CHAPTER 14

ETHICS AND CHARACTER IN MILITARY LEADERSHIP
"The prosperity of a country depends, not on the abundance of its revenues, nor on the strength of its fortifications, nor on the beauty of its public buildings, but consists in the number of its cultivated citizens, in its men of education, enlightenment and character".

-Mortin Huller

General

14.1 The Army has its own distinct philosophy of leadership and there is a qualitative difference in the civilian and military leadership on account of the differences in the goals to be achieved. Military success in battle for example cannot be measured by observable statistics whereas a civilian manager is able to measure success by productivity.

14.2 In the Army important decisions are taken by leaders involving lives of men, which is not the case in the civil. Military leadership has to lay its foundation on four basic pillars viz; values, beliefs, character and ethics. These four are generic forces that lead to good training, maintenance, tactics and success in battle. Today it is exceedingly believed that if sound professional values, character and ways of thinking can be developed in the Army leaders, the rest will follow naturally. In this context leadership can be defined as process by which a soldier applies his beliefs, values, ethics, character, knowledge and skills to influence others to accomplish the mission.

Ethics and Character

Ethics

14.3 Ethics flow from belief and values. As we know, word ethics has been derived from the Greek word ‘ethos’ meaning character. Ethics and character are therefore synonymous words with perceptual difference only. In leadership it is presupposed that only men of good character will make good military leaders. There are some who consider this impractical and too idealistic. Some say successful leaders in battle require to possess guile and cunningness so essential to outsmart the enemy. So what if the successful leader has indulged in indiscretions—he has been successful in the battlefield! Beliefs and values determine quality of ethics and character. Beliefs are opinion about people, concepts that one holds to be true.
Those beliefs that become truth are those which allow a man the best use of his strength. A leader’s belief will strengthen his determination and will to accomplish any task. Values dictate the level of importance one places on people, concepts or things. Army needs are unique as it demands sacrifices during trying situations. A soldier operates from a stand of trust to sustain confidence in himself, comrades and superiors in the unit. Identifying personal and unit values thus provides a framework for developing a personal philosophy of leadership.

14.4 The quality of beliefs and values will determine the quality of ethics. Different people conceive ethics differently but certain commonalities of views are highlighted:

14.4.1 All ethical views are concerned in some ways with distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong.

14.4.2 All ethical views have been arrived at by thinking and by searching questions.

14.4.3 Ethics are well-examined beliefs and values.

14.5 The society has entrusted professional soldiers with extraordinary powers, which can be misused by unethical leaders. Ethics guide a professional in arms in the use of powers for the overall good of the society.

**Character**

14.6 It is well said, "If wealth is lost nothing is lost, if health is lost something is lost and if character is lost everything is lost". Character is the most important possession as compared to wealth and health. Men of character command the spontaneous homage of mankind. It has been accepted beyond doubt that any effort on part of military leaders to arrive at a higher standard of character is inspiring and invigorating.

14.7 It is very important for every leader to understand that qualifications are just a tool in building a good career. It does not develop the individual as a complete person. The 'complete person' denotes one with character, discipline, right attitude and positive approach. Character is not a gift, it is an accomplishment. Character is built with hard work. It is a combination of many qualities. The key qualities of the person’s character are trustworthiness, ethics and high morals. Leaders of fine character live by their values. True
character thus encompasses the capacity for self-discipline. Leaders with character rely on the integral values system to differentiate between the right and wrong. Character is easier kept than regained. Character creates self-respect, which in turn leads to higher self-esteem.

"Character comes from following our highest sense of right, from trusting ideals without being sure they will work"

- Richard Bach

14.8 Maturity is reflected in all aspects of character - the decision we make, the friends we choose and the responsibilities we accept. Every leader must realise that on the way to building a character, some mistakes are part of the learning process and maybe unavoidable. Therefore, developing the right attitude and meticulously practising a good character and good reputation will make the leader a complete person to face the real time challenges ahead of him.

Impediments

14.9 Men possessed with great ethical values and high character are not soft-pedalling their lives always. They are often faced with odds that they choose to confront rather than avoid. They clearly perceive a position of comparative material disadvantage but face it for higher goals. An experienced leader of the armed forces brought up in a rigid atmosphere, used to hard earned money does not get disillusioned. He considers himself the ultimate saviour of the country’s honour. Needless to say a successful military leader should be ready to suffer some hardships in following the righteous and ethical course.

A Live Situation

14.10 Section of soldiers is on a rescue mission. Two soldiers of a raiding party are injured and lying wounded just fifty metres short of two huts in which armed militants are holed up and firing continuously. If not rescued within a few hours these soldiers will die. The section on rescue mission has a civilian guide who had led the body of troops to this village. The section leader, a young captain ponders over his options. The civilian being a local is aware of an alternative route which could possibly rescue these wounded soldiers though this was also fraught with risk of fire from the militants. The section leader offers several enticements to the civilian to lead the section on the alternative route to rescue the trapped soldiers. The man however refused to cooperate. The captain here must make a decision that he had hoped to avoid. There are rules first in such situations, if one follows
them, the men will die. There are ethical considerations involved here. The ethical considerations by themselves, however, do not always provide complete approach sufficient to answer all of the moral questions that confront leaders. The captain in this scenario has a choice. He can torture or threaten to torture the civilian into cooperating or can decide not to torture or threaten the civilian and effectively lead his men to die. Unfortunately for the young captain, the decision is not a simple one. If he chooses the first option he violates laws of war. If he chooses the second option, he will have directly contributed to his men's deaths. Deciding what to do is complicated: there is no clear way to choose one over another by the leader at this juncture. Preserving the lives of his men and accomplishment of mission are moral imperatives of considerable force. Yet, so is keeping the promise the captain has made to uphold the tenets of international human-rights laws. Whether or not the young captain resolves this situation well will depend on the kind of person he is. Most ethical decisions for the leaders are easy to make. For most part, as long as they meet the expectations of subordinates and superiors and stay within the rules, everyone will consider them as ethical leaders. But as the example shows, this is not always the case. There are moral difficulties that arise when military necessity and the war convention come into conflict. Therefore, for the captain to ask why rules should take precedence over the lives of his men is definitely reasonable. He must also ask himself if he wants to be the kind of officer who allows his men to die just to confirm to rule. Deciding upon an answer is what the job of the leader is.

14.11 An officer of character is more concerned with being the kind of person who does the right thing, and the right time, in the right way, and is not as concerned with the act itself. The ethics of character avoids most dilemmas because the focus is no longer on deciding between two unfortunate outcome or on conflicting rules but on being a certain kind of person\textsuperscript{54}.

14.12 Character, Leadership, and Ethical Decision-Making. There is a gap between the kind of ethical questions leaders confront and the kind of answers that consequence and rule-based approaches can give. When considerations of military necessity are insufficient and rules fail, what the captain does depends ultimately on the type of person he is and the training he has received in his career. Thus, it is important to develop officers of character to understand what it means to be good officers - not just what it means to follow rules.

\textsuperscript{54} Major Charles A Pfaff, US Army.
perform duties, for reasons well, although these are important to being ethical. If leaders are to have the resources necessary to make ethically sound decisions, they need approach ethics that articulates what good character is and how it can be developed. Unfortunately the leaders in the Army today either have no time or have no inclination to develop a virtuous character not only in themselves but also their subordinates. It is because of this that young leaders are faced with such ethical dilemmas in operational situations which they find hard to resolve. It is the young leaders who will grow tomorrow in service and command greater authority wherein greater number of lives of men will be at stake. It perhaps then would be too late to develop character in ethical decision-making

**Application of Ethics Theories to Military Leadership**

14.13 The relationship in two most commonly known theories is explained as follows:

14.13.1 *Philosophical holders* advocate that man must do what will benefit others if he is to obtain greatest happiness for himself. This theory pre-supposes that a military leader should be of such high character as not to fall prey to his human desire to save his own life at the cost of several men placed under his command.

14.13.2 Under the purview of obligation theory, it can be stated that a military leader is obliged to take decisions, which will involve him and his men being exposed to dangers of various degrees. The leader disregards those dangers in making his decision on account of the need to produce intrinsically good results. He also has an obligation to save as many lives as possible. Evidently there is often a conflict between the two prima facie duties. The question is at once ethical and the leader's decisions will largely be dictated by the strength of his character.

14.14 Ethics therefore, guides a professional in arms in the use of power for the overall good of the society, even if it entails sacrifice of lives of men under command and own life.

**History Proves It**

14.15 A leader's beliefs, values, ethics and character go to determine whether he is selflessly motivated to serve. These pillars determine the thought pattern and behaviour of officers, JCO and NCO and men. The net product may well determine how successfully a body of troops will carry out its unit task, or how a larger body will carry out its unit task, or how a larger body will carry out its mission of defending the country's vital interests.
Indeed, it is the character and intellectual capabilities of leaders at all levels that will determine resulting quality in the Army.

**Ethical Imperatives of Leadership**

14.16 **Service before Self.** A good leader is one who is servant of his troops. The overly ambitious, power hungry and insensitive leaders do not make quality leaders as they do not understand their role. The effective leaders are essentially a servant to his troops, who make sure that at any time they have no reason to fail and that they had every possible resource in fulfilment of their objectives.

14.17 **Ego.** The leader must have a sense of purpose. His courses of action should be such that brings him nearer to his stated goals. A good and effective leader must have positive self regard and often not too big an ego. But it should be strong enough to withstand pressures, handle the kind of anger he could incur, as also be strong enough to appreciate negative feedback from others.

**Basking in own Glory**

14.18 A honest and true leader is the one who never takes credit for successful results. Leaders who gain trust, loyalty are those who pass on the credit of the executed task to the subordinate who have actually done the work. Actually a leader really does not need any credit. He has already achieved success to be in that position. He should go along with the notion of mentoring, learning to help subordinates grow and allowing them to reap the rewards of work that is well executed. And needless to emphasise mentoring thrives only in a fearless environment.

14.19 **Humour.** Humour is an intangible asset of a military leader. A pervasive sense of humour is mandatory for the leader when the going gets tough. Humour and honesty enable a leader to detach himself from a situation and create sufficient space and distance wherein he is able to laugh at himself. The ability to laugh at events in the most stressful and depressed situations are the hallmark of a humble leader. It is indeed directly connected with the humility.

14.20 **Integrity and Wisdom.** Integrity and wisdom are prerequisites for an efficacious leader. Integrity entails that promises made to a subordinate, peer or a superior are executed to the last breath. It is here that humour can assist in difficult situations.
14.21 **Ethics And Leadership: De Novo Look.** Senior leaders are seen mostly with awe by the juniors and to a large extent emulated. The leader therefore needs to take extra precaution so that deeds match their words. Paradoxically, at the same time actions and deeds done at senior levels tend to be seen critically and with a coloured vision, should the reputation of senior leaders be eroded.

**Leaders are the Standard Bearers for the Organisation**

14.22 As one arises higher in service the ethical and environmental issues become murkier, less transparent and less subject to specific rules and simple solutions. However, an officers’ usefulness to the nation and overall credibility will be fundamentally affected by his inability to enter an environment, where absolutes are hard to find and still make wise and ethical decisions. Today, the ethical environment in the higher echelons of the Army is definitely hazy and not transparent. And the interesting issue at this juncture is the ease and ability with which ethical issues by the senior leadership are brushed aside as non issues. What is then expected out of the younger lot in the organisation?

**Prerequisites for Sustenance of Strong Ethical Standards in Senior Leaders**

14.23 **Ethical use of Authority.** Numerous tensions can be identified as related to ethical behaviour at higher ranks. One of the major tensions emanate from *non ethical use of authority.* The authoritarian structure of the military profession, even though essential, is the natural breeding ground for the unethical use of authority. The power and influence of the senior officers is greater than a subordinate, while the influence of a general officer is truly awesome. Within the hierarchical authoritarian structure of the Armed Forces, there are various levels of responsibility. Each level of responsibility is assigned a commensurate degree of authority. The rank of a leader just gives him a certain level of authority and powers to execute responsibilities as assigned to him by virtue of his position. At a lower level, the command of the company entails a certain degree of responsibility associated with it. As one grows senior in rank and position there is a corresponding increase in the level of responsibilities and powers associated with it. When authority is used in the fulfilment of responsibility, it is supposed to be used legitimately and ethically. When authority is used for purposes not directly associated with carrying out assigned responsibilities, it is used illegitimately and unethically. Conversely if one fails to use authority to carry out assigned
responsibilities, his negligence is itself unethical. Someone else who uses authority should be given the job.

14.24 As one goes up in rank, those of lower grade readily assume that the senior is using authority legitimately and ethically, because of the regard with which juniors hold the senior officers. This at times is misused by men in authority. One of the most widespread and patently unethical uses of authority is the exploitation and degradation of subordinates. This has almost become institutionalised and definitely unhealthy for the environment.

14.25 **Power Corrupts.** In the Army the higher the rank and position the easier it is to misuse authority. Sadly the checks that the junior officers are subjected to are less evident and less compelling in the senior echelons. At times the senior lot begins to believe that at their rank and service there is no need to seek counsel of others. The freedom of action in the higher echelons is all too compelling and the leader keeps getting sucked into the unethical whirlpool of events. Small personal indiscretions which would never be acceptable in a subordinate then become the norm.

**Conflict of Loyalties**

14.26 In the Army the term loyalty is most misunderstood. This is especially true amongst the lower ranks. For a soldier it is just loyalty to his superior for as he says that there is no other choice. He feels that it is only then he is showing loyalty to his paltan and the country. However for more enlightened lot of Army personnel there is a conflict between loyalties to the organisational position versus adherence to personal conviction. Also conflict is often seen between ambition and selflessness. What is legitimate ambition? On one hand selflessness as a sterling quality of character is taught in the Army on the other hand ambition too is sometimes rewarded.

**Honesty and Deception**

14.27 Decisions in an organisation are based upon the information available to the decision maker. If that information is inaccurate or incomplete, the decision may well be faulty. The decision may be faulty even if that information is accurate and complete, but it is more likely to be faulty if the information is accurate and incomplete. In many situations at higher levels, the issue of honesty and deception are not recognised as such. One of the most common deceptions is the exaggeration of need in order to get what is really needed, knowing that the initial request is certainly going to be reduced.
Responsibility for developing and sustaining a healthy ethical climate primarily rests with the senior level leaders of the Army

The Reporting System

14.28 The other complex issue is that of the reporting system of the officers. Here ethical principle of fairness conflict directly with the ethical principle of honesty. Is the reporting officer fair to his officers to rate them honestly in accordance with the intent of the reporting system when he knows that across the Army, his contemporaries are inflating reports of their officers. Is he justified in waging a one-man campaign for strict honesty, when it comes at the expense of his own command. Conversely, what are the ethical standards of the senior leader who then will use the threat of a damaging a report?

Longevity of Ethical Climate

14.29 As mentioned earlier senior leaders are responsible for developing and sustaining a healthy ethical climate. It establishes the way people feel about their responsibilities and interact with others and the degree to which they will commit themselves to organisational tasks. In turn, a healthy ethical climate has a direct bearing on the readiness. Will the soldiers be honest and work to improve their shortcomings or will they cover up things? Most trust and confidence problems in the Army can be traced to the ethical environment that is prevalent. When the climate is characterised by threats, lack of ethical clarity, incompetence and conflicting policies the juniors receive wrong signals of expected behaviour.

14.30 To develop and sustain the correct ethical climate, senior leaders and Cdr must reach out to their organisations, know the intricacies of their job, trust their subordinates and take risks on their behalf. Openness must be encouraged as also dignified criticism and the senior leader must encourage subordinates to show initiative. Also it is necessary for the senior leaders to show greater tolerance towards honest mistakes of subordinates.

Perceptions of Juniors

14.31 The senior leaders must understand that what may appear to be ethical to them may not be seen that way by their subordinates. They must be sensitive to those who do not agree with their actions. The key in evaluating ethical behaviour is understanding in the
reasoning behind senior leaders’ decisions. Therefore the senior leaders must ensure that their subordinates’ perceptions are consistent with the message they intended to convey.

*Subordinates cannot be left to speculate as to the values of the organisation. Top leadership must give forth herein explicit signals, lest any confusion or uncertainty exists over what is or is not permissible conduct. To do so otherwise allows informal and potentially subversive codes of conduct to be transmitted with a wink and nod and encourages an inferior ethical system based on going along to get along or a notion that everybody is doing it.*

- Richard Thornburgh
Former US Attorney General

**Loyalty**

14.32 Loyalty has to be understood in the right context by the senior leaders if they were to become effective role models. Loyalty should be both ways - from senior to junior and vice versa. In the Army however, this term is most misunderstood and misinterpreted. There is a need for everyone to guard against confusing personal loyalty with loyalty to higher ideals. This is only possible in an environment which has been made ethically healthy by the Cdr.

**Expediency**

14.33 It has been seen often that men in senior echelons of the Army use sophisticated rationalisations for some of their expedient actions. They fall into this trap at times due to inherent power vested with rank and appointment. This is where the double standards are created. The double standards in turn undermine trust and confidence in their organisation wherein subordinates also tend to justify unethical behaviour.

14.34 Whereas a senior leader is expected to show empathy, understanding and maturity, at times it is seen that the opposite is actually the case. It is a known fact that the moral toughness directly depends on the strength and character of the individual. Senior leaders and Cdr can control their public character by always considering the ethical implications of their actions and behaving accordingly. Their behaviour must be consistent and must possess a stronger moral force. Those at senior levels then shape the ethical actions of their subordinates.

**Transformation Leadership**

14.35 This is the style of leadership which is often guided by moral codes and ethical
values. It is here that the leader cares for human dignity and rights. He also subscribes to a
code of ethics that is fully acceptable to his society as well as his profession. This type of
moral leadership serves the objective of the organisation better in the long run. Leaders face
ethical dilemmas at all levels, and the best leaders recognise and face them with a
commitment to doing what is right, not just what is expedient. Leaders should internalise a
strong sense of ethics, principles of right conduct and system of moral values. Values
provide a basis for leaders to differentiate between right and wrong, ethical and unethical
behaviour. Values also may reflect the extent to which leaders accept or reject
organisational pressures and goals. In this context, the leadership at Abu Ghraib in Iraq up
the ladder ignored the aspects of moral and ethical values completely.

14.36 **Actual Case Studies.** It is essential at this juncture to record two contrasting cases,
which depict live situations existing in the Army today.

14.37 **Case 1.** 2 Lt Goswani of 13 Field Regiment was an Observation Post Officer at
Trishul in 1962 in the Sino-Indian war. The Chinese attacked the defended locality in waves
with overwhelming strength. After sustaining heavy losses the defenders were ordered to
withdraw by Brigadier Raina (later COAS), but Goswami thought it to be his duty to
provide fire support to withdrawing troops rather than himself withdraw. When the Chinese
were mopping-up Goswami brought heavy fire to bear on his defended locality that killed
several Chinese, besides wounding Goswami himself. Goswami was presumed dead by the
Chinese and they left him there to decay and decompose. Later at night he regained
consciousness and crawled to the brigade headquarters undetected by the Chinese. For his
bravery he was awarded MVC, the highest decoration given to any soldier in that war.
Goswami’s course mates narrate that while under training at the IMA at Dehradun, he was
an extremely unassuming gentleman cadet who behaved well even when not observed.
While on the YO’s course at Devlali, in 1961, on a Sunday a mass punishment was given to
YO. Unsupervised, the officers concerned were directed to go on foot about 15 miles and
touch the peak of a hill feature, Shiva Dongar. Goswami was one of those who did the
punishment ordered, despite having the weakest constitution in the course. Though this
single instance is not a total explanation of Goswami’s character, it nevertheless is an
indicator of the values he cherished.

14.38 **Case 2.** Major X was a decorated soldier with a good career profile. With eleven
years service the officer was selected for Defence Services Staff College. He was doing
quite well in studies but one day he could not get time to complete an assignment. Major X requested Major Y a friend to let him copy the solution to the exercise. Y agreed. The instructor's sharp eye readily discovered the cheating done. He reported the matter to the Commandant who ordered return of both the officers to their units. Two careers, otherwise budding, suddenly earned a blot. A keen officer who got posted to the training institution where Major X had done his pre-commission training went through the cadet days records of the officer. It was revealed that as a cadet, Major X had been severely punished at two different occasions for cheating in the examinations. Evidently, some traits of bad character if not corrected can lead a man into serious trouble later in life.

14.39 The above case studies do not in any way suggest that code of ethics and moral character are only applicable to the officer cadre. In fact due to the crisis of availability of the officers in the Army, it is the also new junior leadership at the hands of JCO and NCO, which is under focus.

Present Situation

14.40 The code of ethics and moral character today in the Army remain as high as ever. However introspection is essential for its development and strength. Some of the present disturbing trends are highlighted below:

14.40.1 Mismatch between words and deeds.

14.40.2 A section of the personnel looking for short cuts to success.

14.40.3 Personality based command resulting in loss of transparency at all levels.

14.40.4 The moment a person is overlooked for the next rank there is a dramatic attitudinal change in this individual. This definitely affects his hither to fore held values, beliefs and ethics if not the character. This creates pressure on those personnel who still hold in high esteem these factors in their professional and private lives.

14.40.5 There is generally no attempt made to allay the fears of genuine leaders that their interests will be looked after.

14.40.6 The autocratic attitude of superior continues to increase the frustration
amongst the subordinates. No one can deny that the following dialogue from a senior to a junior exists in all Army units partly or wholly, at different levels of command: - “I am the boss, do as I say”. “No representations, I’ve heard you and I don’t agree and if you still don’t feel correct, I don’t care”. “I’ve put in 30 years of service, seen so many operations, this is the way I seen it being done”.

14.40.7 Lack of confidence building measures by the senior with a junior perhaps due to an inherent fear of exposing own mistakes or loosing ones own credibility.

14.40.8 By virtue of rank, service and the power vested in certain appointments there is a tendency to twist the system to ones own advantage by establishing own set of code of ethics at work place.

14.40.9 Inability on part of junior leadership to stand up to incorrect pattern of behaviour by seniors for fear of being ruthlessly sidelined in the system.

14.40.10 Prevention of flowering of genuine values, beliefs, ethics and behaviour amongst all due to existence of large-scale sycophancy and yesmanship.

14.41 **Self Development Log.** It is essential for every individual in whatever appointment he functions, to carry out constant self-appraisal of his leadership attributes. To this end a self-development log is proposed *(Refer Appendix D)*.

14.42 **Developing the Leader.** Every senior must understand that he has a major role in developing the morals, ethics and the leadership traits in a junior irrespective of the service bracket. Every individual has traits, which he himself is not aware of, so as a senior it is his responsibility of imbibing and making a person realise these. Unfortunately most leaders today in the Army shy away from this onerous responsibility. One reason for this is that the leader refuses to carry out any introspection about his own ethical standards. It is only when a leader is on a higher ethical plane that he can develop leadership traits in his juniors. It would be interesting at this stage to examine an address by Sergeant Major John G Stepanek to the passing of cadets at West Point *(Refer Appendix E)*. It explicitly explains the mind of a soldier and his expectations from his leaders. If it is followed in letter and spirit by our leaders today then their morals and ethical standing amongst their troops will be of a very high order.