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The Military Hierarchy Experience
Ethical Leadership Issues from the View of the Lower Ranks

Caroline N. Walsh

A qualitative study of US military enlisted or formerly enlisted members found that their view of ethical leadership issues focused on low-level leadership failures resulting from lack of mid-level oversight, rather than a view that high-level leaders were to blame, which indicates an opportunity to further incorporate ethical development at the mid- and lower levels into an organization's ethics strategy. Findings also indicated a desire for low- and mid-level accountability rather than, or in addition to, high-level firings following an unethical incident. The study follows previous findings that ethical leadership behaviors have a positive impact on the workforce, such as influencing work engagement (Vogelgesang, et al., 2013), organizational identity (O'Keefe, et al., 2019), and organizational citizenship behavior (O'Keefe, et al., 2018).

The Marine Corps and the Navy at large have people-related strategies that are focused on recruitment and retention and incorporate aspects of leadership and development into the strategies. The Marines, after previously discharging seventy-five percent of first-term Marines each year and recruiting around 36,000 new Marines to fill the ranks (Athey, 2021, Nov 15), implemented programs that aligned with ethical leadership practices. Practices in their "Force Design 2030" included strengthening "relationships and communication throughout the Marine Corps," which, along with other initiatives, such as removing the steps that members need to take to reenlist, has improved their retention rates (Mongilio, 2022). In 2021, Commandant General David Berger stated, "We have to treat people like human beings" (Athey, 2021). In terms of the history of the culture of retention, he acknowledged that the Marine Corps made a mistake with their previous assumption that humans were at their peak physically in their late teens and early twenties, thus not focusing on retention. It turned out that "humans reach their physical peak in their mid- to late-twenties, by the time most Marines have left the Corps" (Athey, 2021).

In 2022, the Chief of Naval Personnel told the US senators that the Navy was starting to find itself in competition with the private sector for talented personnel (Mongilio, 2022). In 2020 and 2021, the Navy met its recruitment goals for enlisted members (Mongilio, 2022). However, in recent years, the Navy has not met its recruitment (Mongilio, 2022) nor retention (*The Navy Needs a Retention Strategy*, 2020) goals for active-duty officers serving in managerial leadership positions, indicating a turnover of those with leadership experience and training. Both services acknowledged that leadership was a major part of their strategies to maintain a workforce that can support their missions. As observed in the findings of the present study, it is likely that developing ethical leaders at all levels would enhance retention efforts and maintain a dedicated workforce.

Methods

Five current or former US military enlisted members were interviewed with the goal of understanding how they made sense of unethical incidents in their military experience and how they made sense of publicly known military justice cases. The participants were undergraduate university students: four were affiliated with the Marine Corps and one was affiliated with the Navy. Three participants were military veterans using their veteran education benefits to work towards a new career, and two participants were current enlisted military members who were enrolled in a military-supported career development program in which they were selected to obtain their degree and advance to become military officers upon graduation. The participants were asked about their own stories and asked to reflect on the publicly known military justice cases involving Vanessa Guillén, a US Army soldier killed by a fellow US army soldier ("Army disciplines 21," 2021) and Eddie Gallagher, a Navy special forces member charged with murder, murder of a prisoner, and attempted murder of the civilians, among other charges ("Journalist: Eddie Gallagher," 2021).

Interviews were conducted to understand the military-affiliated students' sensemaking process related to the two military justice cases. Case facts were collected through a review of publicly available documents and media. The interviews were scheduled for ninety minutes to allow time and space to explore the definition of ethics and integrity, military-affiliated students' own experiences, and a full exploration of the case facts. For the cases, original documents were reviewed when available and fact gathering otherwise consisted of a review of media reports on the cases and follow-

on consequences, a review of a podcast that has the goal of objectively discussing military experiences, and an interview with each participant.

Findings

The interviews first explored the participants' personal experiences, observations, and sensemaking in their military experiences. Then, in the military justice case reflection portion of the interview, participants discussed who was responsible in various situations and made sense of what level of leader could have changed an outcome or improved an experience. Frustration was a common feeling that came up when participants experienced or observed people in the military being held to different standards, when the military was supposed to be a rules-based organization that applied punishment fairly across the system and up and down the ranks. Despite describing a great deal of challenging experiences, when discussing what it was like to work for *ethical* leaders, each participant displayed and embodied the ease they described in their experience of working for ethical leaders.

Making Sense of Which Leaders Are Responsible in Different Contexts

Making sense of who was responsible in the participants' experiences and in the military justice cases brought up insights on low-level and high-level leadership responsibilities. In the Vanessa Guillén case, they highlighted low-level responsibilities and discussed what consequences high-level leaders weighed when facing the choice of addressing unethical issues or maintaining their own career. The participants perceived that commanders were often punished by being relieved of command for any major issues exposed under their leadership. The participants viewed that high-level leaders were almost incentivized to cover up problems. The participants regularly commented on how the lower and mid-level leaders were supposed to be responsible for holding people accountable and serving as role models.

Reflecting on the Vanessa Guillén case, two of the participants felt strongly there was a major failure with low-level leadership. They were dismayed with the fact that the incident took place in the armory because that space is typically regulated, yet it was left unregulated enough that the incident could occur and not be easily found out:

> "…how are those two alone in the armory number one, and how was he able to not only kill her but remove her from the premises without anybody knowing that, right? …I know what the armory is, and that would never happen."

> "I think everybody should have been relieved in that area…the armory."

> "There's logs of it. There's cameras. So how the hell did he get past all of that?"

> "We had a guard before you entered the armory."

Two of the Marines showed disbelief that there was not a guard or cameras, which would have made the incident nearly impossible to occur in an armory. To them, this was an incident that could have been prevented from occurring on base in the armory if low-level responsibilities, like logs and security, had been enforced. This would have prevented the perpetrator from having easy access to the victim on the job where they both worked.

A concern that came up in discussion was that commanders might be punished *too* easily for incidents that occurred at the low levels. From the participants' view, commanders were rewarded by covering things up because if problems were kept hidden, the commanders could continue their career undisturbed. If the commanders acknowledged issues, they faced being relieved or fired from their command. The participants viewed the often quick and public command reliefs following an incident as preventing some commanders from addressing major problems:

> "They don't want to have bad publicity because it will make them look like bad commanders and bad leaders, and they're worried about getting relieved."

> "They try to make it look like everything's fine. Right? And hopefully try to make it long enough until they can move commands."

> "Instead of actually fixing it, they try to make it look like everything's fine."

> "I feel like a lot of the cases in the military get swept under the rug,"

> "There was a Marine…on a training exercise. He got lost and was nowhere to be found. The battalion commander of that unit was relieved of command because it was within his ranks.…I'm pretty

> sure that battalion commander…has never crossed paths with that Pfc…he's in charge of a thousand Marines…but because it was within his ranks, he got relieved of command."

Participants communicated their understanding of the conflict high-level leaders faced when it came to deciding what to acknowledge and address. The high-level leaders risked losing their upward career movement should they make an issue public (or should an issue become public), even if the command was too far removed to have directly influenced the issue.

Along with consideration of command-level leadership's decisions, the participants felt it was the low- and mid-level leaders that had the access and responsibility to hold people accountable, serve as role models, and create an ethical environment. The low- and mid-level leader responsibilities came up in both reflection on the participants' own experiences and reflection on the military justice cases examined:

> "[mid-level leadership] just adds that extra level of like, okay, like, I can't get away with murder. Basically, I can't get away with doing certain things or saying certain things because my higher ups are here."

> "[the mid-level leader choosing not to report an incident] was a bad example for the younger guys that wanted to do the right thing."

> "Failure at the lowest level, that lieutenant…he had no control over his team whatsoever. That wasn't his team."

> "[it] always starts with small leadership. So obviously, the commanding officer of the base, he wasn't going to know that that was happening."

The participants' comments were about various incidents, but all highlighted that problems could have been avoided if low- or mid-level leaders had acted responsibly and enforced standards. The participants seemed to feel that when there was ethical oversight from those just above the lower-level members, there were fewer incidents and issues that occurred. It was the mid-level leaders' role to see what was happening in the units, regulate it themselves, or get higher-level support when needed. Some of the participants moved into the low- to mid-level leadership positions

during their time in service. After seeing or experiencing ethical issues during their time in the lower levels, they seemed to take pride in making decisions they deemed ethical and contributing to an environment with high levels of ethics and integrity.

Frustration with Varying Standards Based on Positional, Political, and Group Power

All of the participants discussed how people in the military gained power through their rank (positional), who they knew (political), or the group of people with whom they could bond (group). The participants' reflections highlighted examples of how people with one or more of these powers could evade accountability. They also made sense of aspects of the military justice cases in terms of power or abuse of power:

> "[Punishment should not depend on other factors, including position] it should just be: what did they do? And is this illegal?"

> "Someone who's really well liked, if they got a DUI, it was swept under the rug."

> "[They] were known for kind of protecting each other looking out for each other even when they did things that were wrong."

The participants' stories showed examples of their supervisors holding them to standards to which their supervisors did not hold themselves. They expressed being frustrated and irritated. Some questioned the point of having integrity themselves if their own leaders were not acting as such.

In addition to the varying standards depending on level in the hierarchy, all of the participants used the word *politics* to explain their perception that punishment rarely occurred for those who held popular power. The participants reflected on numerous instances in which if someone had power by knowing people or being liked by others, it was probable that they would keep moving up in their careers, despite any unethical behavior:

> "[speaking as if a positional leader who was able to evade punishment] I'm above the rules. And if anyone tries to say anything, screw you."

> "Yeah he's untouchable because his commanders liked him. Politics."

"It's very political, of course. And it's just I feel like a lot of the cases in the military gets swept under the rug."

[Speaking as if a leader for whom a group brought an issue to that went against that leader's friend] "So it doesn't matter if there's twenty of you. Right….I've known him for twenty years."

"It gets very political, right, depending on who you know, you can kind of navigate around, do whatever you want."

"I say that because it's in the context of somebody that committed war crimes who did not get reduced right? Kept his rank and retired, not discharged, retired, right? Absolutely not, like why…are they held to a different standard?"

To the participants, "politics" was another way that people gained power in the military. Even with the military's strict standards and hierarchy, a well-liked person could get away with unethical acts. The participants discussed politics in terms of lack of accountability for smaller infractions to larger ones.

In addition to "politics," most participants commented on the protection that groups had against being punished. They also mentioned the challenges that people who want to speak up about issues will likely face. The theme aligns with the power that groups have, even at the low levels, that can keep them from being held accountable:

"[They] were known for kind of protecting each other, looking out for each other, even when they did things that were wrong."

"And they came up with a lie that they were going to tell they stood by their lie."

"That's having…no integrity when people lie for other people."

Unethical behavior often was allowed to continue because it was group behavior, and the group protected itself and each other. It was frustrating for some of the participants who remained on the outside of the group and chose not to contribute to unethical behavior. They did not feel that they were in a powerful enough position in the hierarchical organization to address the issue or make changes.

Ethical Leadership Has Strong, Positive Outcomes for the Organization and for Individuals

Participants had a strong affinity for ethical leadership and environments. This came up despite the focus of the interviews falling to unethical leadership, difficult experiences, and military justice cases. Even the most mission-focused participants commented about the happiness and ease that came with working for an ethical leader. In addition to speaking about their own individual experience, the participants commented on the culture of the team and environment in which they were working under an ethical leader:

> "They would have integrity, and so for me that made me respect them more and to actually try my best."

> "You could actually go and you could do your job."

> "It was a lot more efficient. Everybody's quite a bit happier…we got a lot done."

> "[They] made me want to work for them more."

> "They care about me and my purpose."

> "I'd go to bat for them, and I had been more inclined to be loyal to them, as long as they, you know, they didn't violate any major rules."

When reflecting on ethical leaders, participants spoke to their individual positive experience with an ethical leader, the ease of their work environment, their high motivation, and their willingness to identify more with the larger organization when they worked under an ethical leader. For some, working for ethical leaders would encourage them and others to put their own lives on the line, should a life-or-death situation emerge. It seemed that most of the participants only could think of a few times in which they worked for ethical leaders.

Conclusion and Discussion

The study found that each participant had experienced issues with unethical leadership during their military experience that had negative impacts

on their readiness for service, and for some, commitment to service. As confirmed in other research, higher levels of perceived ethical leadership result in greater organizational identification, which then predicts organizational outcomes, such as morale, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (O'Keefe et al., 2019). For most of the participants, unethical leadership impacted their motivation to work and their commitment to their unit or the organization at large. Interestingly, in terms of the varying levels of a military organization and its ethical measures, O'Keefe, et al. (2019) found that tenure in an organization had an effect on ethical leadership, with respondents with 0–5 years of service scoring higher on ethical leadership than respondents with 6–10 years, 16–20 years, and more than twenty-five years of service. The finding by O'Keefe et al. (2019) and the findings of the present study are an indication that there is more to explore about the value of ethical leadership at the military's lower levels.

Enlisted-level Ethical Leadership Development

The participants' stories and reflections beg the question of how the military is developing its enlisted members who, early in their career, can quickly gain power over others through positional leadership positions, popularity, and group cohesion. The participants' contributions also inform us of what impact unethical leadership at the lower levels has on work productivity and potential retention. Much of the research on ethical leadership focuses on the high-level leaders who are responsible for "embedding" ethical leadership throughout the organization (Schaubroeck et al., 2012). Most of the participants in the present study were at the will of whoever was in the low- and mid-level enlisted leadership positions—members who were perhaps only a few years ahead of the participants. Even a slightly higher level, however, meant the participants risked punishment for speaking up—punishment that could mean anything from repeated unpleasant duties to threats of potential court-martial. Unlike civilian sector jobs, the military members were unable to quit or walk away and find a new company or a new role. For the participants, experiences of powerlessness occurred in the early years before their rank was high enough to grant some power to speak up, advocate, or implement changes.

Persistence of Negative Leadership Styles

The findings highlight the continued existence of politics and tyrannical leadership styles at the lower levels of US military organizations. The

participant's reflections confirm the negative impact of tyrannical leadership on subordinates, such as reducing their willingness to perform to high levels of excellence in the organization (Boudrais et al., 2021). Tyrannical leadership not only signals to subordinates that selfish behaviors are acceptable over collective efforts, but it also indicates a tolerance for aggressive and disrespectful behavior (Boudrais et al., 2021). Based on the theory of social exchange, individuals who perceive negative forms of leadership are less likely to problem-solve and suggest improvements (Boudrais, 2021). The participants' lack of motivation to work to their fullest capability under leaders they perceived as unethical or even tyrannical serves as an example of social exchange theory and its outcome in the workforce. Previous research into psychological contract support also explains the outcomes of negative leadership. *Psychological contract support* is an operational definition of institutional integrity (Dobbs et al., 2019). The contract is employee-created in which workers "agree" to what is expected of them and the organization and what is delivered (Dobbs et al., 2019). Congruence between what the employee expects and what the organization delivers results in positive performance by the employee and reduces counterproductive workplace behaviors (Dobbs, 2019). Ethical leadership helps the organization "deliver" what today's military members expect from their leaders, which results in better performance by its members.

Limitations and Implications

Limitations

While the study provided insight from those in the military at the enlisted levels, limitations to the study included the representation of the participants, the time length of the interviews, and the lack of perspective from those at the higher levels of the military. The participants were not representative of the military population because they were primarily affiliated with the Marines (four participants were in the Marines, one participant was in the Navy). The length of the interviews was a limitation because although the participants all shared stories related to leadership and ethical issues, the interview time was split between their stories and their reaction to the military justice cases. This did not give sufficient time to dig even deeper into their own stories and understand more about what the issues might have done to their well-being or impacted other parts of their lives. Another limitation is that in interviewing only enlisted members, the study did not contain the perspective from higher levels that might have

acknowledged why the enlisted members might have experienced what they did. Likewise, it did not validate the stories or relationships that the participants communicated, but only contained their own sensemaking of their experiences and the cases.

Military Leadership Development

For military leadership program developers, it may be useful to incorporate programs that include sharing and reflecting on early career injustices and ethical perspective-forming experiences. It could be interesting to see what helped those leaders form thir organizational identity despite any challenges they experienced early in their career. Examining what facilitated their own growth could inform how they can be a more impactful leader as they move forward in higher-level positions. As a chaplain shared in a study examining the role of chaplains in the Canadian military, "There are very few opportunities for young soldiers to ask questions and talk about things" (Rennick, 2013). In Rennick's (2018) study, the lack of space to talk was related to values and understanding the mission; however, from the present study it appears for some members there are very few opportunities to talk about values and ethics or gain support for navigating issues. Also an implication for practitioners to be aware of is that not everyone in an organization is likely to incorporate ethical values. As Zheng (2015) discovered, people who score at the low end of conscientiousness are likely to be influenced less by ethical leadership.

Veteran Care

For therapists and Veterans Affairs department employees who serve veterans, it is important to understand that current and former service members experience regular and sometimes prolonged abuses of power during their service. The experiences or observations may not come up in regular day-to-day conversation, but the experiences frame how members view the military organization, their service, and their trust in justice systems, perhaps their overall trust as well.

Future Research

To build on the present study and the study by Robinson et al. (2021), future studies might focus on practices and relationships that contribute to an ethical context among military members. Additional qualitative research would allow for exploration of what practices leaders and military members use to develop character and ethical (or virtuous) behavior among their

positional followers or fellow team members. A study by Sosik et al. (2018) examined character strengths that military officers shared in focus group discussions about the strengths of bravery, social intelligence, integrity, and self-control. In addition to examining character strengths, it would be interesting to identify a leader's self-described ethical practices because the findings could provide practitioner insight on activities and practices that leaders use to maintain an ethical context. The impact of their practices could then be validated by interviewing their positional followers and examining what factors they perceived as contributing to an ethical context. Additionally, because ethical leadership involves two-way communication (Martin et al., 2021), future research might also examine the relationships between leaders and followers and how an ethical relationship might have been cocreated to create ethical teams or contexts.

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