

Navigating *Ethical Complexity*

by Joseph Dwayne Blanding

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Effective military leadership integrates systems thinking with the ethical triangle to discipline judgment under mission command. This integration guides leaders to test lawful options against rules, consequences, and virtues. Leaders also anticipate second- and third-order effects. By linking commander's intent, concise communication, and ethics-aware After Action Review (AAR) to short, realistic vignettes, units convert abstract ethics into repeatable habits. This process occurs without altering Rules of Engagements (ROEs) or legal standards.¹ Effective military leadership relies on these foundations. They guide leaders in making ethical choices, empowering subordinates, and navigating dilemmas within military ethical standards. Shared understanding grows through clear communication and repeated ethics training. Systems thinking helps daily decisions connect to larger impacts and supports leader adaptation. The operations process includes planning, preparation, execution, and assessment. These interconnected steps achieve mission success.

This article explains why annual compliance and ad hoc ethics moments underprepare leaders for complex, right-versus-right dilemmas. It next defines systems thinking and the ethical triangle and illustrates how they align with mission command.² Building on these definitions, the article also proposes a unit routine of vignettes, leader modeling, and ethics-aware AARs. This routine

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builds ethical habits and anticipates second and third-order effects without changing ROE or legal standards.³

Leaders who combine operational processes with systems thinking gain a deeper understanding of the system and its interconnections. This perspective enables both ethical decisions and anticipation of consequences. By recognizing these links, leaders establish clear expectations, communicate effectively, and foster a shared understanding. Clear intent makes ethics part of every action. Communicating the leader's intent is crucial for accountability and ethical conduct.

During rehearsals, leaders assign responsibilities and set clear expectations, guiding individuals to act in accordance with the organization's values. Rehearsals enable leaders to model ethical behavior by demonstrating expected conduct. Upon assuming command or responsibility, leaders must define leadership, followership, and the ethical code that governs actions. Discussions should clarify these foundational concepts. Continuous ethics training and communication help ensure consistent behavior. This makes scenario-based training about dilemmas necessary. Next, key terms are defined, including systems thinking and the Cynefin framework, to clarify the approach.

The operations process is defined as the "central command and control activities performed during operations: planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation."⁴ Lawrence, citing Snowden and Boone, stated that the Cynefin Framework is a decision-making or analytical framework.⁵ It recognizes the differences between system types and proposes new approaches in complex social environments. Unlike categorization modeling, where the framework precedes the data, the Cynefin Framework is a sense-making model. The framework emerges from the data. Lawrence, citing Snowden and Boone, describes five domains:

- 1) simple, where cause-and-effect relationships are predictable and repeatable.
- 2) the complicated domain, where cause-and-effect relationships exist, but are not self-evident and therefore require expertise to decipher.
- 3) the complex domain, where cause and effect are only obvious in hindsight, with unpredictable and emergent outcomes.
- 4) the chaotic domain, where no cause-and-effect relationships can be determined.
- 5) disorder, where decision-makers or analysts do not know the domain in which they reside.⁶

A more detailed explanation follows later in the article. Building on this foundation, Mann, Parkins, Issac, and Sherren citing Sweeney and Serman, defined systems thinking as "the ability to represent and assess dynamic complexity."⁷

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To operationalize such thinking, the operational approach broadly describes the mission, operational concepts, tasks, and actions needed to accomplish the mission.⁸ Closely related, a commander's intent is a clear and succinct expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state that supports mission command, provides focus to the staff, and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander's desired results without further orders, even when the operation does not unfold as planned.⁹ With these definitions in mind, the next section discusses why it is important for the commander or director to define leadership, followership, and ethical

expectations upon assuming responsibility for the organization.

Defining Leadership, Followership, and Ethics

Defining effective leadership, followership, and ethics is essential for mission success, as it sets clear expectations and fosters accountability. These definitions create an environment demanding virtuous leaders, as Gong and Zhang highlight the contemporary importance of righteousness.¹⁰ Leaders who clearly state their values and expectations enable open correction, thereby reducing groupthink. For genuine command effectiveness, leaders must promote open dialogue, encourage feedback, and consistently model virtues to sustain accountability and mission accomplishment.

A commander's influence is vital for making ethical followership proactive and routine.

A commander's influence is vital for making ethical followership proactive and routine. Explicit guidance and accountability transform ethical conduct into an expectation, not an option. By recognizing and reinforcing ethical acts through consistent training, leaders establish a clear standard. Clearly communicating that illegal or unethical orders should be challenged ensures subordinates know ethical behavior is essential for mission accomplishment.

Leaders who define what good leadership looks like are more likely to guide their subordinates through ethical dilemmas. This is for the same reasons noted in the previous discussion on followership. Subordinates will act in accordance with the expectations set by their leader. This is similar to Schein's primary embedding mechanism, where people pay attention to what leaders pay attention to. Setting leadership expectations, combined with

a systems-thinking approach that identifies the relationships, connections, and needs of each component, guides subordinates in making ethically sound decisions. They do so because they understand the system's characteristics and behaviors holistically. Defining what good leadership entails and the expectations of all involved guides individuals to act in accordance with the organization's values and beliefs. Leaders must do this upon assuming command or responsibility of an organization. It guides behavior, increases the possibility of an ethical climate and organizational culture, and helps avert occurrences of unethical behavior. Historical failures demonstrate how the absence of virtues can undermine legality and legitimacy. Leaders must model high standards and foster open, ethical dialogue.

The cases of Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Sassman, former commander of 1-8 Battalion, and Colonel Steele, former commander of 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, illustrate why leaders must consistently demonstrate ethical behavior and foster candid, ethical dialogue within their units. In both instances, unethical actions by soldiers, apparently influenced by their units' leadership climate, resulted in the premature end of these commanders' careers. In Lieutenant Colonel Sassman's case, his unit was accused of forcing detainees into the Tigris River, which allegedly led to the drowning death of at least one civilian detainee. It was further alleged that Lieutenant Colonel Sassman encouraged his troops to withhold information in order to reduce their punishment. In Colonel Steele's case, soldiers in his unit were accused of killing unarmed Iraqis during Operation Iron Triangle. These soldiers attributed their actions to unclear rules of engagement and an aggressive command climate created by Colonel Steele. Both commanders served during the Iraq War. Ethics training, reinforced by leaders' example, aligns individual and organizational values. Leaders' commitment to systems thinking and

ethical conduct influences team behavior and fortifies the ethical climate. The ethical triangle supports systems thinking by framing decisions in terms of rules, outcomes, and values, encouraging a multidimensional evaluation.

The Ethical Triangle: Balancing Statutes, Consequences, and Character

Military leaders' decisions have a profound impact on the ethical climate around them. This article argues that, although all three domains of moral decision-making—statutes, consequences, and character—are relevant, a leader's character has the most significant impact on ethical outcomes. To clarify this, an overview of each domain is provided, but the article will focus primarily on virtue ethics. Leaders must weigh when to follow rules and when character-driven judgment is more effective. Gong and Zhang distinguish domains: one focuses on consequences, another on following rules, and the third on character.¹¹ Developing a strong character enables ethical decision-making, and this analysis aims to help leaders navigate dilemmas by emphasizing the importance of virtue.

Kem's triangle disciplines judgment by testing actions across rules (law and ROE policy), virtues (professional character), and consequences (effects on people, mission, legitimacy).¹² Dr. Jack Kem served as chief academic officer, dean of academics, and professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and authored four books and over thirty-five articles on ethics and related topics. As emeritus dean, I draw on his ethical triangle to structure this paper and use virtue ethics to frame character as a habit-shaped disposition for right action under pressure.¹³ Practically, leaders identify non-negotiable constraints (ROE and Law of Armed Conflict[LOAC]), assess immediate and downstream effects, and confirm alignment

with unit virtues and commander's intent.¹⁴ This illustrates how ethical principles shape real-world decisions.

For the deontologist, the act must be done out of duty "regardless of the nonmoral value it produces or may produce."¹⁵ Building on this, virtues bridge motivation and outcomes, emphasizing the importance of continual character development. This focus on growth is significant in ethical theory. To connect theory and practice, it is crucial to establish a practical process for applying the ethical triangle, which this paper will outline.

Leaders must weigh when to follow rules and when character-driven judgment is more effective.

First, identify principles the individual or organization may violate. At this initial stage, it is crucial to understand the complexities of universal or international law that govern ethical conduct. The rule of law is often complex, making the rules of engagement difficult to interpret. The military does not focus heavily on rules of engagement during garrison time before deployment due to limited time and new work-life balance priorities for recruitment and retention. Given these complexities, adopting a systems thinking approach is valuable. Systems thinking clarifies which lawful option distributes risks and benefits best within ROE/LOAC and the commander's intent, rather than suggesting when to violate rules.¹⁶ The triangle's lenses ensure rules, consequences, and virtues are considered together.¹⁷ This approach enables leaders to understand the broader implications of their decisions and more accurately predict future outcomes.

After considering deontological principles, shift to outcomes through consequentialism. Unlike merely seeking the greatest benefit for

all, this approach finds balance when overriding rules. A deontologist asks if a threshold has been reached, providing options, while a utilitarian seeks the greatest good. At the consequential domain, focus on who benefits or loses. Since leaders cannot predict the future, systems thinking and sense-making tools like Cynefin help determine when to apply act- or rule-based consequentialism.

Next, consider situations where an egalitarian approach may be necessary to promote an equitable distribution of outcomes among those affected. This inward focus helps sustain moral balance, underscoring the role of good character in moving within the ethical triangle. Research by Gong and Zhang distinguished the significance of virtues and their relationship to a person's identity and moral integrity, affirming that "the difference between virtues and rules is that the former is a manifestation of an individual's character, where rules are an instrument to reach a goal."¹⁸ This underscores the importance of personal integrity in moral behavior.

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The final domain in this process, and the primary focus of this article, is the virtuous domain. This domain focuses on aligning personal character with organizational values, making individual conduct a central component of ethical leadership. Character here is developed through continuous training, ensuring values are ingrained and sustained. In the virtue domain, selecting someone who consistently demonstrates ethical actions is essential; this moral individual serves as a visible guide for ethical decision-making. The right guide must

be widely recognized for moral integrity and for embodying objectivist values—such as respect for universal moral laws like 'do not harm innocents' or 'do not steal.' Virtue ethics is grounded in professional traits—integrity, honesty, and benevolence—that underpin conduct under stress.¹⁹ Because stress can undermine ethical performance even when dilemmas are clear, leaders should cultivate resilience and use structured reviews.²⁰ After-action reviews and leader modeling add the consistency that stabilizes decision-making in high-pressure situations.²¹

Personally, I look to Jesus Christ or Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) as moral examples. When questioned about MLK's personal flaws, I respond that leadership is complex—no one is perfect. What matters for our purposes is his lasting, positive impact on society. Leaders must recognize that moral fallibility is human, as Louden notes: "Every human being is morally fallible, for there is a little Oedipus in each of us."²² Aristotle emphasized that everyone is capable of making mistakes. This perspective enables leaders to focus on taking ethical actions and fostering ongoing growth.

The central recommendation is for leaders to systematically apply the ethical triangle and systems thinking by aligning decisions with recognized moral role models. This approach involves assessing dilemmas, acting, reviewing outcomes, and adjusting as needed through ongoing ethics training. Consistent application ensures adaptability and ongoing development of ethical leadership.

To address these ethical challenges, the Cynefin framework is instrumental in identifying ethical dilemmas, thereby facilitating virtuous acts that address these issues. It becomes evident that understanding the complex environment is crucial. This understanding enables leaders to determine the optimal level of effort and resources to commit, thereby transforming opportunities into standard operating procedures

—a critical step for addressing potential issues the unit may encounter in the future. To further assist commanders, the use of communities of practice and experts within the complicated domain, as noted by Snowden and Boone, is essential.²³ The U.S. Army is considered the best Army in the world because it prioritizes providing realistic training to its personnel. As such, leaders must consistently provide scenario-based training. This training is crucial as it enables soldiers to understand the second- and third-order effects of their decisions, thereby enhancing their ability to make ethical decisions. Once again, backcasting or scenario planning, products used within systems thinking, can provide a reassuring structure for addressing ethical concerns and expanding ethical options through moral reasoning. Training in ethics and systems theory/thinking should begin early in a leader’s career. Scenario-based training fosters a virtuous approach by giving subordinates an opportunity to consider the outcomes of their decisions, thereby increasing their likelihood of creating the greatest good for the greatest number.

These two areas are crucial when discussing virtues and the decision-making process. As mentioned earlier, it is challenging to determine what you will encounter in the future. To address this, scenario planning and back casting provide decision-makers with a structured approach to review actions and assess options. By using these tools, decision-makers can adopt a virtuous approach and make the most moral choice. Furthermore, the method offers reassurance and guidance in uncertain environments. However, it is essential to acknowledge that techniques effective today may not be effective tomorrow, as illustrated by chaos theory and the butterfly effect. As Gharajedaghi cited from Einstein, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”²⁴ In this context, chaos theory and the butterfly effect highlight how small changes in our environment

can alter outcomes, leading to significant problems later. Therefore, to seek the greatest good, continuous training in consequentialism and understanding the system remain important. This ongoing process ensures decision-makers feel reassured and guided.

Leaders bear significant responsibility in applying systems thinking and theory. In particular, their role is crucial in recognizing how components interact and influence one another, which enables them to identify behaviors that reflect virtue. When leaders understand these links—a skill often built in design thinking—they are better equipped to select the most ethical option. For example, design thinkers can “create feasible wholes from infeasible parts.”²⁵ Building on this, they can “identify new sets of alternatives and objectives, looking for more desirable possibilities in the future” and determine who will benefit.²⁶

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Similar principles guide commanders in their operational planning. Similar to backcasting and scenario planning in systems thinking, commanders begin at the endpoint and work backward. They identify decision points or areas needing ethical consideration. Dialogue and rehearsals set the unit up for success. These actions maximize the likelihood of making moral decisions with consequential outcomes. Commanders must be clear and concise in their intent but flexible in the operational approach.

Modeling Ethical Behavior

Unit commanders play a central role in promoting ethics by leading through example and connecting actions to clear ethical outcomes.

Despite time constraints, providing context helps soldiers see the larger mission, fostering shared understanding and successful mission command. By applying systems thinking, commanders show how ethical choices yield lasting positive effects. Openly evaluating the impacts of decisions sets ethical norms, encouraging ethical behavior throughout the organization.

Critical analysis equips soldiers to make informed, ethical choices by assessing consequences.

Commanders must prioritize critical thinking, with systems thinking as an effective framework. Critical analysis equips soldiers to make informed, ethical choices by assessing consequences. This practice supports both immediate actions and long-term outcomes. Leaders who apply and demonstrate a clear ethical decision-making framework show subordinates how to approach complex dilemmas common in our field. Encouraging soldiers to consider the broader impacts of their actions helps them select outcomes that are widely recognized as ethical. Modeling these behaviors promotes ongoing development; leaders willing to admit and learn from errors, especially during AARs, empower their teams to do the same. Modeling ethical behavior promotes continuous improvement, which is directly related to a systems thinking approach, as experimentation coupled with single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop learning is required. Leaders modeling ethical behavior create a climate conducive to ethical decision-making and reinforce the use of all three domains of the ethical triangle to make more holistic, ethically aligned decisions. This approach offers a valuable lesson for both military and civilian organizations, fostering organizational improvement.

Systems thinking fosters effective adaptation in complex environments. Leaders committed

to ethical conduct inspire teams, showing every action affects the system's health. Army culture may resist critical thinking, relying instead on intuition at lower levels. Leaders who acknowledge their imperfections strengthen ethical standards and demonstrate ethical decision-making, moving away from purely intuitive choices.

Intuitive judgment is key to Army operations, but can affect structured processes such as the Military Decision-making Process (MDMP) and the Army Design Methodology (ADM). Gharajedaghi says linear systems are the sum of their parts, but nonlinear outcomes come from interactions.²⁷ These methods work in that environment. MDMP is a planning guide, while ADM uses creative thinking for unique problems. Both need sound judgment. Commanders show judgment, confidence, and adaptability under pressure, supported by these processes. Open team dialogue helps blend intuition and structure to solve complex challenges.

Leaders must provide an organizational climate that is conducive to learning, collaboration, and open communication, allowing subordinates to discuss possible scenarios and anticipate future actions or situations in which they will need to adapt. In this situation, leaders should focus on the behaviors of adaptive leaders who understand that their role is not to solve problems, but to ensure their subordinates have the necessary tools and resources to solve complex problems. In systems thinking, scenario planning is a powerful tool for providing visualization of where an adjustment or potential decision needs to be made, allowing everyone time to reflect and create alternatives. By adhering to the systems thinking or theory approach, everyone will gain an understanding of how the components are interconnected, which enables them to make decisions based on careful analysis and consideration of all relevant factors.

The utility of the systems thinking approach lies in its holistic view of the system, ensuring that all relevant perspectives, such as political, social, and environmental, are considered. One of the problems with using the ethical triangle as a framework is that the military may default to the deontological portion of the framework and neglect the consequentialism and virtues domains due to the high stakes associated with violating rules and laws. In systems thinking, a holistic approach analyzes how each component is interconnected with others, including actions and relationships, which results in a more ethical decision because all perspectives are considered. Similarly, it is essential to maximize the use of the ethical triangle by using all three domains (virtues, deontology, and consequentialism) and working inward to ensure that all domains are balanced before deciding. In other words, for the ethical triangle to be effective, all three domains must be considered in a similar manner to systems thinking, where an understanding of all components and how inputs to one component result in either a balance or reinforcing output on another component. This necessitates a discussion on all three domains of the ethical triangle and how to properly use the framework.

As mentioned earlier, systems thinking helps identify situations that require adaptation by prompting individuals to consider how solutions will affect the entire system. This likely leads to decisions that benefit all parties. Moreover, by adopting this approach, leaders and subordinates can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities in uncertain and chaotic environments. This understanding, in turn, enables them to make more informed and ethical decisions by using all three domains of the ethical triangle. In complex conditions, Cynefin's probe, sense, respond posture, together with systems thinking's focus on interdependencies, keeps attention on emergent effects.²⁸ Furthermore, the triangle ensures that those effects are weighed alongside legal

boundaries and professional character, producing choices that are both legitimate and durable.²⁹ To apply these principles in practice, units use short vignettes to identify value conflicts. They then conduct ethics-aware AARs to capture impacts and adjust Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Through this cycle, intent is translated into decisions that follow rules while staying aware of consequences and character.³⁰

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How to Operationalize Ethics Training

Additionally, scenario-based training enables the unit to target the mission's objectives, ensuring a virtuous approach is attainable. Ongoing training is essential for reinforcing consistent ethical behavior. I recommend taking the following steps to implement ethical training at the organizational level.

- 1) Leaders can introduce right-versus-right ethical dilemmas using vignettes that connect desired ethical outcomes to current or anticipated ethical challenges focused on rules, virtues, and consequences.³¹
- 2) Leaders can conduct ethics-focused AARs that evaluate actions taken, implications, and next steps. They should examine second- and third-order effects of decisions and align findings with the SOP to assess whether changes are needed for ethical outcomes.³²
- 3) Leaders should actively encourage dissent and questions, designating individuals

beforehand to serve as devil's advocates. This approach tests decisions, fosters disagreement with leadership when needed, and aims to increase engagement, psychological safety, and learning.³³

- 4) Leaders can demonstrate scenarios involving themselves based on rules, virtues, or consequences, and explain their chosen course of action to illustrate their ethical perspectives. They can also link these viewpoints to the commander's intent, including purpose, key tasks, and end state.³⁴

Success depends on a clear, concise commander's intent as the foundation for a virtuous approach. Commanders who clearly articulate the situation foster a shared understanding and establish clear limits. This guidance allows subordinate leaders to achieve desired outcomes and apply ethical frameworks. A well-defined commander's intent empowers leaders, applies sound judgment, and complements rules of engagement to promote decisive and ethical decision-making.

Success depends on a clear, concise commander's intent as the foundation for a virtuous approach.

Limitations and Implementation

Transforming the values and beliefs within an organization to better include its members requires a concerted effort in reculturing, which Fullan described as moving beyond a limited focus on assessment and pedagogy.³⁵ Instead, organizations should prioritize and improve these elements routinely.³⁶ Modifying an individual's beliefs also takes substantial effort. Ongoing training is not only beneficial, but crucial for providing consistent responses in similar situations. Gong and Zhang suggested

that if someone behaves a certain way in one context, similar behavior can be expected in related contexts.³⁷ For example, a courageous individual's past actions reflect bravery; future behavior will likely align with that—just as a righteous person will act righteously, and a benevolent person will act kindly.³⁸ This underscores the importance of continuous training and development. Although this requires time and effort, it is achievable and can lead to positive change.

The literature highlights that changing an organization's culture is a lengthy endeavor. Building on the need for continuous training and development, Fullan defines transformational change as an iterative, ongoing process that can take several years. Successful examples include Microsoft under Satya Nadella, which shifted from certainty to learning within four years, and IBM under Lou Gerstner, which was restructured for long-term viability. In these cases, feedback was critical for addressing individual concerns, understanding resistance, and identifying necessary changes in values and beliefs. These examples demonstrate that cultural transformation, though challenging, is possible over time. The key lesson is that patience, feedback, and leadership are crucial for sustained cultural change.

However, reculturing is more challenging in larger organizations. To address this, open dialogue is needed with each individual. Providing evidence and feedback explains why changes in values and beliefs are needed. This process is similar to assessing organizational climate. Proper assessment engages individuals to understand their feelings about the organization. The challenge is that individual perceptions can fluctuate. This requires ongoing evaluation. Similarly, continuous training helps shape an individual's character to match the organization's values. Self-identity and moral identity develop through experience and moral inclinations.³⁹ Thus, realistic training, especially

in scenario-based exercises, becomes vital. Ultimately, tailoring communication and training to individual needs, as well as assessing ongoing perceptions, are essential for success.

Conclusion

Systems thinking and sense-making tools, such as the Cynefin framework, can assist commanders and subordinates in understanding the entire system, ensuring they are aware of the second- and third-order effects of their decisions, which maximizes the potential results for the most ethical decision. Thus, the ethical triangle complements systems thinking when it comes to making ethical decisions, as the leader will view all domains of the triangle, including laws, consequences, and virtues, much like systems thinking requires an understanding of how components interact and relate to each other, resulting in a more holistic outlook.

To support this argument, commanders need to translate ethical foundations into clear actions. Leaders should create shared understanding by describing the operational environment, identifying the current and desired end states, and clarifying operational approaches. This clarity enables adaptability and allows for the establishment of clear right and left limits through a commander's intent, which in turn supports virtuous and ethical decisions. Personally delivering this intent reinforces mission command and ethical standards.

Leaders reinforce the main argument by providing resources and fostering an organizational climate rooted in collaboration, trust, and open communication. This approach, consistent with adaptive leadership, facilitates the collective understanding necessary for ethical decision-making throughout the organization. Integrating all domains of the ethical triangle is essential for making balanced ethical decisions. Leaders must model ethical reasoning and behavior to embed these practices in the organization, supporting the argument that this model encourages a culture of ethical alignment through consistent training and role modeling. Applying the ethical triangle begins by focusing on principles and potential rule violations, then on consequences, and finally on virtues like empathy and the Golden Rule. This virtuous approach directly operationalizes the argument that combining frameworks results in sound ethical decisions. **IAJ**

Notes

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