



Marine Candidate participates in fire team assault course at Officer Candidates School, Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia, June 17, 2017 (U.S. Marine Corps/Cristian L. Ricardo)

Conquering the Ethical Temptations of Command

Lessons from the Field Grades

By Clinton Longenecker and James W. Shufelt

There is no getting around the fact that every promotion and new position brings with it a new host of challenges, demands, relationships, problems, opportunities, and even new, and maybe even previously unseen, ethical challenges. . . . It is only a smart thing to be ready and prepared to address all of these issues.

—U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE STUDENT OBSERVATION

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Ethical lapses committed by senior business leaders are reported almost daily. Unfortunately,

similar reports about military leaders also frequently appear; browse almost any contemporary military publication, and there is usually an article discussing an ethical failure by a high-ranking Servicemember. Although Department of Defense figures attest that the actual number of these failings is statistically small, they garner disproportionate attention.¹ The critical nature of the U.S. military mission makes it incumbent on leaders to possess not only great technical competency in their jobs but also great character and integrity. Because of this demand, the U.S. military has high formal standards for ethical leadership behavior.

The requirements for ethical behavior by all members of the military—and especially those in leadership positions—are clearly stated in U.S. law, Department of Defense policies, Service regulations, and doctrine and joint Service publications.² The U.S. military's commitment to these high ethical leadership standards is manifested in three important areas that cut across all the Services:

- clearly articulated and demanding standards and codes of conduct for ethical leader behavior and decisionmaking
- ongoing leadership ethics training and development initiatives
- daily accountability for “exemplary leader conduct” and ethical decisionmaking.³

The criticality of adhering to high ethical standards was emphatically reiterated in Secretary of Defense James Mattis's August 4, 2017, memorandum, “Ethical Standards for All Hands,” which stated that all members of the defense community should focus on the essence of ethical conduct, “doing what is right at all times, regardless of the circumstances or whether anyone is watching.”⁴

Moral Choices and Temptations

Despite this overarching organizational commitment to ethical military leadership, history shows that, without due diligence and moral courage, leaders with great integrity, high ethical standards, and effective training, operating

in “morally sound cultures,” can still make less than fully ethical and moral choices—with devastating consequences, especially at the senior leadership level.⁵ Research shows that any number of factors can erode or degrade the most principled leader's character, causing questionable moral choices and unethical decisions when operating within the realities, dynamics, and pressures of the modern workplace.⁶

In his book *The Lucifer Effect*, Philip Zimbardo identifies several workplace factors that can damage the moral fiber of individuals, including negative situational and environmental forces, lack of accountability, bad bosses, toxic organizational cultures, bad group dynamics, persistent personal isolation, a significant failure, and even success.⁷ These factors confront even the most upstanding leaders, potentially allowing them to be influenced or “tempted” to engage in unethical decisions and even activities that are knowingly wrong.⁸

It is our position that if leaders—regardless of their rank—are going to continually make effective ethical and moral choices and demonstrate exemplary management in every situation, they must be able to conquer the temptations that come with the territory of command.⁹ In this context, temptation can be defined as something that entices individuals or groups to desire something that is unacceptable or considered wrong and not in their best interest.¹⁰

Although the word *temptation* rarely appears—and is even more seldomly discussed—in leadership development circles and ethics literature, we maintain that every leader faces ethical and moral temptations associated with the position. Therefore, every leader must be prepared to answer this question: What are the specific moral and ethical temptations associated with the position I hold, and am I prepared to conquer them? The purpose of this article is to identify potential temptations associated with senior military positions and offer specific practices that can prevent leaders from engaging in wrongful, immoral, and unethical behaviors.

Exploring the Temptation of Command

To understand the temptations associated with military command, we conducted structured focus groups with 271 senior military leaders at 4 different senior Service colleges. We asked participants to anonymously answer the following open-ended question: “Based on your experience, what are the specific temptations or opportunities for wrongdoing associated with your most recent position?” We encouraged these leaders to focus on the temptations associated with the *position* that they held rather than discussing *personal* temptations that they might be dealing with on an individual level. We collected, shuffled, and randomly distributed the group's responses to everyone and asked participants to read at least 10 response sets from their peers and make observations on what stood out. Subsequently, we randomly assigned participants to 5-person groups in which they compared and discussed their observations and recorded a top 10 list of command temptations on a flipchart to share with everyone.

After each focus group discussed its findings with the entire group, individuals returned to their small groups and addressed the following statement as a team: “Please identify the specific practices and action steps that you believe leaders need to take to avoid making wrongful decisions in responding to the specific temptations we have just identified.” We instructed groups to think about these practices as “guardrails,” protective barriers used in dangerous environments to prevent serious injury by *preventing* hazardous activity. Each team then developed a list of 8 to 10 specific leadership guardrails, which were subsequently presented to the larger group. Having reviewed, tabulated, and conducted a content analysis on the presentations from each of the 57 focus groups, we learned a great deal from this exercise about both the temptations of command and the leadership guardrails that can potentially help prevent moral and ethical failures.

Observations on the Temptation of Command and Guardrails

From our focus groups, we have several observations on the interactive process of temptation-mapping and guardrailing. First, when participants were asked to engage in this exercise, they were reminded that the focus was not on them as leaders but rather on the temptations attached to the positions they hold. Second, during the process of reading the temptation lists from fellow participants, there was typically a great deal of notetaking and some nervous laughter from participants as the leaders saw, in writing, many of the ethical challenges they all face. Third, the focus group discussion on the temptations of command was quite beneficial, as there was typically great empathy about and consensus on common temptations. Fourth, when the focus group charts identifying temptations of command were compared, there was normally exceptional consensus, which was further reinforced by each group's explanations to the larger group. Finally, when asked to identify the specific guardrails that can prevent leaders' ethical failure, participants typically had meaningful team discussions in coming to consensus, as these talks naturally evolved into effective team-building and coaching experiences for all involved.

The Temptations of Command

During these exercises, focus group participants identified many potential temptations of command. The top 10 temptations, ranked by frequency, follow.

1. Falsifying, Massaging, or Manipulating Information or Data. Participants identified that many senior leaders face a real temptation to be less than candid and honest, or even manipulative, when presenting information and data attached to their positions. This potential misuse of information/data has any number of causes, including paperwork exhaustion, time constraints, a desire to protect individuals/operations/organizations, and/or a self-serving willingness to personally benefit or make

oneself look more successful. Participants noted this issue is a very pervasive temptation given the military's competitive, information-rich, and data-driven environment.

2. Misuse of Government Funds/Resources/Personnel. To enable them to complete the mission, leaders at all levels are entrusted with significant monetary and other tangible government resources that, without due diligence and attention, can be misused. Such mishandling might result in unauthorized pay reimbursements or improper personal use of government vehicles or other equipment. At the same time, the misuse of military personnel for personal benefit also surfaced as a real temptation. Employing these resources for personal advantage is a potential temptation that senior leaders must always address and avoid.

3. Inappropriate Sexual Relationships. The issue of inappropriate sexual relations quickly emerged in these discussions as a potential Achilles' heel for many senior leaders, despite the military's exceptionally strong prohibition against sexual harassment, assault, fraternization, and adultery. Participants highlighted many explanations for allowing this powerful temptation to grow into actual wrongful behavior, such as extended separations from loved ones, isolation and loneliness, stress-related sex, and hubris.

4. Alcohol/Substance Abuse. Any discussion of temptation in military circles will always include a discussion of alcohol, and our participants were no exception. They made the case that, although the military formally frowns on alcohol abuse, the military culture as a whole is still accepting and tolerant of alcohol consumption, which can create significant problems for both individual leaders and their subordinates. Participants noted that other substance abuse opportunities also surface as temptations in any military environment.

5. Favoritism or Preferential Treatment. Fairness is the cornerstone of effective command; however, our leaders made the case that the temptation to treat personnel by different or personally convenient standards was an issue that required attention and serious

consideration. Though there may be rare reasons to justify this practice, "playing favorites" and related preferential treatment of personnel, for whatever reason, can create a variety of negative, unforeseen, and unpredictable problems in any command structure.

6. "Blind Eye" and Failure to Report Wrongdoing. The U.S. Army officer corps has a tradition of ethical behavior starting with the West Point cadet honor code, which states that "a cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do."¹¹ This same ethos is pervasive in every Service's formal ethical standards; however, in a highly competitive—and at times political—environment, participants noted that there may be incentives that could cause a leader to look away from or ignore wrongdoing. Whistleblowing has established processes and is encouraged across all the military branches, but participants made it clear that there exists a potential personal cost for engaging in this practice—one that might have a chilling effect on leaders, encouraging them to ignore a problematic situation.

7. Exerting Inappropriate Influence on Personnel Decisions. The U.S. military has well-defined standards and requirements for human resource decisions at all levels. Despite these established processes, participants stated that senior leaders can have a powerful influence on personnel processes for selection, promotion, and hiring decisions and, in some cases, can clearly overstep these stated guidelines. While leaders might, in their minds, have the best interest of the organization at heart, they can nonetheless override or unduly influence these established decision processes with potentially damaging and unforeseen negative side effects, as these activities do not take place in a vacuum.

8. Offering/Accepting Gifts or Bribes or Quid Pro Quo. Senior leaders have specific guidelines concerning offering or accepting gifts, yet virtually every focus group shared accounts of leaders being offered tickets to a sporting event or entertainment venue or a personal gift that was contrary to these strict guidelines. Participants agreed that this temptation is very real; they shared the belief that, the



Training officer, on left, assigned to Maritime Expeditionary Security Squadron 11, briefs squadron's chief staff officer and executive officer aboard 34-foot Sea Ark patrol boat during navigation check ride exercise off coast of Long Beach, California, November 12, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Nelson Doromal, Jr.)

higher one rises in the organization, the greater the likelihood and frequency of this temptation. In addition, participants frequently tied quid pro quo to this discussion and it was frequently associated with a dialogue of how “transitioning to retirement” can open a potential hornet’s nest of ethical questions, predicaments, and dilemmas.

9. *Hubris*. In a large and mission-driven enterprise, it is important that rules and the chain of command be followed. Yet participants stated that, in select circumstances, some officers might be tempted to knowingly violate policy or disobey an order if they believe doing so can provide them with a desired benefit or outcome. The keywords in these discussions were *knowingly* and *personal gain*. Participants discussed the temptation that exists when leaders erroneously believe that they are bigger than rules, policies, and regulations, which is frequently driven by unbridled ego, egocentrism, and hubris. And as

an additional warning, they made it clear that the higher a leader rises in the organization, the greater this potential temptation.

10. *Seeking/Demanding Deference or Preferential Treatment*. Groups identified the issue of showing favoritism as a temptation of command. They also pointed out that if leaders are not careful, they can find themselves seeking or even demanding favoritism or special treatment as they navigate the military’s large and complex operating systems. This temptation can come in many forms, including seeking perks, travel arrangements, and line jumping, among others. These actions are frequently driven by leaders’ belief that the rules do not apply to them, as previously discussed, or the need for expediency.

In summary, focus groups openly discussed and honestly identified potential temptations—the moral and ethical challenges that leaders can face in senior military positions. While it may be easy

to look at these temptations and judge these leaders as somehow lacking, flawed, broken, or defective, these participants—from a wide cross-section of Services and functions—were given an assignment to collect intelligence on the threats they faced because of the positions they hold; these were *their* conclusions. All leaders face temptation, but the real question is whether they have the strength of character and moral courage to withstand those temptations and continue to do the right thing regardless of circumstance.¹²

The Ethical Guardrails of Effective Command

After participants identified temptations, we asked them to cite any specific ethical guardrails to help conquer these enticements. We next discuss the top 10 guardrails that emerged from the focus groups, ranked according to frequency of mention; each is followed by a key leadership question for senior leader consideration and action.



Army instructor with 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion, assigned to Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa, writes team evaluation during Counter Illicit Trafficking Junior Leadership Course examination at Queen Elizabeth Park, Uganda, October 10, 2019 (U.S. Air Force/J.D. Strong II)

1. Develop and Maintain Real Accountability Relationships. Our participants emphatically believe that personal and professional accountability is a critical vehicle to deal with the temptations of command. It has been stated that it is lonely at the top. Loneliness suggests the absence of relationships, and thus a lack of social support and accountability, both of which our senior leaders agreed can create real trouble. Group discussions and presentations revealed the importance of creating professional accountability by establishing peer-level accountability partners; fostering effective working relationships with key advisors, such as executive officers and senior enlisted leaders and advisors; and developing a personal “board of directors” to provide a professional and personal source of accountability, counsel, and encouragement. Participants believe that

meaningful relationships and a “battle buddy” or “wing man” are critical to effective leadership and fostering a willingness to always do the right thing. In a nutshell, the conclusion was that there is no substitute for relationships and accountability in staying on the straight and narrow.

Key Leadership Question: Who is truly holding you accountable for effective and ethical leader behavior and encouraging you to be your very best?

2. Create Situational Awareness Around Potential Ethical Temptations and Prepare for Your Moment of Truth. Once ethical temptations have been identified, individuals must increase situational awareness to avoid them, as it is easier to sidestep temptation than to resist it. In the same vein, senior leaders spoke of being properly prepared to effectively respond to the various temptations of

command. Participants viewed being mentally and physically equipped to confront a temptation as critically important to ensure leaders are prepared for their “moment of truth”—when they are confronted with a real-world temptation. Participants made it clear that preparation and rehearsal are critical to ensure leaders are prepared to make a good ethical choice, demonstrating their moral courage to conquer each and every temptation they face. Simply stated, there is no substitute for preparation when entering an ethical battlefield.

Key Leadership Question: Are you situationally aware of the temptations you face, and have you rehearsed how you will defeat them when confronted with your moment of truth?

3. Develop, Own, and Maintain a Personal Code of Conduct. The U.S. military has exceptionally well-developed



Marines stand at attention for "Anchors Aweigh" during graduation ceremony for Lance Corporal Leadership and Ethics Seminar, Class 1-21, at Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina, January 28, 2021 (U.S. Marine Corps/Michael Neuenhoff)

standards for ethical behavior; however, participants made it clear that individual leaders need to create a *personal* code of conduct for their current position and the ethical challenges they face. Participants suggested such personal codes of conduct should include statements clarifying one's leadership purpose and mission, articulating one's personal values and virtues, and identifying key leader behaviors and practices, among others. In addition to developing this personal code of conduct, participants believe that leaders need to take ownership of that code by making it part of their daily reflections, leadership ethos, practices, and personal behaviors/habits.

Key Leadership Question: Have you taken the time to develop a personal code of conduct that addresses the challenges of the current position you hold, and do you "own it"?

4. Make Proactive Use of Existing Military Checks/Balances and Protocols.

Leaders had thoughtful discussions about the military's wide spectrum of checks and balances that, when properly employed, serve as valuable guardrails and as potential deterrence to wrongdoing. Although participants believe that existing military safeguards against ethical wrongdoing can be effective, they noted that if someone wishes to bend the rules, "go off the reservation," or "do their own thing," these checks and balances are of reduced value. The key point is for leaders to clearly know and understand the preexisting organizational guardrails and to use them to advantage. These checks and balances can also come in the form of personnel, including executive officers, senior non-commissioned officers, and chaplains.

Key Leadership Question: Have you taken the time to fully recognize and own the various military guardrails that are available to you in order to help you defeat the temptations of command?

5. Increase Personal Faith, Self-Reflection, Awareness, and Assessment.

According to participants, the tempo, pace, and workload of senior military leaders have increased in recent years, which has had a debilitating effect on their time to think and reflect. To help maintain a moral compass, participants stated that it is imperative to take the time to build on personal faith or belief systems and to set aside moments for self-reflection, awareness, and assessment. These practices are critical cerebral guardrails to avoid ethical wrongdoing, as they help leaders stay morally and ethically strong. Contemplative activities can help keep leaders grounded, but taking



Recruit division commander assigned to Officer Training Command Newport, in Newport, Rhode Island, corrects Officer Candidate School student's form during remedial physical training, March 9, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Darwin Lam)

time to remember their higher calling as leaders can easily be lost in the frenzied heat of battle and the frantic pace of daily military life. According to participants, there is no substitute for taking the time to look in the mirror, reflect on one's personal code of conduct, and think through all the challenges one faces in every part of the job.

Key Leadership Question: How often do you take time to think about your higher calling as a military leader and build on your personal value system through self-reflection, awareness, and assessment?

6. Keep Ego in Check and Practice Servant Leadership to Maintain Humility. Successful military leadership requires self-confidence, self-assuredness, and a bit of swagger, to be sure. These can be noble and positive leadership qualities, but, when taken to an extreme, they can lead to overconfidence,

superciliousness, hubris, arrogance, and pomposity. Participants made it clear that these negative leadership qualities can set the stage for ethical wrongdoing, as people might begin to believe that the rules do not apply to them or that they are deserving of special treatment. Participants spoke of the importance of keeping one's ego in check and maintaining humility, and they mentioned practicing servant leadership. In these discussions, senior officers frequently spoke of the importance of serving their operations and the people who depended on them for mission success. They considered this servant mindset to be a buttress against arrogance and hubris. Participants stressed that arrogance is a precursor to poor ethical decisionmaking, while humility can help a leader stay on task.

Key Leadership Question: Do you practice daily servant leadership to help

those in your command succeed and to help keep your ego in check?

7. Proactively Create and Foster an Ethical Leadership Culture in Your Command. Our leaders stated that creating an ethical leadership culture is a critically important guardrail for those in their command structure, as well as themselves. When senior leaders lead by example, operate with transparency, and help establish an ethical/moral command climate, employing all the tools available to them, they create not only downward accountability for their people but also upward accountability for themselves. Participants shared in these discussions that a toxic leadership climate breeds poor performance and opens the door for a host of potential ethical disruptions. Conversely, creating an effective and principled command climate, where performance and ethical guidelines are clearly established, discussed, trained, and

reinforced on a daily basis, creates a powerful set of guardrails for all.

Key Leadership Question: What specific actions are you taking in your command to clearly establish a culture of high performance and ethical behavior that is known, understood, and felt by all?

8. Establish and Maintain Transparency, Openness, and Consistency in Decisionmaking and Communications. The senior leaders made it clear that a key indicator a leader might be succumbing to temptation is a lack of transparency, openness, and consistency in his or her daily actions. When a senior leader engages in ongoing decisionmaking and communications that demonstrate transparency, openness, and consistency, he or she is creating a positive and principled command culture. This practice creates a powerful guardrail not only for the senior leader but also for the rest of the organization. When these behaviors are found to be lacking in these critical practices, a moral or ethical vacuum that can lead to a less than optimal command culture might manifest.

Key Leadership Question: What specific actions do you take to make decisions and to communicate in a transparent, open, and consistent fashion with those in your command structure?

9. Seek Out Input/Counsel from Experts. According to participants, the military provides some exceptional guardrails, including the input and counsel of staff members who can advise senior leaders on ill-defined or ethically challenging decisions. Senior leaders should seek counsel from their legal advisor, resource manager, human resource specialists, equal opportunity/equal employment opportunity compliance officers, senior enlisted leaders, chaplains, and other trusted experts/advisors to help them make more effective and ethically responsible decisions while maintaining an environment of transparency, openness, and consistency. Again, making use of these resources can lead to better decisionmaking while concurrently sending a powerful message that the organization's leaders are serious about making effective and ethical decisions with input and accountability from key stakeholders.

Key Leadership Question: When making important decisions with ethical implications, do you seek wise counsel from people in your organization who can help you make the best possible decision for your operation?

10. Keep Good Records and Accurate Documentation. The final guardrail participants identified is the practice of using personal discipline and organizational skills to keep good documentation of decisions, activities, and ongoing reporting functions. Participants pointed out that if a leader sets the goal of accurate documentation, good recordkeeping, and transparency, there is less temptation to manipulate or falsify information or data and decisions. Leaders should use staff members for secondary oversight whenever possible in this regard. This fundamental practice requires organization and discipline and serves as a powerful guardrail, while potentially increasing a leader's efficiency and operational effectiveness.

Key Leadership Question: As a leader, do you keep good and accurate records, especially regarding reports and information that are deemed as being critically important?

A Call to Action

To conclude our discussion, a call to action is appropriate at both the individual and the organizational levels, stressing key practices that senior leaders and their staffs can employ to help conquer the ethical temptations of command.

Walk the Ethical Talk. Individual leaders must use their disciplined military training and strong thought processes to apply these lessons in a proactive and disciplined fashion. This requires leaders, on a personal level, to identify the temptations associated with their current position as well as the requisite guardrails needed to prevent ethical failure. When senior leaders pinpoint these issues, they are in a much better position to protect themselves from ethical temptation, and they will also set a first-rate example for those who are depending on them for their own success. It is imperative that senior leaders make use of all the available resources at their disposal to ensure

personal accountability.¹³ One of the most powerful lessons brought on by the anticipation of combat is that there is no substitute for preparation.

Conduct a Temptation-Mapping Session with Your Staff. Senior leaders must encourage their staffs to openly identify and discuss the potential temptations they may face as members of their leadership team. Leaders might consider using their executive officer, judge advocate general, or chaplain as a facilitator for this critically important discussion; it is important to have this discussion to create both openness and a sense that leaders are not alone in the challenges they face. Temptation-mapping can be an invaluable reconnaissance tool to reveal to leaders what they are up against both individually and collectively, which helps get everyone on the same page concerning these challenges.¹⁴

Conduct a Guardrailing Session. Senior leaders can help their staffs construct safeguards to make it easier for team members to stay on the moral high ground and reach their full leadership potential. Senior leaders should have a follow-up discussion after temptation-mapping with their teams. In this discussion, they should engage in a dialogue that identifies and operationalizes activities that prevent failure by identifying specific guardrails to protect their integrity and avoid wrongful behavior. Again, the use of facilitators can be quite beneficial in this conversation, but senior leaders should be actively engaged in listening to this discussion so that they are in a better position to lead, understand, and set an example. The important point is to get team members to *own* the behaviors and actions that they believe are most important for success. This exercise is a double-edged sword in that it gives individual leaders specific guidance in conquering *their* temptations while at the same time serving as an effective team-building exercise to enhance unit cohesion and culture.

Prepare and Equip Individuals for Ethical Success. Senior leaders can use the practices identified in the guardrailing session as a needs assessment to help create meaningful ongoing leadership training

and development initiatives. Leadership teams may need sessions on how to develop an accountability relationship, improve their situational awareness, create a personal code of conduct, or better appreciate the power and nuances of servant leadership. It is important to note that most of the key guardrailing practices are also the cornerstones of great leadership development, which can be a powerful motivator for the engagement of junior officers and staff.¹⁵

Coach and Reinforce the Right Behaviors and Decisions. Senior leaders must always reinforce both daily workplace actions and desired outcomes by using their personal influence and formal authority to coach/encourage effective leader behaviors, celebrate success, and deal with people who are unwilling to live up to the professional/ethical standards a senior leader might establish in their command. All leaders are exceptionally busy, but this is time well spent for developing their teams while sending a powerful message concerning the ethical command culture that they wish to nurture and develop. The best defense against ethical leadership failure, at all levels, is a good offense—which senior leaders can achieve by nurturing and molding principled individual leaders and teams. Without ongoing attention to effective measurement, assessment, and feedback around desired ethical leadership behaviors and outcomes, senior leaders are unknowingly or inadvertently sending the wrong message to their personnel that these issues are not a priority.¹⁶

The best security against ethical leadership failure, at all levels, is a good offensive strategy, as explained by an Army colonel who participated in one of our focus groups:

I believe our leaders live up to our high ethical standards and do the right thing day in and day out. Having said that, we are all human, and even the best of us can make bad choices for lots of different reasons. In the end, I believe dealing with temptation requires the same preparation that we take when going into combat because defeating our temptations is a battle

we must win if we are to maintain our integrity and ability to lead others.

No truer words have been spoken; all leaders must prepare themselves to conquer the temptations associated with their positions and must answer the call to help their people do the same. JFQ

Notes

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¹⁵ Dan Stallard and Kurt Sanger, "The Nathan Solution to the Bathsheba Syndrome," *Marine Corps Gazette* 98, no. 4 (2014).

¹⁶ Clinton O. Longenecker, "Characteristics of Really Bad Bosses," *Industrial Management* (2011).