

Ethical Leadership

The Way Ahead

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“All glory comes from daring to begin”

The defining moments of 2010 related not so much to positive developments within the country but rather to a series of exposures of wrong doing within the government vividly brought home to the public by the print and visual media. The spotlight was focused on people in high positions in the political establishment, bureaucracy, industrial houses and even the media who misused their position for personal gain which shook the confidence of the nation. Inevitably some of the glare also fell on the armed forces who in public perception are considered to be the paragons of virtue. While the infractions here were miniscule compared to the misdeeds brought out in other domains, the fact that even the services were affected shook the public to a much greater extent. The armed forces are perceived to be of a higher moral and ethical caliber than the rest of their countrymen – a product different from the rest due to their training, motivation, discipline and regimental ethos despite coming from the same social milieu. Any transgression by men in uniform thus becomes a subject of high media scrutiny, begging the question ‘Are the ethical leadership standards of the Indian Army on the decline’.

The subject has not been statistically analysed in a manner which can give out a definitive answer to the above question. Transgressions within the armed forces are not a new phenomenon and have been taking place earlier also. Then as in the present, swift action has been taken against those found guilty of misconduct. The difference now lies in the visibility of cases of misconduct which can be beamed straight into our living rooms by an alert and highly active media. Cases of misconduct by the armed forces lead to consternation

among the public and intense soul searching within the service community. Discussions on the subject though animated are based on opinions limited by one's own experiences and more often on hearsay, and lack the focus of analytical thought and detailed scrutiny. But perhaps the debate needs to shift from what some perceive to be an "ethics crisis", to how ethical leadership can be strengthened within the Service.

What exactly is ethical leadership? To confine the term to good character and having "the right values" is limiting as the reality of ethical leadership is far more complex and the stakes are much higher. As such, it must embody the purpose, vision, and values both of the organisation and of the rank and file, within an understanding of ethical ideals. These ideals give rise to viewing ethical leadership in terms of certain defining aspects or characteristics of ethical leaders. This broader concept empowers leaders to offer a way to understand ethical leadership that is more complex and more useful than just a matter of "good character and values." What is it that ethical leaders do which sets them apart from the rest?

Defining Features

Create the Culture - An ethical culture cannot be created by having a laminated "values card" in the front pocket or a purely compliance approach to ethics to solve the "ethics problem." There is a need for a live conversation about ethics and values, where people hold each other responsible and accountable about whether they are really living the values. And if such live conversations become a part of unit life, the rank and file would expect their officers to live by that culture too. Bringing such a culture to life means that people must have knowledge of alternatives, but still choose to stay within the bounds of ethical behaviour because it is important and inspires them. Making a strong commitment to bring such a culture to life is an essential part of ethical leadership. As an example, at the unit level, it could imply creating a culture where resorting to unfair means to win a competition is anathema. Where resorting to illegal means to create funds is abhorred even if such funds are ostensibly meant to be used for a good cause. The list of 'doables' can be expanded, with the sum total constituting that unit's culture. In operations, such a culture could translate into honest reporting and not fudging records to make the unit look better than what it actually is. In short, it implies doing the right things and not just doing things right. Creating such a culture would also require appropriate dissent mechanisms. In the army, subordinates will obey what they perceive to be legitimate authority even if there is no cost for disobedience.

This 'authority trap' to be avoided would require established and explicit ways for subordinates to 'push back' if a person thinks that something is ethically wrong and the values of the organisation are being eroded. Indeed, many of the current scandals could have been prevented if only there were more creative ways for subordinates to express their dissatisfaction with the actions of their superior officers. The process of developing these mechanisms of dissent will vary in each unit and headquarter, but it is a crucial leadership task.

Walk the Talk - It is important for leaders to tell a compelling and morally rich story, but ethical leaders must also embody and live the story. Lt Gen SK Sinha who served under Gen Cariappa when the latter was the Western Army Commander recounts an incident which highlights this aspect. Returning from a tour, Gen Cariappa saw his two children coming out of his other staff car. They had missed the school bus and the ADC had sent the staff car to fetch them. Cariappa was furious at the misuse of government transport and directed disciplinary action be taken against his Aide. Next morning he was told that the ADC had been admonished. 'What about the loss of petrol to the government', queried the General? He was informed that the amount had been deposited in the treasury at the prescribed rate. 'Have it debited to my personal account', was Cariappa's cryptic comment. While the above incident relates to financial probity, the principal applies to all aspects of command functioning. The fig leaf of service privileges cannot be applied to personal matters and certainly cannot be used as a justification for flouting service norms. When breaches occur between what is preached and what is practiced, the hierarchical structure of the army may still elicit compliance but the leader stands exposed and his moral authority weakens. And successive dents at moral authority soon erode the leaders and the organisations credibility for the leader is the ethical role model for his command.

The Selection Dilemma - The steeply hierarchical structure which exists in the armed forces results in the phenomenon of too many people chasing too few promotions. As in the economics model, here too the result is inflation in the assessment pattern and at times, attempts by subordinates to ingratiate themselves with their superiors in the hope of getting a better chit. It is imperative that only the best in a batch rise to higher ranks and the onus for this lies on the shoulders of assessing officers. Ethical leaders pay special attention to this aspect. That this determination is for the most part subjective makes it a moral imperative for the assessing officers to be judicious in their appraisal which should be free from bias due to regimental and other affiliations. Judging

a person's Integrity is far more important than evaluating their experience and skills. When primacy is given to this aspect, we can expect higher standards of ethical behaviour to pervade the organisation.

The Organisation Comes First - Ethical leaders view their role as promoting the effectiveness of their command and achieving organisational goals rather than being focused on personal advancement. They recognise that value is in the success and well being of their command. They thus identify and act on levers, such as troop loyalty, that drive organisational success. This also implies accepting responsibility and taking responsibility for the decisions that affect one's command. Ethical leadership demands that failures not be laid at the doorstep of subordinates and success not be appropriated as the personal handiwork of the leader.

Make Tough Calls - Ethical leaders do not hesitate to make difficult decisions. Many young officers have complained that if they 'took a stand', they would in all likelihood get sacked. That may be true, for the very act of taking a 'stand' denotes risk. Without that risk, there can be no stand – no passion in what we believe in. Whether it is taking a stand in classical military terms as taken by Major Shaitan Singh and his company on the icy heights of Rezang La in 1962, or taking a stand to uphold one's values – the underlying principle is the same. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, as the Army Chief, stood his ground and resisted all attempts by the Prime Minister and her cabinet, who due to political compulsions wished to commence operations against East Pakistan in the summer of 1971. He put his career as the Army Chief at stake and stood by his professional opinion. By insisting on operations being shifted to winter, he ensured that the Army was well prepared and the subsequent victory was a result of that decision. Many instances abound both in peace time and in war of leaders taking tough decisions even at the risk of their career. This would remain a defining aspect of ethical leadership.

The Limits of Values - All values have limits in relation to the context or the audience in which they are being used. Ethical officers have an acute sense of the limits of the values they live by and are prepared with solid reasons to defend their chosen course of action. As an example, regimental or unit loyalty is often invoked to hide unit shortcomings under the carpet. What happens then if an officer is asked to lie or perhaps just turn a blind eye to cover up his unit's misdemeanors? Is the unit's honour more important than his? Or is the 'unit honour' story being used to preserve the reputation of the commanding officer? What happens if a staff officer is asked to lie about the conduct of the

General he is serving? Whose honour is to be preserved? Ethics is no different from any other part of our lives: there is no substitute for good judgment, sound advice, practical sense, and conversations with those affected by our actions. In any case, how can the honour of a unit be maintained, if an officer was to lose his own?

The Five Star Culture Myth - A lot of talk takes place about the prevalence of a five star culture within the Army which is perceived to be largely the causative factor of much of the ills that plague the Force. But is it really so? Perhaps a visit to a five star hotel would disabuse quite a few people of what five star culture is all about. It is true that some people go overboard in making arrangements for the visit of senior officers. While there is a need for shunning ostentation, there is also a matter of elegance and élan which cannot be overlooked. While financial probity is an important constituent of ethical leadership, it cannot by itself imply good leadership. If that were to be the case, ascetics would make the best commanders! Our prizing of self denial and austerity in the Army's leadership could hence do with a bit of challenge, frankly, before it becomes so set in stone that conspicuous lack of consumption becomes a substitute for genuine leadership virtues. While ethical leadership is about 'raising the bar'; there must be room for mistakes, for humour, and for a humanity that is sometimes missing in our senior leadership. Ultimately, ethical leaders are ordinary people who are living their lives as examples to their commands – and in the process they become role models for others to follow.

Becoming an Ethical leader

Becoming an ethical leader is relatively simple. It requires a commitment to examining your own behavior and values, and the willingness and strength to accept responsibility for the effects of your actions on others, as well as on yourself. An honest answer to the following questions would be an appropriate check to determine the ethical content of one's leadership: -

- What are my most important values and principles? Does my behaviour reflect those values? What would my subordinates and peers say my values are?
- What mechanisms and processes have I designed to be sure that the people under my command can 'push back' against my authority?
- What could the Army ask me to do that would cause me to resign for ethical reasons?
- What do I want people to say about my leadership when I am gone?

- At the end of the day, can I use my days work as an appropriate lesson to teach my children ethical behaviour?

Developing Ethical Leaders

To develop ethical leaders in the Army, we need to engage in some of these questions. The process would require each, unit, establishment and headquarter to chart its own course in the general line of what has been suggested based on its working ethos. There can be no fixed format. It would also be useful to engage in a conversation with subordinates about what they see as 'ethical leadership'.

Within the Army, many a mistake is made due to ignorance of rules and procedures. Administrative aspects need to be given greater emphasis during training. Perhaps Cadets at our training academies need to be taught accounting procedures while still in the academy. On commissioning, all officers could be taught works procedures and other administrative details so that ethical oversight is not caused by ignorance. We also need to figure out how authority can be challenged while at the same time ensuring that the stability and strength of the command structure is not compromised. Knowledge of rules and insisting on adherence could be one step in this process.

It is important for the ethics codes to be clear. It would be important to ensure that persons who do not live by the code do not attain higher ranks as that will vitiate the very *raison d'être* of ethical development. Finally, the content must be based on self example and the pitfalls of preaching must be scrupulously avoided. Wives have an important role to play too. They must form part of the ethical narrative. A strong backing at home makes it easier to live by the code.

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We are what we repeatedly do; excellence then is not an act, but a habit.

— Aristotle

Be the change you want to be.

— Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

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