Globalization has connected the world like never before and, as the world’s only superpower, the United States will continue to be asked to send its forces around the world to aid and assist those in need. As a result, the future Joint Force will likely face significant ethical challenges because of the various cultural and social factors they will encounter. To facilitate operational success and to provide clarity for Service members, Joint Force leaders must have clear codes of conduct developed for their organizations prior to undertaking missions around the world.

Operating in a Multicultural World

As the world becomes ever more interrelated, the increase in environmental complexity creates an immense potential for ethical problems or misunderstandings. Differences in regional, national, or local cultures create immeasurable differences in ethical attitudes that make it difficult for a citizen of one country to ascertain right or wrong in another country. The Joint Force of the 21st Century will operate in a dynamic global security environment with the potential for conflicts to arise across domains a high likelihood. To operate successfully in and across multiple domains, the Joint Force must understand that ethical differences exist between cultures and codes of acceptable conduct vary accordingly. Prior to undertaking missions abroad, the Joint Force must be grounded in the ethics and values that this nation expects of its soldiers, sailors, airman, and marines.

Cultural missteps have the potential to test the Joint Force’s ethics as highlighted by recent incidents within the U.S. Secret Service. Members of the Secret Service allegedly hired prostitutes last March and April in El Salvador and Colombia as the teams prepared for President Obama’s visits. The motto of the Secret Service is “Worthy of Trust and Confidence,” but these allegations undermined the American public’s trust and confidence in the Secret Service. Military Service members unaware of the potential harmful effects of unethical behavior can also undermine the public’s trust and confidence in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Trust and Ethics

Trust is a key component of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey’s attempt to pursue, instill, and foster, what he calls “mission command” in the joint community. Mission command—essentially understanding, intent, and trust—is the cornerstone for successful future operations around the world. Operating as part of a coalition in uncertain environments increases the complexity of operations and undermines assumptions about acceptable behavior. Mission command requires trust at every level of the joint force and building trust with subordinates and partners is the single-most important action a commander will undertake. Given today’s interconnected environment and the need for greater
speed in competitive decision-making cycles, it is evident that operations will “move at the speed of trust” for the joint force of the future.

Although the commander must translate understanding and intent to subordinates clearly and concisely, commanders must ultimately trust his or her subordinates to get the job done according to the organization’s values. Trust has its roots in strong values and ethics that influence one’s perception of situations and problems. Values and ethics directly influence individual and group preferences, behaviors, and actions. Values are defined as the beliefs that generate and guide decisions and are rooted in fundamental personal beliefs preferred and reinforced in a community. Ethics are defined as desired or appropriate standards of behavior within a community and help individuals’ determine right and wrong.

Unfortunately, the concept of community or group values has been undermined in the U.S. over the past few decades by a popular movement that starts from the principle that values are a matter of personal decision. Assumptions regarding individual ethics have had such a profound change on U.S. culture that little, if any, agreed upon moral criteria remains with which to judge right and wrong. Interests, rather than ethics, currently explain the predominant social influences on organizational values. Without familiar laws and judicial procedures and in uncertain settings with unfamiliar attitudes, personnel operating in foreign environments find ethical clarity elusive.

Ethical Realignment

When the Joint Force leaves home and crosses international borders, moral clarity often blurs. Even a seasoned Joint Force leader must reevaluate his or her assumptions constantly regarding actions in unfamiliar environments. What is often naturally accepted in one’s native country can be unacceptable in a foreign country, or vice versa because of different laws and standards of acceptable behavior. In foreign settings, the values promoted and modeled by a leader have a tremendous effect on values exhibited by an individual or organization. Ultimately, as the nature of the influence process is the desire to engage followers to accomplish mutual goals, ethics is central to leadership.

With this in mind, in June 2012, the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, General James Amos, announced that he was undertaking a worldwide tour of Marine bases to reemphasize the Corps’ renowned discipline and to reiterate the conduct he expects following several undesirable incidents. After over a decade of fighting wars several continents away from home, General Amos believes that a slight fraying of the well-known Marine Corps values may have occurred. Recent incidents captured on video and in photographs depicting Marines urinating on dead Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and Marine snipers posing next to a flag that resembled the Nazi SS symbol were signs of a system of values that were an anathema to the Marine Corps.

In a recent interview, General Amos stated that although the Corps was “not off the deep end,” he expressed concern that the public image of the Marine Corps was in question. Given that over the past 10 years, hundreds of thousands of Marines have served honorably and ethically in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of Marines involved in unethical behavior is quite small. Even so, he found the incidents troubling enough to travel to each Marine installation to ensure officers and senior non-commissioned officers provide the proper focus on accountability and discipline to their Marines.

Although the Marine Corps and other Services are highly regarded by the American public, General Amos expressed concern that the recent wars have affected standards of conduct. If discipline and accountability are allowed to erode, the American public and Congress may lose faith in the Services’ ability to carry out their missions. Once faith in the Services is lost, they will cease to exist he warned. "As the keeper of the flame I don't ever want to even get close,” Amos said.
For the Joint Force, operating in a global environment requires one to differentiate between customs or behaviors clearly wrong from those simply different. Respect and understanding must shape and guide Joint Force ethics: respect for human values and local traditions, and an understanding that some practices are plainly wrong no matter what the circumstances. Clearly, context matters when deciding what is right and what is wrong and some things ethical in one scenario may be unethical in another. With that ambiguity in mind, strong core values can provide Joint Force members with a foundation for acting ethically.

Core Values

Core values help organizations differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable practices. To be useful, codes of conduct must be explicit and provide crystal clear guidelines for those occasions when the enticement for unethical behavior is strongest. Codes of conduct, however, must provide leaders the latitude to use his or her judgment in culturally sensitive situations. Ethics is the activity of applying moral principles to tangible situations. The application of moral codes becomes problematic as individuals see values “come to life” when applied to a specific issue. It is the application of specific principles across different culture that makes the desired outcome uncertain.

When the Joint Force operates globally, multiple values are expected to be in tension and a strong institutional code of conduct helps to alleviate the strain on Service members. Without this commitment, stated values and ethics result in clichés that provide personnel little or no framework for behaving ethically. Core values form one of the most elementary components of a group’s culture. They generally represent the basis of the group’s ideological system and provide the indispensable link between the group’s culture and social systems. In the absence of core values, both systems will collapse eventually.

The Role of Leadership

In a study of ethics policy and practice, no point emerges more clearly than the role of senior leadership in providing commitment, direction, and examples of ethical behavior. It is important to remember that immediate leaders and supervisors, far more than distant top leaders, most often influence the subordinates they work with closely. Senior leaders, however, set the policies and provide feedback through promotions and recognition programs that define actual values. As such, leaders throughout all echelons of the Joint Force need to espouse and model ethical values. Values-based leadership is a bond between a leader and a follower founded upon a shared, strongly internalized set of values promoted and acted upon by the leader. Every act and statement of a leader has an effect on culture and values. Actions speak louder than words, so values-based leaders must earn their subordinates’ trust every day.

A Joint or Service ideology or philosophy that embodies a set of values can act as a guide for navigating through the uncertainty of inherently difficult situations. Coupling values with prior learning (e.g., demonstrating desired ethical conduct with positive reinforcement) serves as excellent predictors of behavior. If not coupled with prior learning, values may only reflect what are called espoused values. Although espoused values can predict well enough what people will say in a given situation, what they do may be out of alignment with expectations.

Recommendations

Subordinates learn from and model the behaviors of the people they admire and in many cases this is their immediate supervisor or commander. Joint force leaders must take action to ensure they embody values-based leadership by espousing, modeling, and reinforcing the following ethical qualities in their organizations:
• Appropriate personal behavior and expectations. Leaders must hold themselves to high ethical standards and strive for honesty, humility, and integrity in their personal and professional lives. Leaders must accept responsibility for their own ethical failings.
• Fairness. Leaders must not show favoritism and treat everyone equitably. Leaders must never be condescending and must be willing to accept others’ mistakes.
• Organizational leadership. Leaders must articulate and communicate an ethical organizational vision. Leaders must hold people accountable and put ethics above short-term interests.
• Ethical interpersonal behavior. Leaders must treat peers and subordinates with care and consider the consequences of his or her actions on others.
• Inclusiveness. Leaders must collaborate inside and outside of his or her organization and look for ways to increase cultural competencies.

Conclusion

Ethical responsibilities encompass activities, practices, or behaviors expected or prohibited by the military even when they are not written into law. These responsibilities span a range of norms and behaviors that mirror concerns thought necessary for keeping within moral expectations. Without ethical guidelines, some personnel may exhibit “rogue” behavior in unfamiliar environments. In other words, creativity or innovation may cause one to abandon good judgment and subsequently commit an unethical act.

Although an inhospitable and dynamic environment may induce unethical decision-making, the Joint Force can offset these cultural pressures through a values-based leadership style. If the Joint Force does not establish and continually reinforce desired ethical standards, the already tenuous balance between creative leader and “rogue” leader may intensify. Significant cultural and ethical challenges face the Joint Force of the future because of the need to conduct missions around the world. Joint Force leaders must advance the values and standards of the Profession of Arms to continue to maintain the trust and confidence of the American public.

References


About the Author

Dan McCauley

Dan McCauley is a National Defense University assistant professor at the Joint Forces Staff College located in Norfolk, VA. Prof McCauley is a retired United States Air Force pilot and has served in various course director capacities such as air operations, strategy, and theater campaign planning.


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