

# Shaping Small Unit Ethics

by Richard S. Higashi

*“Adhering to the principles the Army Values embody is essential to upholding high ethical standards of behavior.”<sup>1</sup> —ADRP 6-22*

Today’s military conflicts are complex, so navigating the ethics of today’s battlefield as a tactical leader is not simple. The current Army strategy is to have soldiers rely on their training and above all else, embody Army values. Conceptually, this should help leaders choose the *right* that is the most consistent with Army goals, but there are always competing principles and sometimes individuals deviate toward unethical behavior. To help soldiers make choices there are a multitude of ethical decision-making models (e.g., The Ethical Triangle) that are supposed to help individuals make ethical decisions, but I contend that they are better suited as introspective models for reflection. The problem is that these models are individual focused so instead of relying on each individual’s moral foundation, there should be a formalized process that shapes the ethical environment for soldiers at the lowest levels. Here is a two-part process: 1) leaders need to foster a positive ethical climate with consistent feedback and reflection; and 2) staffs at higher echelons need to deliberately use a problem-solving method to provide ethical clarity to subordinate units.

*“Climate and culture describe the environment in which a leader leads. The leader shapes the environment in which the leader and others operate... Army leaders must consistently focus on shaping ethics-based organizational climates... When an organization’s ethical climate nurtures ethical behavior, people will think, feel, and act ethically.”<sup>2</sup> —ADRP 6-22*

This excerpt shows that the Army understands the leader’s role in fostering an ethical climate. It is important because one of the most powerful influences on an individual’s ethical decision making is the organization’s environment.<sup>3, 4</sup> The problem is measuring a unit’s ethical climate. If we use Victor and Cullen’s definition of an organization’s ethical climate: “the perceived prescriptions, proscriptions, and permissions regarding moral obligations in organizations,”<sup>5</sup> then we can use the following five categories, as described by Valentine and Barnett,<sup>6</sup> to help leaders measure climate:

1. the degree to which soldiers perceive that leaders support and model ethical behavior
2. the degree to which soldiers perceive that ethical behavior is the “norm” in their unit
3. the degree to which soldiers perceive that ethical (unethical) behavior is rewarded (punished) in their unit
4. the degree to which soldiers perceive that they can act ethically and still succeed
5. the degree to which ethical considerations are factored into the decision-making process in their organization

The goal is to reflect on these five questions and incorporate them into the “assess” step of the Army Operations Process.

*“Ethical reasoning must occur during the operations process. Leaders consider ethics in planning, preparing, executing, and assessing operations.”<sup>7</sup> —ADRP 6-22*

This will help identify behavior that deviates from the Army norm after each cycle of the operations process and allow the leader to make corrections. It is very difficult to keep perceptions in check, but one method

is consistent feedback; both up and down the chain of command. Upward feedback is not discussed often, but lower-level leaders should be consulting with their superiors for advice and clarity. The problem is what happens when subordinate leaders don't ask questions.

Famous historical cases such as the My Lai Massacre, Abu Ghraib, and “The Fall of the Warrior King”<sup>8</sup> all provide examples of how things can go wrong. While these cases are extreme, there are patterns that develop from which we can learn. For example, the “Fall of the Warrior King” was a case where LTC Sassaman tried to cover up his soldiers’ unorthodox method of non-lethal force to enforce a curfew, which resulted in the death of Zaydoon Fadhil. LTC Sassaman’s actions could be attributed to a high level of unit cohesion and shows its potential negative effects. LTC (R) Robert Rielly studied cases like this and the My Lai Massacre; he discovered that unit cohesion, an essential element in combat, is one of the major factors that can negatively affect a group’s ethics.<sup>9</sup>

*“The normative power of the cohesive group causes the strong personal commitment on the part of the soldier that he ought to conform to group expectations. The development of unit norms and values causes unit members to band together in their commitment to each other, the unit and its purpose.”<sup>10</sup>* —William Henderson

The danger is that any unit can develop norms and values not consistent with the Army as a whole.<sup>11</sup> To show how powerful this can be, a study conducted in 2006 found that more than 40% of service members in combat zones would not report a fellow service member for a potential war crime.<sup>12</sup> Cases like “The Fall of the Warrior King” exemplify this and show how atrocities and war crimes cannot be attributed to a single individual acting alone.<sup>13</sup> These acts can occur when a leader provides tacit approval through silence or worse, explicit approval.<sup>14</sup> To prevent this from happening, leaders need to be the ethical role model, correct errant behavior, and produce an ethical climate where everyone will think, feel, and act ethically.

The Framework of the Army Ethic		
	Legal Foundations	Moral Foundations
<b>Army as Profession</b>  (Laws, values, and norms for performance of collective institution)	<b>Legal-Institutional</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The U.S. constitution</li> <li>• Titles 5, 10, 32, USC</li> <li>• Treaties</li> <li>• Status-of-forces agreements</li> <li>• Law of war</li> </ul>	<b>Moral-Institutional</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Declaration of Independence</li> <li>• Just war tradition</li> <li>• Trust relationships of profession</li> </ul>
<b>Individual as Professional</b>  (Laws, values, and norms for performance of individual professionals)	<b>Legal-Individual</b>  Oaths: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enlistment</li> <li>• Commission</li> <li>• Office</li> </ul> USC – Standards of Exemplary Conduct UCMJ Rules of engagement Soldier’s Rules	<b>Moral-Individual</b>  Universal Norms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic Rights</li> <li>• Golden Rule</li> </ul> Values, Creeds, and Mottos: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Duty, Honor, Country”</li> <li>• NCO Creed</li> <li>• Army Civilian Corps Creed</li> <li>• Army Values</li> <li>• The Soldier’s Creed, Warrior Ethos</li> </ul>
NCO UCMJ	noncommissioned officer Uniform Code of Military Justice	U.S. USC
United States United States Code		
The Army Ethic is the evolving set of laws, values, and beliefs, embedded within the Army culture of trust that motivates and guides the conduct of Army professionals bound together in common moral purpose.		

Figure 1. The Framework of the Army Ethic.<sup>15</sup>

The Army expects their leaders to make values-based, ethical choices for the good of the Army and the nation,<sup>16</sup> but how do leaders do this? The current Army strategy is to have soldiers rely on their training and above all else, embody Army values. The Army provides a framework for this based on the legal and moral obligations of individuals and the institution. (See Figure 1 on page 56.)

Martin Cook argues that this current model, with a reliance on training and exhortation of rules, is not sufficient and should be supplemented by leaders shaping their command climate and reserving time for reflection on ethics.<sup>17</sup>

*“While a leader may not be completely prepared for complex situations, spending time to reflect on the Army Values, studying, and honing personal leadership competencies will help.”<sup>18</sup>—ADRP 6-22*

This sounds great, but how should one reflect? One of the best models created for ethical reflection is James Svara’s Ethical Triangle (See Figure 2 below.) because it balances the three main ethics approaches: the virtuous approach, the deontology and principle-based approach, and the utilitarian approach (consequences). However, the problem is that it is not very useful as an ethical decision-making model because it is not practical in the heat of battle.

Another problem with this model is that it becomes difficult to visualize multiple competing worldviews on ethics. Here is where I will introduce an adaptive model, called the Ethical Pyramid (See Figure 3 on page 58.), which incorporates Svara’s model and a theoretical model on ethical dimensions. Victor and Cullen (1988) theorized that there are three ethical criterion dimensions, which are egoism (consequences to the self), benevolence (consequences to others), and principles (application of ethical standards).<sup>19</sup>

The Ethical Pyramid combines both models in order to help leaders visualize multiple worldviews on ethics by showing how an individual’s morals align with the Army’s and others (coalition partners, host-nation nationals, etc.).

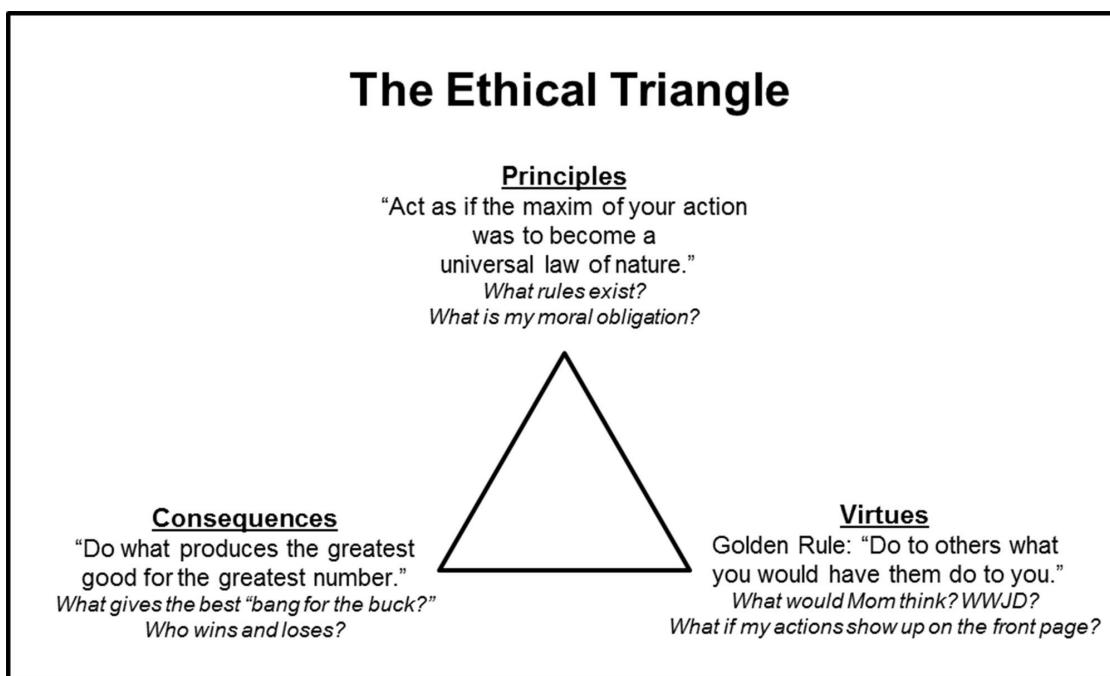


Figure 2. The “Ethical Triangle.”<sup>20, 21</sup>

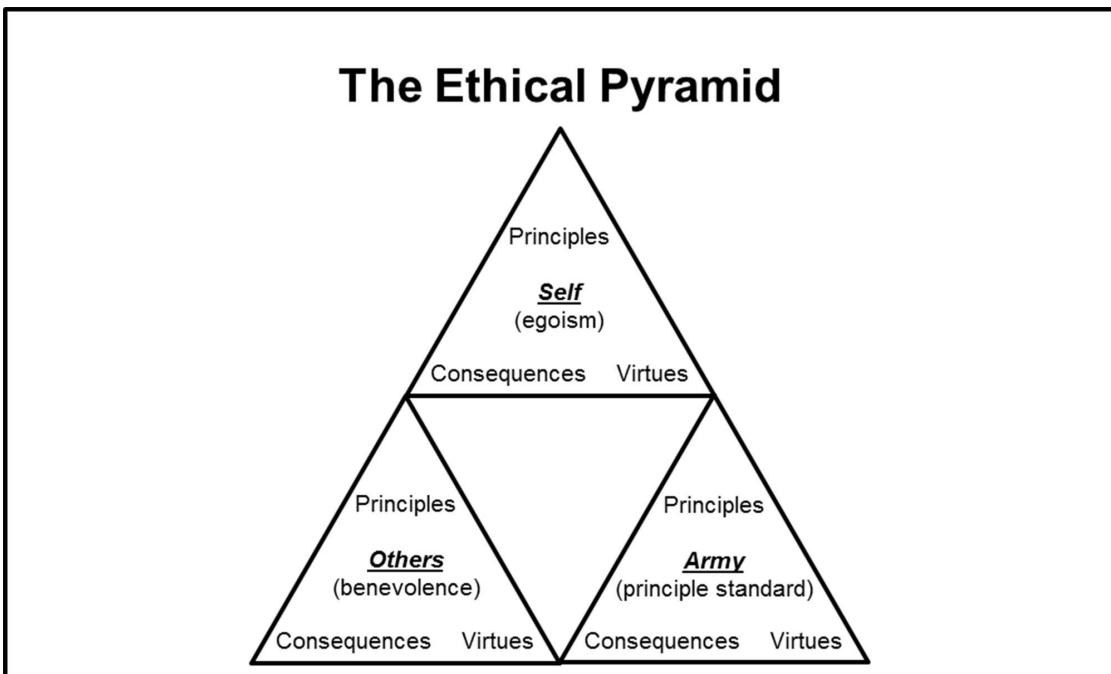


Figure 3. The Ethical Pyramid.

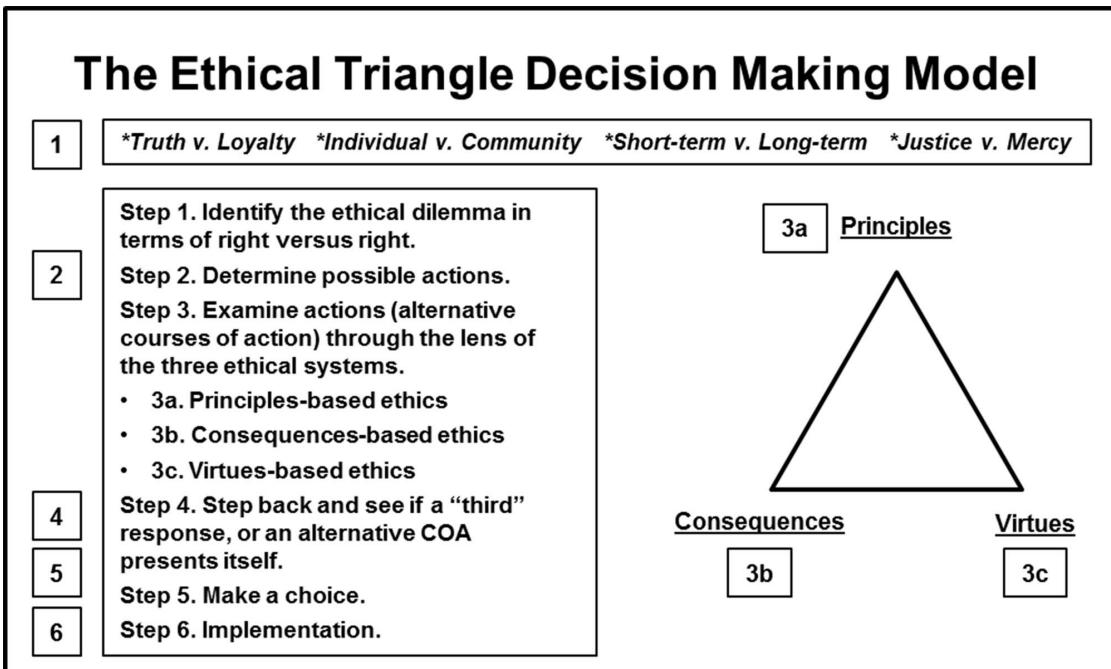


Figure 4. The Ethical Triangle Decision-Making Model.<sup>23</sup>

This may look like ethical relativism, or the idea that morality is relative to the norms of one's culture, but this model is merely a tool to check for moral alignment. This is an important distinction because ethical relativism receives criticism since it leaves no room for a common framework for resolving moral disputes between members of different societies.<sup>22</sup> While this model does not help resolve any disputes between competing worldviews, it does help show how similar (or different) an individual's view on ethics is compared to the Army and others.

The Ethical Pyramid is not the only model created based on the Ethical Triangle. Dr. Jack Kem developed his own model on how to use the Ethical Triangle for decision-making (See Figure 4 on page 58.), but it appears to be too time consuming for small unit leaders to use during combat.

That being said, it can be useful as a problem-solving model for staffs in higher headquarters. In other words, staffs can use models such as this in order to provide clarity to smaller subordinate units.

*"Organizational leaders have staffs to help them lead their people and manage their organizations' resources. They establish policies and the organizational climate that support their subordinate leaders."*<sup>24</sup> —ADRP 6-22

Currently, the most common way staffs provide ethical clarity is through the review of rules and regulations. This, however, has proven inadequate (ref. previous listed atrocities), so one recommended course of action is for staffs to be more deliberate in their planning at the operational level to include ethics (e.g., generate an Ethics Annex to the Operations Order). However, the staff's goal is not to tie the hands of subordinate commanders, but to create more specificity with regard to ethics in order to reduce ambiguity and the chance for criminal misinterpretation or abuse.

*"Vague orders may foster a climate of indiscipline, permitting subordinates to act outside the framework of the Army Values in pursuit of mission accomplishment. Nothing is more dangerous from an ethical perspective and could do more harm to the reputation of the Army and its mission. Leaders have a responsibility to research relevant orders, rules, and regulations and to demand clarification of orders that could lead to criminal misinterpretation or abuse."*<sup>25</sup> —ADRP 6-22

Ultimately, the purpose of this framework is to use *planning* at higher echelons (e.g., the operational level of war) and introspective models (e.g., the Ethical Pyramid) for individual *understanding* to align small unit ethics with Army values. These introspective models, such as the ethical pyramid presented in this paper, are tools that can assist leaders and their staffs in their understanding of the ethical environment. It is important because historical evidence shows that soldiers within small units can, and sometimes do, deviate from the norm without consistent assessment and correction. Furthermore, there should be a better, formalized process during planning that shapes the ethical environment for soldiers at the lowest levels instead of relying entirely on the pre-existing ethical foundations of each individual.

## End Notes

- 1 Department of the Army, *ADRP 6-22: Army Leadership*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government, 2012). 3-6.
- 2 Ibid., 3-5, 3-6, 7-1.
- 3 James Weber and Virginia W. Gerde, “Organizational Role and Environmental Uncertainty as Influences on Ethical Work Climate in Military Units,” *Journal of Business Ethics* (2011): 595.
- 4 Sean Valentine and Tim Barnett, “Ethics Codes, and Sales Professionals’ Perceptions of Their Organizations’ Ethical Values,” *Journal of Business Ethics*, no. 40 (2002): 192-193.
- 5 B. Victor and J.B. Cullen, “The Organizational Bases of Ethical Work Climates,” *Administrative Sciences Quarterly*, no. 33 (1988): 101.
- 6 Valentine and Barnett, “Ethics Codes, and Sales Professionals’ Perceptions of Their Organizations’ Ethical Values,” 192.
- 7 Department of the Army, *ADRP 6-22*, 3-7.
- 8 Dexter Filikins, The Fall of the Warrior King, *New York Times*, October 23, 2005, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/23/magazine/the-fall-of-the-warrior-king.html>.
- 9 Robert Rielly, “The Darker Side of the Force—The Negative Influence of Cohesion,” *Military Review* (Apr 2001): 2.
- 10 William Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion. The Human Element in Combat* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1985), 23.
- 11 Rielly, 4.
- 12 Weber and Gerde, “Organizational Role and Environmental Uncertainty as Influences on Ethical Work Climate in Military Units,” 609.
- 13 Filikins.
- 14 Rielly, 4.
- 15 Department of the Army, *ADRP 1: The Army Profession*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government, 2015). 2-3.
- 16 Department of the Army, *ADRP 6-22*, 3-7.
- 17 Martin L. Cook, “Military Ethics and Character Development,” in *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics*, edited by George Lucas (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), 104-105.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Weber and Gerde, 596.
- 20 James Svara, “The Ethical Triangle.” In *Combating Corruption, Encouraging Ethics: A Practical Guide to Management Ethics Second Edition*, edited by William L. Richter and Fances Burke (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 27.
- 21 Dr. Jack Kem, “Ethical Decision Making: Using the ‘Ethical Triangle,’” *2016 CGSC Ethics Symposium* (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2016), 4.

22 Manuel Velasquez, Claire Andre, Thomas Shanks, S.J., and Michael J. Meyer, “Ethical Relativism,” *Santa Clara University*, last modified August 1, 1992, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/ethical-relativism>.

23 Kem, 7.

24 Department of the Army, *ADRP 6-22*, 2-5.

25 Ibid., 3-7.