



# What Does Contemporary Science Say About Ethical Leadership?

Christopher M. Barnes, Ph.D., and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Doty, Ph.D., U.S. Army

**A**UTHENTIC, TRANSFORMATIONAL, and ethical leadership is at the heart of our military profession. Leaders at all levels set the ethical tone for subordinates in their units either by omission or commission and have a significant impact on how their subordinates act and perform. Indeed, leaders are often the most important source of information that subordinates look to for guidance in their behaviors. Engaging in ethical leadership is among the most important components to leadership. Ethical leadership is a topic that should be important to anyone in the Army who is in a leadership position or considering occupying one.

Some people believe that ethical leadership is simply a leader who behaves ethically. Others believe that ethical leadership reveals itself more in the behavior of followers than in that of the leader himself. Even when people agree on how to define ethical leadership, they may be unclear how it influences people. Does it influence only ethics-related behaviors? Does it have a broad effect on a large set of behaviors? Or, do followers tend to ignore ethical leadership altogether?

## What is Ethical Leadership?

Researchers in the field of applied psychology define ethical leadership as the demonstration of appropriate conduct through personal actions and relationships and the promotion of such conduct to subordinates through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making. This definition highlights three key components of ethical leadership. A discussion of each follows.

First, leaders become credible and authentic as ethical role models by engaging in ongoing behaviors that subordinates deem unselfish and ethically appropriate. These behaviors include being honest, showing consideration for others, and treating people fairly and with respect. As noted by M.E. Brown and colleagues, ethical leadership entails engaging in transparent, fair, and caring actions.<sup>1</sup> By so doing, leaders become an example of how to behave and a model for others to identify with and imitate. This is an ongoing process; subordinates are continuously evaluating their leaders, so a leader who is ethical at one point in time and not at another sends mixed messages that damage his authenticity.

*Christopher M. Barnes is an assistant professor at the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) at West Point. He holds a Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Michigan State University.*

*Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Doty, Ph.D., U.S. Army, was formerly the deputy director of CAPE. He previously commanded the 1st Battalion, 27th Field Artillery (MLRS), V Corps Artillery, U.S. Army, Europe.*

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PHOTO: Recruits go on patrol during basic training at Fort Jackson, SC, earlier this year. (SSG Shawn Weismiller)

Second, ethical leadership entails directing attention to ethical issues and standards. Soldiers, like all people, have only a finite attention span and a lot of competing information to process. Ethical leadership requires emphasizing the importance and significance of ethics. Communicating about ethics on a consistent basis is a key component to ethical leadership; leaders who behave ethically but never talk to their subordinate about ethics will fall short in ethical leadership.

Third, ethical leadership entails creating ethical command climates that set the conditions for positive outcomes and ethically appropriate behavior and provide negative outcomes for inappropriate behavior. Soldiers pay close attention to rewards and punishment, and they quickly learn to engage in behavior that gains rewards and avoids punishment. It is also important that Soldiers perceive the rewards and punishment process as fair, or the leader loses credibility.

Ethical leadership is a two-way process. Ethical leaders must direct attention to ethical issues, enforce ethical standards, and allow subordinates to bring up ethical issues with them. Rewards and punishments should take place in an environment of open two-way communication. Subordinates must inform their leaders about ethical issues they may face (that the leader is unaware of), and ethical leaders must clearly inform followers of ethical standards.

## How Does Ethical Leadership Affect People?

Brown and colleagues conducted a series of three studies that included outcomes of ethical leadership. In addition, A.H.B. De Hoogh and D.N.D. Hartog and D.M. Mayer and colleagues examined outcomes of ethical leadership. In this section, we will briefly summarize those findings.<sup>2</sup>

Ethical leadership results in positive relationships between the leaders and their subordinates. Brown and colleagues found a strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and trust in the leader. They also found that ethical leadership had

***Ethical leadership is a two-way process.***

a positive relationship with subordinates' satisfaction with their leaders and their perceptions of how fairly their leaders treated them. De Hoogh and Hartog found that followers were more optimistic about the future when their leaders ranked high in ethical leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Ethical leadership results in important behavioral outcomes as well. Brown and colleagues found that ethical leadership led subordinates to be more willing to report problems and to engage in higher levels of effort. Mayer and colleagues found that ethical leadership was associated

with less unethical behavior and more positive helping and citizenship behavior by subordinates.

In short, ethical leadership leads to ethical behavior and followers that are more effective. In a 2009 information paper, officers at the Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, noted that command climate was one of the key factors affecting Army attrition rates. Specifically, they noted a “disparity between what is said and what is done”—often an indicator of ethical leadership issues. Future research will examine when these effects are small and when they are large, in hopes of maximizing the positive effects of ethical leadership. To date, no research has revealed any negative effects of ethical leadership, and that is not expected to change.

## How is Ethical Leadership Transmitted?

How can we instill ethical leadership in our Soldiers? Soldier development is an important priority, and developing subordinates is a leader responsibility. Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership*, discusses attributes and core competencies expected of our Army's leaders. Three of these core competencies, found in Appendix A1, are—

- Leads by example.
- Creates a positive environment.
- Develops others.

***...a leader lends legitimacy to his behavior.***

As Brown and colleagues note, ethical leadership occurs in a context of social learning. Soldiers learn not only through their direct experiences but also

**...ethical leadership trickles down from the very top of an organization all the way to the front lines.**

from observing the behaviors of others. Leaders, in particular, are role models for Soldiers. This is in part because the assigned role of a leader lends legitimacy to his behavior. In addition, leaders enjoy status and success, which directs their subordinates to pay attention to the behaviors that lead to that status and success. Perhaps more in the military than in other organizations, leaders have power over others. People pay close attention to those who wield power over them and often imitate their behavior.

Mayer and colleagues found that ethical leadership can spread through an organization all the way to the front lines. Front-line workers behaved more ethically and cooperatively when their immediate supervisors ranked high in ethical leadership. Even more interesting, ethical leadership in top management and leader teams predicted ethical and cooperative behavior of front-line employees and lower-level supervisors. This indicates that high (or low) ethical leadership from leaders at the very highest levels influenced leaders at lower levels, who in turn influenced the ethical behavior of everyone else.

The findings are vitally important for two reasons. First, they emphasize that the ethical leadership of Soldiers in leadership positions affects more people than they may realize. It influences not only subordinates directly under the leader, but Soldiers two or three levels removed. Second, the ethical leadership of Soldiers in leadership positions extends over more time than they may realize. Leaders of today are shaping the leaders of tomorrow. Leaders with low ethical leadership affect many people over a long time in ways one cannot anticipate. On the other hand, ethical leaders will help many people in unanticipated ways.

## **What Does This Mean for Soldiers Today?**

Soldiers can make bad decisions, as highly publicized incidents of moral failures from Abu Ghraib



**GEN Martin E. Dempsey, commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, addresses the instructors of the Chaplain Service School during their development training at Fort Monroe, VA, 13 April 2010. The group was tasked to discuss ethics and morality in the force.**

(U.S. Army, Angelina Goindano, TRADOC CG Photographer)

to Bagram Airbase to Mahmudiya have revealed. The Tigris River incident in January 2004 involved a battalion commander, a platoon leader, and a platoon sergeant. And the Pat Tillman incident involved leaders of all ranks along the chain of command (as did the My Lai incident in Vietnam). Clearly, unethical behavior is not a “rank” issue—just as ethical leadership is not a “rank” issue but a *leader* issue. The unanswered question in all these cases is, *What, if any, effect did ethical leadership have in and on these incidences?* The Army needs to answer this question if it is going to learn from its mistakes. In its judicial and investigative processes, the Army primarily focuses on what happened, not *why*. Good and bad behaviors do not occur in a vacuum. There are *always* contextual variables (ethical or unethical leader climates) that surround and influence behavior.

Examples of ethical and unethical leaders abound, both in and out of the military. Clearly unethical leaders (who were subsequently punished) carried out the Enron and Madoff financial scandals. Unfortunately, General Eric Shinseki (when he spoke truth to power in the months leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom) and Major General Antonio Taguba (in his report on Abu Ghraib) were both arguably punished for being ethical leaders. We should hold up these two as exemplars and role models as ethical leaders—just as we did when we learned that Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson took action to stop unlawful killing during the My Lai massacre in March 1968.

The Army's current emphasis on a new leader development strategy, the human dimension, and

comprehensive Soldier fitness are designed to ensure we grow and develop ethical leaders—at all levels. Being an ethical leader is not easy. It takes consistent moral courage—especially when there is a conflict in loyalties. Doing the “right thing” is easy to talk about and think about, but often hard to do. To risk ostracism by peers, subordinates, and seniors requires strength. We often talk about the importance of “speaking truth to power,” but how often do we really do it and (more importantly) how often do leaders *set the conditions* for subordinates to do so?

Ethical leadership is the bedrock for success in the military. Courage and competence win battles, but character wins wars. We can never lose sight of that. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. M.E. Brown, L.K. Trevino, and D.A. Harrison, “Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2005), 97, 117-34.

2. A.H.B. De Hoogh and D.N.D. Hartog, “Ethical and despotic leadership, relations with leader's social responsibility, top management team effectiveness, and

subordinates' optimism: A multi-method study,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 19 (2008): 297-311; D.M. Mayer, M. Kuenzi, R. Greenbaum, M. Bardes, and R. Salvador, “How does ethical leadership flow? Test of a trickle-down model,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 108 (2009): 1-13.

3. *Ibid.*



U.S. Army, Carroll Kim (TRADOC Public Affairs)

MAJ Jeff Spangler (Soldier Support Institute at Fort Jackson, SC) and MAJ John Rasmussen (Fort Huachuca, AZ) brainstorm ways for the chaplaincy to partner with the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic during the TRADOC Chaplain Service School Instructors Development Training, 13-15 April 2010, at the Bay Breeze Community Center at Fort Monroe, VA.