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The Importance of Teaching Followership in Professional Military Education

“Can effective followers prevent leaders from making future unethical decisions?”

By LTC Paul Berg

In Danny Miller’s book, *The Icarus Paradox*, he describes how having a “competitive advantage, multiple resources, and superiority status can lead to an unforeseen downfall of organizations and individuals by not seeing the situational awareness.”¹ He argues that people and organizations “get caught in a vicious circle whereby victories and strengths become weaknesses leading to their downfall.”² He describes how Icarus from Greek mythology made a great pair of artificial wings and tried to fly close to the sun. As he flew closer to the sun, his wings melted and he fell to his death. Elevating oneself above greatness and becoming too powerful can blind people and organizations to their weaknesses and result in personal or organizational destruction.

Is there a Problem with some of our Army Senior Leaders?

Army Doctrine and Training Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, describes the leadership and followership framework as “everyone belongs to a team, serving as either leader or responsible subordinate, for these teams to function at their best, leaders and followers must develop mutual trust and respect, recognize existing talents, and willingly contribute talents and abilities for the common good of the organization.”³ Recent news headlines have told the stories of senior military officers at the peak of

their profession violating the nation’s trust by grossly abusing power, exercising toxic leadership, performing criminal acts, and demonstrating unethical/immoral behavior. Just like Icarus, these leaders could not see their approaching downfall. They did not understand their problem of being blinded by greatness. Even though the strengths of these top military officers made them elite within their profession, it also became their weakness which led to their ultimate downfall. The difficult and real question is, whose fault is it? Who do we blame? Is it the institutional, organizational, or individual’s fault? The challenge for the Army (in the case of this paper) is how can it correct the moral compass and re-establish trust with the Soldiers these fallen Army leaders have led and re-establish the faith of the American people.

The U.S. Army can’t allow moral decrepitude to become an infection. Leadership at the highest levels are exploring new methods and strategies to prevent these behaviors and prepare leaders to recognize vulnerabilities, prevent missteps, and restore Soldier confidence in their leaders and equally important, public respect and trust.⁴ The U.S. Army is built on the framework of serving the nation and the theme demands public trust. The organizational pillars that trust stands on

are “trustworthiness, military expertise, honorable service, esprit de corps and stewardship of the profession.”⁵ When senior officers fail in one of these pillars, the organization’s trust with society erodes. The U.S. Army has challenges declaring itself to be a profession, because the “label of profession can only be granted when they earn it from the society they serve.”⁶ The military is a profession and one that has higher moral standards than most private sector organizations.

There is a larger institutional challenge in the scenario. If the subordinates know about the unethical decisions, why don’t they counsel and guide their leaders to prevent them from failing? Can we as an institution provide an educational framework to educate subordinates to prevent leaders from making unethical



decisions? If the Army taught more effective subordinate followership in the professional military education process, then effective subordinates could possibly be better prepared to prevent senior officers from making unethical decisions. The answer could be that the military education system should teach and implement new followership classes to prevent unethical decisions and help re-instill the trust with the American people. This challenge can't be rectified by having classes alone; it requires a culture shift to develop informed effective followership.

Characteristics of Military Service Education

In 1867, General William Tecumseh Sherman, who assisted in founding the Command and General Staff College, described subordinate leadership as "we have good corporals, some good sergeants, some good lieutenants and captains, and those are far more important than good generals."⁷ In regards to military leadership and followership, Lieutenant Colonels Sharon Latour and Vicki Rast describe Soldiers as simultaneously both leaders and followers the day they enter military service, throughout their career, and into retirement.⁸ Latour and Rast state that all Department of Defense professional military educational curricula focuses on teaching and developing leaders but few of the military schools spend time developing effective follower cultures and skills.⁹ The dominant military organizational culture encourages subordinates to adopt a follow me behavior through discipline and lawful orders. Their research findings conclude most teaching philosophies devalue followership in their contribution of warfighting. They conclude that the military services expend most of its resources educating a small fraction of its service members, communicating their value to the military institution, and then establishing career paths for a select few while ignoring the vast majority of subordinate followers in the military service.¹⁰ The Army educational philosophy in entry level officer and enlisted courses implies that before a Soldier can be a leader, the Soldier must learn how to be a good follower. The question becomes, how effectively is this philosophy communicated to new Soldiers?

The conceptual idea is that by teaching everyone to follow orders completely,

they also learn how to become leaders when the time comes for them to be in charge. The challenge arrives when those Soldiers and junior officers become senior enlisted and field grade officers and just following orders is not acceptable behavior. Further followership development has to be implemented into the organizational culture because merely taking orders is not acceptable. In the Fiscal Years of 2014 and 2015 Departments of Army and Air Force Command and Select List, the selection boards have selected between 9-18% of available lieutenant colonels for battalion or squadron command, which means the other 82-91% of lieutenant colonels will remain in subordinate staff positions. This selection rate supports Latour and Rant's thesis that the majority of military leadership educational classes are useful to only a small select percentage of the force.

also be held responsible because they have a duty to be effective followers.

One of the most recognized authors of followership is Robert Kelly who defines followership not as a subset of leadership but as an equal component to leadership. In his book, *The Power of Followership*, Kelly introduces a new followership model to describe different followership styles in relation to leadership models.¹² In Kelly's research, he identifies that "the primary traits that produce the most effective followers in an organization were critical thinking and active participation."¹³ Kelly's research proposes that an exemplary follower is an independent critical thinker who has learned to be a critical thinker through education and development, enhances motivation, has intellect, and becomes self-reliant in achieving the



Why is Followership Important in Relation to Ethics?

In regards to leadership, James McGregor Burns wrote that "leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth."¹¹ Leadership and followership are complex fields of study. Both are dependent on each other because without one the other can't exist. There can't be leadership without followers and followers need a leader to exist. So, if leaders fail because of unethical decisions, it is reasonable to assume that subordinate staff officers should

mission of the organization. Critical thinking is learned behavior that must be accompanied with adequate reflection time. This concept means the follower or subordinate can truly "not just follow orders without critical analysis and must participate with the superior for the good of the institution."¹⁴

Ira Chaleff is another key followership researcher and author of *The Courageous Follower*. He uses military examples such as the German guards in concentration camps during WWII and Lieutenant Calley at My Lai, Vietnam to provide examples of





virtue ethics to explain different levels of the leadership-follower relationship. Chaleff's followership model emphasizes that selective rule breaking is a key attribute to being a courageous follower: "It is not ethical to break rules for simple convenience or personal gain, but neither is it ethical to comply with or enforce rules if they impede the accomplishment of the organization's purpose, the organizations' values, or basic human decency."¹⁵ This concept is that followers and/or subordinate must be courageous against the boss when events demand and require action of "dissent" for the good of the organization. Chaleff also emphasizes those organizations that have courageous followers have no need for whistle-blowers because the followers do their duty to prevent leaders from conducting unethical decisions.¹⁶ One of the key statements Chaleff comments on in his introduction is that "proximity and courage are the critical variables in the prevention of the abuse of power."¹⁷

The challenge in respect to followers is how do they approach their superior and look them in the eye and tell them that they disagree with their decision? The military has a wide breadth of competent and educated personnel in subordinate ranks working for superiors who do not appreciate or acknowledge this asset. They do not want to have anyone challenge their authority. Good followers are expected morally and ethically to bring up opinions, recommendations, and judgments to their superiors because of their critical and effective reasoning as followers.¹⁸

Dissent in Followership

The military is more unique than other organizations because the military works under a distinct chain of command for daily operations and the military culture promotes working with your boss before going over your boss' head in the chain of command. Lieutenant Colonel Mark Cantrell (USMC) wrote an article about military dissent emphasizing that followers have a responsibility to make sure the boss is wrong before they make note of the fact and bring the correct information and guidance to the boss for his own good and future perspective.¹⁹ Loyal dissent follows an ethical guideline to maintain an effective chain of command. In the military culture, most organizations have a chain of command and going around your command is almost always discouraged. The result is few courageous followers.

Military Education Opportunities

There are a multitude of opportunities to teach ethics and followership in all levels of military education. Military entry-level officer basic courses teach leadership classes, but almost no formal academic classes discuss followership concepts. This does not mean the courses do not promote a team based, chain of command, subordinate training model, but there are few lessons on how to provide negative feedback to your boss when the boss might be wrong. The perception from the military culture turns the message into sharpshooting and challenging your boss instead of providing an analyzed dissent.

Due to many recent senior military leader investigations, ethics is becoming mandatory training, especially in the field grade ranks. In Command General Staff College Class 13-01, ethics classes (E100 & E200 blocks) of instruction were introduced into the curriculum by directive from the Department of the Army. This is one of many starting points to address the large number of senior level commanders making unethical decisions and their staffs not doing enough to prevent them. In the next couple of years, ethics will be more prevalent in the junior officer courses, but followership still remains a topic that is not popular to educate in the Army organization academia.

Organization Culture as Organizational Life

Many references of the bureaucratic framework relate to how the employees become a part of the organization (or machine) and the employee's life becomes the job. The Army does the same thing by encompassing every facet of life around military culture to include medical care, housing, social events, and work place environment. Does the Army create officers who are so success driven that failure is not an option they can comprehend? There are always asymmetric power relations while running an Army, a multinational corporation, or family business that result in the vast majority of employees working in the interest of a select few.²⁰ The Army has a history of military prodigies who were chosen by current general officers to rule in the future because of their connections, family lineages, and "entitlement" of authority. The theory of the "iron law of oligarchy" reflects on the military institution just like it does in political organizations and labor unions where an elite group runs the organization while the premise of equal opportunity and merit are merely "window dressing" for the organizational culture and society.²¹ In regards to this understanding, who can blame these senior officers for their unethical conduct because they were made that way and any pretense of ethics and morality were merely window dressing? The bureaucratic culture in any organization can stifle creativity, honesty and constructive criticism.

Conclusion: Effective and Courageous Followers

The effective followership question is if Icarus' assistant knew the feathers would melt with the heat of the sun; why didn't he tell Icarus before he attempted to fly toward the sun? If a leader is going down the wrong or unethical path, then the subordinate followers' duty to is to prevent that leader from going to where they will fail or fall like Icarus. The idea is that effective and courageous followers will use professional dissent to challenge their leaders' decisions. By understanding dynamic followership, military organizations can treat followership like a discipline and improve leader-follower cultures. Through education all Soldiers and officers can learn how to be effective and courageous followers through education as well as be good leaders. Teaching the conceptual dynamics between the



relationship of followership and leadership could prevent future unethical decisions.

In a cultural movement toward followership in military ethical leadership, many retired Army officers are addressing the senior ethical problems as a followership dissent problem. In his presentation at the International Leadership Association annual

conference in Denver Colorado on October 25, 2012, Dr. George Reed COL (R), former Director of Command and Leadership at the U.S. Army War College, described leadership through an ethical lens with “well meaning followers facing conflicting loyalties as they balance their own sense of right and wrong with desires of leaders and the best interest of the organizations they ultimately

serve”.²² His expressions and the themes of his presentation reflect that the institution might have created the leader who has a tendency to fail at his pinnacle job but the responsible subordinate professional follower also has to find a method to address his boss in the environment for the good of the organization.

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