

## LYING TO OURSELVES: DISHONESTY IN THE ARMY PROFESSION

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The suffocating amount of mandatory requirements imposed upon units has been well documented—units and individuals are literally unable to complete the demands placed upon them. Given that it is impossible to comply with every requirement, how do units and individuals reconcile the impossible task of accomplishing all requirements with a bureaucracy that demands confirmation that every directive was accomplished?

In discussions across the force addressing this question, officers usually began with bold declarations such as the captain who emphatically stated, “Never intentionally have I said, ‘Yes, we’re 100% on this,’ when I knew we weren’t.” After a few minutes into the discussion, however, hints would inevitably emerge that there was more to the situation. For example, one senior officer stated, “You find ways to qualify your answer. It’s not quibbling—it’s assuming risk.” Eventually phrases such as, “You gotta make priorities, we met the intent, or we got creative” would surface to sugarcoat the hard reality that in the routine performance of their duties as leaders and commanders, U.S. Army officers often resort to evasion and deception.

Dishonesty, however, is not restricted just to compliance with directed requirements. Dishonesty and deception are also prevalent in maintenance, supply, and other official reporting. From the Travel Risk Planning System form to the Officer Evaluation Report, officers often provide deceptive information in order to traverse the burdensome Army bureaucracy. Likewise, in the combat environment, many of the same issues in the garrison environment emerge. Examples of untruthfulness in areas as diverse as shortage an-

nexes, assessments of partner forces, storyboards, or Commander’s Emergency Response Program funds are also common.

Interestingly, discussions with staff officers in the Department of the Army revealed that the recipients of the reports are often skeptical of the data. One staff officer stated, “We don’t trust our compliance data. . . . If we frame something as compliance, people ‘check the block.’ They will quibble and the Army staff knows it.” As a result, it appears that a peculiar situation emerges where both those requesting information and those supplying it know that the information is questionable. Despite the existence of this mutually agreed deception, all concerned are content to sanction and support the illusion that all is well.

Behavioral ethics experts point out that people often fail to recognize the moral components of an ethical decision because of ethical fading. Ethical fading occurs when the moral aspects of an ethical decision are overlooked. Ethical fading allows us to convince ourselves that considerations of right or wrong are not applicable to decisions that in any other circumstances would be ethical dilemmas. This is not so much because we lack a moral foundation or adequate ethics training, but because psychological processes and influencing factors subtly neutralize the ‘ethics’ from an ethical dilemma.

For example, by using euphemisms for lying such as prioritizing, accepting prudent risk, or even exercising good leadership, the focus shifts from any moral implications to the annoying aspects of requirements. The psychological distance from an individual to the actual point of dishonesty also adds to ethical fading. Thus, most officers would be extremely uncomfort-

able telling their rater face-to-face that their unit completed Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) pre-deployment nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) training when they, in fact, did not. Those same officers, however, would probably be more comfortable conveying the same mistruth via a block checked on the ARFORGEN checklist.

The psychological distance between a person and the consequences of a dishonest act can also influence ethical fading. A moral decision can lose its ethical overtones if the eventual repercussions of such a choice are either unknown or minimized. For example, it is a common perception that much of the information submitted upward disappears into the ether of the Army bureaucracy and therefore truthfulness is often not a major consideration.

While officers can offer a wide assortment of justifications for unethical behavior, one rationalization appears to underlie all other rationalizations—that dishonesty is often necessary because the directed task or the reporting requirement is unreasonable or “dumb.” When a demand is perceived as an irritation, a person’s less-than-honest response almost becomes a compensatory act against the injustice. As one officer stated, “I think some expectation of equivocation is accepted on dumb things.”

Two other rationalizations are often used as justifications for dishonesty—mission accomplishment and supporting the troops. Officers reported that they sometimes needed to act as Robin Hood—going outside the ethical boundaries to assist others. As one officer nobly put it: “I’m just going to ‘check this box’ . . . and if I’m 70% accurate—that’s good enough to 1) keep my guys out of trouble and 2) keep my boss out of trouble so we can keep doing good things for the country.”

While nearly all officers are confident in their ability to correctly determine which requirements were trivial, however, those judgments can vary widely across individuals and groups. For example, some officers offered that not reporting a negligent discharge was an example of acceptable lying, especially when it was a simple mistake and easily remedied. Other officers, particularly those in the combat arms, insisted that such a discharge was a serious breach of discipline, and leaders were duty bound to send a report upward. As one officer observed, “I think a real danger . . . is [that] we’re requiring every single person at every single level to make their own determination on what they want to lie about.” Convincing ourselves that deceitfulness in the Army is mostly well-inten-

tioned altruism serves to mask the caustic effects of dishonesty for self-advancement. As a very perceptive officer noted, “While you may be saying you did it for the good of your men, or you did it for the right reasons, how is that different at the end of the day from someone who didn’t?”

The gravest peril of the tacit acceptance of dishonesty, however, is the facilitation of hypocrisy in Army leaders. The Army as a profession speaks of values, integrity, and honor. The Army as an organization often practices zero defects, pencil-whipping, and checking the box. Army leaders are situated between the two identities—parroting the talking points of the latest Army Profession Campaign while placating the Army bureaucracy or civilian overseers by telling them what they want to hear. As a result, Army leaders learn to talk of one world while living in another.

Ethical fading and rampant rationalizations have allowed leaders to espouse lofty professional values while slogging through the mire of dishonesty and deceit. The Army urgently needs to confront the corrupting influence of dishonesty in the Army profession by exercising restraint in the creation of new requirements and encouraging leaders at all levels to lead truthfully. This monograph is but one small step toward initiating that conversation and perhaps stimulating a modicum of action.

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