# Doing What's Right: Shaping the Army's Professional Environment

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Professional studies often include exposure to the ideas of the classical philosophers, and that is all to the good. It is important to know the ethical touchstones that have guided the great civilizations, the great societies, of the past. It is important to know that men have agreed upon standards of conduct, have established mores and sanctions to encourage observance of those standards and to punish transgressions against them, and have thus sought to determine the ethical character of their lives.

It is perhaps more important, with those studies as background, to think hard and seriously about the ethical standards that soldiers choose to guide their lives, both personal and professional. This is because there cannot be a lack of congruence between personal and professional standards, between the private man and the public man in value terms, without devastating harm to one's ability to perform professionally.

This essay concentrates on one further essential step—beyond understanding the great value systems that have guided men over the generations, and beyond establishing a commitment to a value system that will guide one's actions. It deals with the final, difficult, and all-important tasks of translating those values into guidelines for day-to-day activities and then, after adapting them and manifesting them in our own lives, teaching them to those who are entrusted to our leadership, and gaining their willing acceptance and ultimately their own wholehearted commitment to those same values.

This last step is at the heart of professional leadership. Such leadership is, in its essence, the task of establishing and transmitting values. Certainly there are many other desirable attributes of leadership. Technical competence, energy, physical bravery and moral courage, intellectual capacity, commitment—all these and more are undoubtedly desirable attributes

of the successful leader. None of the great leaders, of course, has manifested all these in equal parts. Men are, after all, both fallible and infinitely diverse.

But these attributes, however important, are secondary to the capacity to set and impart values. Professionalism is, after all, the hewing to a set of values postulated as the ideal of performance in the profession at hand. It is important to remember, in thinking about these matters, that they all take place within a given cultural and societal context. Thus what constitute the canons of ideal professional behavior for the leaders of American soldiers in the 20th century may vary substantially, even radically, from the imperatives to which other leaders, at other times, were expected to respond.

Thus I argue that the essence of professionalism is character. Character may be defined as the commitment to an admirable set of values, and the courage to manifest those values in one's life, no matter the cost in terms of personal success or popularity. One writer referred to "those hard outcroppings of character that determine a life." And it is no accident that one of the key phrases in the prayer taught to cadets at West Point concerns the need to "choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong."

Now "those hard outcroppings of character," as I understand them, refer to those key situations—ethical crises, we might say—in which we have the opportunity to stand up and be counted, to weigh in on the side we believe to be right, regardless of the consequences. Such crises, fortunately for us all, only seldom confront us. But that does not mean that we are only rarely faced with the necessity to manifest values in our daily actions. Quite the contrary, as I see it. Virtually everything we do has a value component to it, and—whether we like it or not, whether we realize it or not—we are revealing our values, and teaching our values to others, in an almost constant stream of words and deeds throughout each day.

This realization is both daunting and encouraging. It means that we carry an enormous responsibility as leaders, perhaps greater than we ordinarily realize (and here I am not speaking of the self-evident heavy burden of those who lead troops in combat). It means that we are constantly being observed, and our actions are constantly being assessed, by those we lead (and, of course, by our seniors and our peers as well). The dean of George Washington University's business school once observed, tellingly, that "management is one of the performing arts." He was quite right, and the corollary is that the leader, or manager, is never off stage. But while that is a heavy responsibility,

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it is also a magnificent opportunity. It means that literally hundreds of times a day the leader has an opportunity to touch the people he comes into contact with, and to shape their approach to duty and responsibility.

One of our finest soldiers, Lieutenant General Arthur S. Collins, Jr., wrote a superb book called *Common Sense Training*.[1] In it he pointed out how virtually everything a unit does in the course of a day may be used for training by a wise commander. And it was not just training in specific techniques or tasks he had in mind, but indoctrination in such fundamental attributes as discipline, patriotism, responsiveness to command, initiative, and unit cohesion. General Collins held that training is all-encompassing, with the result that "individual training is designed to improve the whole person." "Improve the whole person"—think of it, and what that says about the trainer (the leader) and his responsibility to set and impart values.

A shared commitment to professional values, and to service, transcends the individual and constitutes the basis for our Army's corporate persona, its central values. We teach these values to our young leaders, who in turn inherit a responsibility to see that they are preserved and passed on. In this way we maintain the continuity and solidarity of our profession.

When new officers leave their basic schools and training centers and enter the Army at large, they have a major adjustment to make. Things are different, and radically so, in this larger world, where practice takes over from theory. They must be prepared to go out and deal with the problems which those differences can cause, differences which have the capacity to undermine the very essence of the Army—its ability to carry out its mission. An important part of being prepared to deal with such differences is understanding just how much influence a leader can have.

Most men, it seems to me, are inherently neither good nor evil. Each has within himself the capacity for actions that are admirable or reprehensible. What brings out the best or worst in us is often the organizational climate in which we find ourselves. In the Army there are units and posts that, at particular times and under particular commanders, come close to living up

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to the ideal standards to which we aspire. There are others which fall lamentably short.

It is not that the one post or unit happened to have assigned to it a high proportion of principled soldiers, while another had many of lesser quality. Rather it is that in one case the leaders were able to build an environment supportive of the kind of behavior (in ethical terms) they professed to want, while others elsewhere failed to do so (and perhaps even failed to understand their responsibility for doing so). The late General Bruce C. Clarke, a renowned Army commander in Europe in the early days of the Cold War, told his commanders that "the outstanding officer is the one who gets superior results from average soldiers." There is much wisdom in that. There are units in the Army which, because of the high priority of their mission or other factors, get more than a fair share of the talent and assets the Army has to pass around. But most units get a representative cross-section of talent, and do a better or worse job of making use of it.

What this brings us down to is building an environment in which people (soldiers) are encouraged and enabled to live up to the highest standards of professionalism. The Army's declaratory policy on ethical standards has always been of the highest order. Its operational policy, unfortunately, has not always matched those high declaratory standards. Perhaps the best example is the distortions of the body count as a measure of operational success in Vietnam, a measure widely acknowledged even by senior commanders to be both corrupt and corrupting. In that case our operational standards failed to come up to our declaratory ones, and the integrity of the whole enterprise suffered as a result.

Many similar problems come up in the course of professional service. But there are many practical things the individual leader can do to enhance the climate for professionalism. Some of the most important are these:

• First, and by all odds the most important, is to set the example in terms of personal and professional conduct by demonstrating commitment to

the highest standards of professionalism and diligent efforts to live up to those standards.

• Second is communicating to all subordinates what your standards are, and that you expect them to live up to those standards as well. Be sure that they understand what you mean, and what you expect; then help them appreciate how that translates into day-to-day behavior.

• Third is ensuring that the professional environment (to the extent you have any control over it) is supportive of ethical behavior, and not supportive of behavior that is ethically flawed. This entails ensuring that in all aspects of your leadership (evaluation of subordinates, competition with other units, methods of motivating subordinates, etc.) you operate in a way that encourages and rewards ethical behavior on the part of your subordinates, and discourages unethical behavior (by not rewarding and, where necessary, punishing it).

• Fourth is recognizing that you have more control over the professional environment than you may realize. If you communicate your commitment to high standards to your fellow officers, they will be more likely to respect those standards in their dealings with you. If you form alliances with like-minded peers, the solidarity of your joint commitment to high standards can improve the organization's professionalism. If you detect unethical practices, and devise other—more acceptable—ways to get the mission accomplished, you can change undesirable patterns of behavior. If you are generous in recognizing highly professional performance, even (or especially) on the part of those with whom you are in professional competition, you can build new bonds of shared commitment to high standards. And if, when it may become necessary, you stand up to be counted in refusing to compromise your standards, you set an example that seniors, peers, and subordinates alike can take counsel from.

Undeniably, there are risks in such a course of action, especially if the command of which you are a part is not at the moment distinguishing itself in terms of professional behavior. No one could possibly argue that adherence to ethical standards, and the responsibility to leaven the officer corps in terms of its ethical norms, is free of risk, or even easy. It is just essential.

It is as simple as that. Doing what is right yourself, teaching what is right to your troops, and encouraging all with whom you come in contact (including peers and seniors) to do what is right—that is what we are training officers to do, what the Army needs them to do, and what the nation relies on them to do. On this all else depends.

**NOTE**

1. Arthur S. Collins, Jr., *Common Sense Training: A Working Philosophy for Leaders* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1978). General Collins retired from the Army in 1974 and died in 1984.