ended question: “Based on your experience, what are the specific temptations or opportunities for wrong doing associated with your most recent position?” During these exercises, focus group participants identified many potential temptations of

command. The top 10 temptations, ranked by frequency, follow

1. Falsifying, Massaging, or Manipulating Information.
2. Misuse of Government Funds/Resources/Personnel.
3. Inappropriate Sexual Relationships.
4. Alcohol/Substance Abuse.
5. Favoritism or Preferential Treatment.
6. "Blind Eye" and Failure to Report Wrongdoing.
7. Exerting Inappropriate Influence on Personnel Decisions.
8. Offering/Accepting Gifts or Bribes or Quid Pro Quo.
9. Hubris.
10. Seeking/Demanding Deference or Preferential Treatment.

6. CONCLUSION

Military leadership accountability and ethical decision-making are intertwined elements that are crucial to the success and integrity of the armed forces. Leadership involves the responsibility of making decisions that protect the lives of soldiers and civilians while upholding national interests. Ethical decision-making requires military leaders to balance the demands of their mission with moral considerations, ensuring that their actions reflect the values of justice, honor, and duty. In a world

where military leaders are often called upon to make life-altering decisions under pressure, fostering a culture of ethical decision-making and holding leaders accountable for their actions is essential to maintaining the trust and respect of the public, the military, and the soldiers under their command.

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