

# Enhancing *Ethical Decision-Making*

**by Joseph Dwayne Blanding**

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As leaders, your decisions have significant impacts. The Army emphasizes the ethical triangle, but leaders may prioritize rules and law over efficiency. I recommend adopting a multifaceted ethics approach that goes beyond strict rule-following. Should senior officials strive for clearer rules of engagement to minimize ambiguity or allow flexibility for commanders' ethical judgment? How will you advocate for the right balance to ensure ethical decisions and mission success?

Army ethics training currently overemphasizes strict rule-following (deontological ethics) and integrates consequentialist and virtue ethics only to a limited extent—creating a shortfall. To address this, the Army should implement ongoing ethics training, foster role modeling by senior leaders, adopt flexible rules of engagement, and use scenario-based exercises to simulate ethical dilemmas. These steps will help leaders adapt ethically in complex, changing operational environments and ensure commanders can make morally sound decisions by navigating laws, rules, values, and consequences, rather than relying solely on rules. This article, one of three on ethical frameworks, clarifies consequentialist ethics for organizational commanders and leaders. Focusing solely on the consequential domain, I cover its importance, benefits, limitations, and key distinctions, and conclude with actionable recommendations for leaders, particularly in military settings.

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Improving ethical decision-making in the Army fundamentally depends on building leaders who are both adaptable and ethically grounded. Robust ethics training, visible role modeling, and flexible rules of engagement are crucial. Applying systems thinking and sense-making tools helps commanders and subordinates understand the broader impact of their decisions, directly supporting ethical adaptability—the core requirement for effective mission command in complex and unpredictable contexts.

Operationalizing this argument requires using a structured approach—taught through Professional Military Education (PME)—to developing commander’s intent so that intent defines ethical boundaries. Structured to include ethical boundaries, commander’s intent would help subordinates make ethical decisions and guide ethical decision-making by establishing permissible actions and rules of engagement. Commanders who clearly communicate their intent ensure respect for the local populace, maintain discipline, and enable precise targeting that minimizes civilian harm.

Clear intent also allows commanders to explain legal and ethical considerations, resolving potential misunderstandings before operations begin. It sets a standard for adaptability and trust, guiding actions amid uncertainty. Combined with consistent delivery and after-action review (AAR), this framework reinforces ethical standards, clarifies desired outcomes, and strengthens decision-making by highlighting what constitutes ethical success. Regular AARs and diverse scenario planning further develop adaptability and ethical competence, underscoring the essential role of ethical expertise in effective leadership.

To extend the discussion on ethical development, regular ethics training is a core component of the military’s daily operations. Karapetyan underscored this need, arguing that ethical education is needed to cultivate soldiers and leaders of character, as well as to address the

organizational culture that often puts soldiers in moral dilemmas.<sup>1</sup> She outlined two approaches to ethics training: a gradual, osmosis-like influence and direct, explicit teaching. Both support the argument that ongoing ethical training is necessary to establish a robust moral foundation, underscoring its critical role in shaping an ethical military force.

The lack of ethical triangle instruction in unit training and limited exposure to PME highlights a clear gap. Drawing on over 32 years of service, I only encountered the ethical triangle as a professor in 2021 and never saw it emphasized at the unit level. This underscores the need for ongoing ethical development: soldiers’ morals are shaped by subjectivism, cultural relativism, and objectivism—personal, group, or universal standards refined by experience. Culture and religion influence these views,

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leading to differing attitudes about right and wrong. Yet, most children learn from family and community that acts like stealing, killing, and lying are wrong. Therefore, ongoing modeling and discussion of ethics is essential to shape a strong moral compass.

Given these frameworks, leaders foster ethical growth by applying emotional intelligence to understand and influence themselves and their teams. Because emotional intelligence shapes ethical decisions, leaders must reflect on their beliefs and assumptions, including whether good people can err in certain contexts. Where do they rank on McGregor’s Theory X–Theory Y scale? These beliefs directly influence a group’s moral standards. Goldman, citing McGregor,

defined Theory X as such: “People are naturally unmotivated to work tend to avoid it unless compelled. As a result, they must be coerced, controlled, directed, and threatened with punishment to work toward goals. Most people reportedly prefer this treatment, as it allows them to do only what is explicitly required and avoid additional responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> He continued by defining Theory Y, declaring that, “Work is natural for people if it is satisfying, so they will show self-control and direct themselves toward goals they care about. Commitment comes from satisfaction and rewards, with the most powerful being the sense of progress toward self-fulfillment. Theory Y suggests that people will seek and accept responsibility because it is satisfying, and avoiding work is learned, rather than natural.”<sup>3</sup>

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Together, these theories show that ethical reasoning is complex and context-dependent, yet current Army training in moral reasoning does not address this complexity. The prevailing assumption—that individuals will automatically uphold Army values without explicit guidance—creates a significant gap. While the Army uses the ethical triangle in decision-making, official doctrine centered on leadership and ethics, such as Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, only briefly addresses ethical reasoning. Of its three short paragraphs on the subject, just one references the triangle’s domains without naming it. ADP 6-22[ii] therefore offers limited instruction for leaders’ ethical responsibilities in daily activities. As Kenny, Lincoln, and Balandin noted, ethical reasoning is a “reflective process that involves the exploration and analysis of moral issues and problems in daily life.”<sup>4</sup> To

improve ethical outcomes, the Army needs both robust guidance and stronger ethical role models. Clearer guidance and role modeling are needed for consistent results.

Modeling ethical behavior is essential for building and sustaining the Army’s ethical climate. Leaders at every level have a direct responsibility to set this example. Saleem-Tanner noted that commanders must actively create environments that support ethical conduct, citing Greenleaf’s view that leaders are responsible for enabling followers to act ethically.<sup>5</sup> This highlights the central role leaders play in shaping ethical standards within the Army. Additionally, Karapetyan asserts that ethical decision-making can be developed.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, leaders must intentionally model ethical behavior and use tools like the ethical triangle to guide their units through dilemmas and reinforce Army values.

The Army maintains that leaders must act deliberately and remain informed when making ethical decisions, emphasizing a systematic, explicit approach. Ethical choices may involve clear rights and wrongs or competing values.<sup>7</sup> Both Kem and Army doctrine stress evaluating virtues, codified rules, and outcomes to ensure the greatest benefit. Kem’s four ethical dilemmas highlight the need for a clear framework, such as the ethical triangle, to guide leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Kem’s ethical triangle shows why a clear ethical framework is vital for Army leaders. The three parts—rules, virtues, and consequences—link to three core ethical approaches. Each gives a unique viewpoint, but complex outcomes mean leaders must think in systems to spot broader effects. The Army’s use of the ethical triangle, both for following rules and thinking through dilemmas, demonstrates that this model directly supports leaders’ decisions.

Fleming, Chow, and Su simplified ethical reasoning into two capacities: prescriptive and deliberative.<sup>9</sup> Prescriptive reasoning, which involves identifying the ideal solution, sets the standard for ethical conduct. Deliberative

reasoning, on the other hand, is the process of forming the intent to act on these standards. The ethical triangle—a framework that integrates principles, consequences, and virtues—helps commanders identify, assess, and motivate action on ethical issues; this includes developing moral sensitivity (recognizing ethical issues), moral judgment (deciding what is right), and moral motivation (having the drive to act ethically). Fleming et al., referencing Rest (1979), further detailed four essential steps in this process, supporting the need for systematic ethical decision-making in leadership.<sup>10</sup>

Building on these ideas, the Army also regards the ethical triangle as a valuable framework for helping commanders navigate ethical dilemmas. Kem provides a comparable structure for ethical decision-making using the ethical triangle.<sup>11</sup> He proposed the following:

- 1) Define the problem (ethical dilemma) in terms of right versus right.
- 2) Consider alternative courses of action or action choices.
- 3) Test the courses of action against the “ethical triangle.”
- 4) Principles-based ethics
- 5) Consequences-based ethics
- 6) Virtues-based ethics
- 7) Consider additional alternative courses of action (such as “win-win” possibilities or no decision).
- 8) Choose the course of action or action choice.
- 9) Implement the course of action.

It is noteworthy that Kem emphasized working inward, using all three domains to reach an ethical conclusion, further connecting his structure to the overall ethical triangle

framework.

The ethical triangle provides a balanced approach to ethical decision-making; however, its effectiveness in military contexts is limited by the realities of military culture, accountability demands, and stringent legal frameworks. Although ethics, as described by Kenny, Lincoln, and Balandi and Karapetyan aim to guide conduct and prevent failures, these ideals often conflict with operational complexities.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, I contend that while ethics are vital, military environments inherently restrict the consistent and practical application of the ethical triangle.

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My confidence in the ethical triangle’s utility stems from more than 32 years of service in the U.S. Army. The central argument of this article is that while I recognize the value of the ethical triangle, the Army’s culture often conflicts with its use, emphasizing rigid adherence to rules of engagement (ROE) over ethical discretion. The ROE are directives regulating combat actions which, while guiding conduct, restrict broader ethical frameworks.<sup>13</sup> I will analyze this tension between ethical ideals and institutional practices. My introduction to the ethical triangle came at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 2021, a change from my 2006-2007 student experience, which shows the Army’s evolution in ethical thinking. These experiences shape my critical perspective on ethics in military service.

In my scholarly work, I emphasize that leaders should weigh all three domains of the ethical triangle—deontological, consequentialist, and virtue-based—when making decisions. I argue, however, that in practice, military

culture and accountability constraints push leaders toward a deontological approach, thereby limiting the comprehensive application of the triangle. While the Army advocates for balance among ethical frameworks, the structural and cultural realities of the organization make this a challenging endeavor. I contend that these constraints underscore the urgent need to reconsider whether the military's reliance on the ethical triangle is viable, given that resistance to change, heightened accountability, and legal pressures significantly restrict leaders' ability to apply it fully.

The U.S. Army's culture is deeply rooted in history and tradition. For this article, culture is simply defined as "how we do business around here." Donnithorne, citing Schein, defined culture as, "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."<sup>14</sup>

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Army culture supports independent, critical thinking in theory. In practice, its traditions, strict rules, focus on masculinity, and respect for hierarchy create a gap between ideals and reality. This makes ethical reasoning stressful inside the system and shows that military culture constrains ethical judgment.

The Army is among the most stressful careers in the world. Bohse highlighted this in his study on military culture and mental health. Bohse, citing Statistica, affirmed that, "Serving in the military is considered one of the most stressful jobs, with a job stress score of 72.47

(based on a 0–100 scale). The second, third, and fourth most stressful jobs were firefighter (stress score: 72.43), airline pilot (stress score: 61.07), and police officer (stress score: 51.97), respectively."<sup>15</sup>

In the military, based on Hofstede's dimensions, soldiers are discouraged from showing weakness or seeking help to maintain a masculine identity. The military is a culture deeply rooted in masculinity, as noted by Ott in her dissertation on the subject. She identified military culture as favoring characteristics typically associated with "masculine personality traits as opposed to feminine personality traits."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the military perpetuates a masculinity contest culture. Ott, citing Reit, defined masculinity contest culture as "a representation of idealized norms of masculinity which privilege the tough, stoic, warrior who is capable and willing to employ violence to achieve whatever ends into which he may be ordered."<sup>17</sup> Traits such as domineering and assertiveness come to mind. I say this based on Ott's revelation of four norms that constitute a masculine culture. These norms are: "1) show no weakness; 2) strength and stamina; 3) put work first; and 4) dog-eat-dog."<sup>18</sup>

By graduation from Boot Camp, injuries or illness are seen as personal weaknesses. Military organizations instill in their members the belief that prioritizing personal needs over the group's mission is not only inappropriate but also dishonorable.<sup>19</sup> This discussion is important because it highlights how military culture restricts the ability of leaders and commanders to prioritize their own values, beliefs, and needs in the interest of the group. Strict structure and tradition make it hard to use comprehensive judgment, as recommended by the ethical triangle. The pressure of military operations often forces leaders to rely on rules and laws. This is a deontological outlook and supports the main argument that culture shapes the limits of ethical reasoning.

Under stress, the military operates as a bureaucratic system with a rigid structure. It obeys rules, regulations, and orders from the chain of command. Soldiers, whether through basic training or officer preparation, learn to follow these directives. The impact of not following orders is significant. Furthermore, success in exercises and operations directly leads to promotions. This connection is a powerful motivator, as highlighted by Bohse. In addition to these pressures, the challenges of military life are further compounded by the stigma associated with seeking assistance. For example, the *Orlando Sentinel* reported in 2002 on the stigma related to seeking assistance:

Army investigators said Thursday that a military culture discouraging early intervention contributed to five recent killings involving couples at Fort Bragg. They noted that while existing marital problems and stress from duty-related separations are likely factors, earlier help could have prevented the tragedy. Col. Dave Orman, a psychiatrist who led the 19-member investigative team, emphasized the need for soldiers and families to feel supported in seeking assistance for domestic issues.<sup>20</sup>

Seeking assistance is often stigmatized in the military. Bohse revealed, citing Shay stating that, “Speaking of psychological problems or seeking help is strongly discouraged among soldiers as it not only portrays weakness, but it can result in adverse actions such as loss of military clearance, inability to operate firearms, and even an administrative separation.”<sup>21</sup> Reinforcing the demands of military life and culture, Yamaguchi stated that:

Regardless of the branch of service, all recruits are required to adopt a structured lifestyle upon entering Boot Camp. The common military core values, such as honor, courage, selfless service, and devotion to

duty, are instilled throughout initial training. As I spent years in the Marine Corps, I have personally witnessed and experienced this very distinct and unique culture. A common expression in the Marine Corps is “Pain is a weakness leaving the body” (Brown, 2010, p. 28), and most recruits, through intensive training, eventually come to believe that tolerating pain is highly valued (Brown, 2010).<sup>22</sup>

By the time these recruits graduate from Boot Camp, the core values of military organizations are so deeply ingrained in the minds of service members that they feel it is appropriate and even an honor to prioritize the needs of larger groups over their own.<sup>23</sup>

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Soldiers learn to obey directives in basic training or officer preparation. The consequences of disobedience are significant. As stated, promotions link directly to successful exercises and operations. This connection is a strong motivator, as Bohse’s declaration highlighted, “During their service contract, soldiers must always be prepared for field exercises, annual training, and deployment. They also undergo regular military inspections and other assessments for combat readiness (Chapman et al., 2012). The outcomes of these activities also determine whether a soldier advances in their career. Poor performance or lack of competency can risk administrative separation (Taub, 2014).”<sup>24</sup>

The stress of high expectations and the risk of removal make command roles difficult. Heightened accountability discourages future commanders from taking similar actions, impacting the command accession process.

Beynon reported, “More than half of the Army’s senior officers are turning down opportunities to command. Instead, they choose the stability of staff roles over the high-stakes demands of leadership or retire, according to internal service data” (para. 1).<sup>25</sup> This underscores how demands for accountability strongly influence officer decisions about leadership roles.

Commanders are held accountable for their actions and inactions, which is essential for effective military leadership. Karapetyan emphasized that accountability is critical to maintaining standards of conduct; without it, trust may decline, power might be misused, and operational effectiveness could suffer.<sup>26</sup> According to Karapetyan, transparency not only fulfills a requirement but also supports public trust and the institution’s integrity. This foundation of accountability shapes the environment and expectations for military leaders.

**The primary challenge for commanders is striking a balance between regulations and moral judgment.**

This strong emphasis on accountability contributes to a persistent investigative culture within the military. Some view this as necessary for maintaining standards. However, it can discourage critical and creative assessment of leaders’ values and beliefs. High-profile cases, such as the removals of Major General George W. Weightman, Major General Kenneth Kamper and several officers, after the Fort Hood incident, show the severe consequences of leadership failures. The steady trend of commander removals highlights the tension between rule-bound accountability and the need for leadership flexibility.

The primary challenge for commanders is striking a balance between regulations and

moral judgment. Some leaders, such as Navy Captain Brett Crozier and Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller, have been removed for acting on conviction instead of compliance. Historical cases, including those involving General MacArthur and General Billy Mitchell, also demonstrate that prioritizing moral principles can have professional and legal consequences. This tension often leads commanders to favor compliance. As a result, leadership becomes riskier, and bold ethical actions are inhibited. This dynamic is at the heart of military leadership today.

Army Regulation (AR) 600-20 guides commanders at all levels in performing their duties. Rules and laws are codified in doctrine, treaties, and laws to hold commanders and leaders accountable. For example, AR 600-20 states commanders must, “guard against and suppress all dissolute and immoral practices, and to correct, according to the laws and regulations of the Army, all persons who are guilty of them and take all necessary and proper measures, under the laws, regulations, and customs of the Army, to promote and safeguard the morale, the physical well-being, and the general welfare of the officers and enlisted persons under their command or charge.”<sup>27</sup>

Karapetyan recognized the military justice system as key for “enforcing accountability of leaders.” She stated leaders are “accountable for their conduct and for the performance of their unit or team,” emphasizing their responsibilities.<sup>28</sup> The military justice system investigates conduct breaches, ensuring responsible parties face consequences.

Karapetyan noted that both internal and external accountability exist, with internal accountability through court-martial and military justice, and external accountability through bodies such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and human rights organizations. Penalties for violating these laws are substantial. Military commanders

face stark consequences—including demotion, financial loss, and professional setbacks—when their moral judgment clashes with established directives, as illustrated by General MacArthur, General Billy Mitchell, and Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller.

Consequentialism provides a practical framework for military ethical decision-making, prioritizing outcomes as the primary measure of morality. Some theorists, such as Xu and Ma, argued that deontological rules can cause moral shortcuts that overlook broader impacts.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, strict accountability and institutional culture limit commanders' ability to use outcome-based reasoning. Commanders must weigh competing pressures and consider consequences for all stakeholders. This tension between outcome-oriented morality and organizational constraints underscores the complexity of applying consequential ethics.

Building on these complexities, accountability pressures directly influence decisions in combat operations. This connection is evident in the application of rules of engagement, which may prohibit commanders from targeting protected sites, such as mosques or hospitals. As noted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the law protects all civilian and military hospitals, as well as religious centers.<sup>30</sup>

In these circumstances, commanders cannot justify breaking these rules, even if doing so might seem justifiably consequential in order to end the conflict sooner. While such decisions are urgent and consequential, leaders are deterred by the high risk and accountability pressures. To navigate these challenges, an overview of the ethical triangle, specifically consequentialism, is provided, along with recommendations for its effective application in military ethical reasoning.

## The Ethical Triangle (Consequentialist-Focused)

### *Consequentialism*

Due to globalization and technological advances, the world is more interconnected and uncertain than it was in the past, such as during the 1920s or 1930s. The environment has become increasingly complex and dynamic due to scientific and technological advancements. For this reason, the military must provide comprehensive ethical training and model the desired behavior. It must also allow flexibility in the rules of engagement to achieve battlefield success. The ethical triangle is the framework chosen by the U.S. Army for ethical reasoning. Consequentialism plays a key role in policy and means apportionment.

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Consequentialism, a logical approach to military ethics, is especially relevant to policy and resource distribution. Xu and Ma stated, “ethical utilitarianism adherents were more sensitive to distributive justice issues.”<sup>31</sup> This highlights fairness in outcomes. Jamieson and Elliott defined consequentialism as a “family of theories that holds that acts are morally right, wrong, or indifferent in virtue of their consequences.” Right acts “produce good consequences”<sup>32</sup> Freeman said, “the right act in any circumstance is one most conducive to the best overall outcome”<sup>33</sup> Enck, Pauchnik, and Perry added that a “person’s action is morally right if it creates the best outcome for the greatest number and is morally wrong if it does not.”<sup>34</sup> Utilitarianism, a type of consequentialism, focuses on outcomes.

Utilitarianism has two key areas: act and rule utilitarianism. Hooker and Derek Parfit are two major figures in this field. Hooker defined rule consequentialism as aligning an act with rules whose acceptance leads to the best impartial consequences.<sup>35</sup> Parfit said act consequentialism means “What each of us ought to do is whatever would make the outcome best.”<sup>36</sup> These definitions, rooted in scholarship, invite deeper thought on consequentialism.

According to Hooker, act-consequentialism holds that moral rightness is determined solely by whether an act would promote value. Rule-consequentialism says rightness is determined by whether the “general acceptance of rules allowing that act would promote value.”<sup>37</sup> These theories are not only abstract ideas. They affect every day moral decisions. When considering utility or happiness, there are two views: egalitarianism and theological ethics. Freeman recorded, “Teleological view affirms the consequentialist thesis that the Right maximizes the good... But they hold an additional thesis defining good independently from the Right or separately of any moral concepts or principles.”<sup>38</sup> He stated that egalitarian acts are “right, not because they maximize the good, but because

environment but also ensures sound moral reasoning. As a foundation, Lawrence, quoting Snowden and Boone, defined the Cynefin framework as a decision-making or analytical tool.<sup>40</sup> Specifically, it recognizes the causal differences between system types and proposes new approaches to “decision-making in complex social environments.”<sup>41</sup> Building on this, Lawrence, citing Snowden, explained that the Cynefin framework consists of five domains. He provided a concise description of these domains, declaring that:

There are five domains: 1) the simple domain, where cause-and-effect relationships exist, are predictable, and are 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; and 5) disorder, where decision-makers or analysts do not know the domain in which they reside.<sup>42</sup>

The Cynefin framework equips you with the tools to understand and navigate complex environments, instilling confidence in your decision-making. Emergent practices, as informed by reviews conducted in hindsight, will assist decision-makers in adopting a consequentialist ethical approach to determining the best options for achieving the greatest good.

The Cynefin framework provides leaders with a clear, structured approach to navigating uncertainty and ethically allocating resources. By relying on recommendations from the community of practice, leaders can determine when to invest further in emerging practices. Experts help refine these practices into best practices. This process, coupled with scenario planning and backcasting, reduces anxiety and

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they are required by an egalitarian decision procedure that requires giving equal weight to everyone’s interests. Equal consideration, not maximum utility, is the ‘fundamental goal’ of these egalitarian, utilitarian theories.”<sup>39</sup>

In addressing an uncertain environment, it is important to combine a systems thinking approach with the Cynefin framework. This combination not only helps make sense of the

provides decision-makers with structured tools to pursue the greatest good—a central, yet challenging, tenet of consequentialism.

While Cynefin and systems thinking prepare organizations for unpredictable settings, these benefits require deliberate training. Developing mastery is challenging because methods must continually evolve; problems change and require new thinking, as noted by Gharajedaghi.<sup>43</sup> Ongoing training in consequentialism and systems approaches is key, enabling ethical and effective decisions in dynamic environments.

Building on the importance of ongoing training and new thinking, leaders have a crucial role in applying systems thinking. This enables them to see how components interconnect and to allocate resources for the greatest good. By employing design thinking, decision-makers can more effectively identify ethical options and innovative alternatives, as noted by Gharajedaghi.<sup>44</sup> Although predicting the future is challenging, especially in the face of rapid change, military education should emphasize consequentialism to prepare leaders for mission success.

In this context, even though all Department of War personnel receive annual ethics training, unit-level training in consequentialism complements these efforts. A clear understanding of consequentialism enables commanders to make decisions that promote the greatest good, thereby reinforcing mission command—the Army’s approach to empowering decentralized, context-driven decision-making.<sup>45</sup> Cynefin and similar sense-making frameworks underpin this ethical and leadership approach.

Taken together, these frameworks and training approaches reinforce one another. The Cynefin framework enables leaders to understand complex environments and allocate resources effectively. Relying on communities of practice and experts is essential. Continual scenario-based training, a priority for the Army, helps soldiers see the impact of their

decisions and strengthens ethical reasoning. Early consistent ethics and systems thinking training, with leaders modeling behavior, can help ensure ethical outcomes. Next, I provide recommendations for organizational leaders and subordinates regarding ethics.

## Recommendations

Unit commanders must set the ethical standard by modeling behavior and connecting actions to outcomes, a core principle of consequentialism that aims to maximize overall good. While providing rationale enhances mission command, time constraints can make this difficult. Still, when soldiers see the broader purpose, they are more equipped for operational success. Commanders should emphasize critical and systems thinking, helping subordinates

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make informed decisions and anticipate long-term effects through consequentialist analysis. However, the Army’s reliance on intuition at lower levels can hinder this shift, limiting the effective application of frameworks such as Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP) and Army Design Methodology (ADM). Linear systems summarize parts, whereas nonlinear systems reflect complex interactions.<sup>46</sup> The MDMP supports iterative planning, while ADM fosters creative problem-solving.<sup>47</sup> Despite time pressures, direct-level commanders must use judgment to develop subordinates amid operational complexity.

To reinforce ethical decision-making, commanders should model and dedicate time specifically to consequentialism training. This training must strike a balance between

consequentialism and deontology, as these frameworks sometimes conflict or converge. Soldiers should learn to distinguish and apply each approach, directly aligning ethical theory with their foundational values. Practical exercises should demonstrate how these ethical frameworks are applied in day-to-day decisions, thereby connecting theory to practice. Flexibility in the rules of engagement may extend the possibility for commanders to use their values and beliefs to guide their actions.

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Flexibility in rules of engagement lets leaders at all levels adapt to uncertainty. Senior leaders should avoid strictly deontological approaches, giving commanders options to maximize ethical decision-making. A balance of rules and adaptability is vital in dynamic settings, illustrating the interplay between deontology and utilitarianism. To guide action within this flexible framework, commanders must clearly communicate both the current and desired end states through the operations process. The operations process is defined as planning, preparing, executing, and assessing operations.<sup>48</sup> At times, an emphasis on adaptive leadership is crucial for overcoming these challenges.

Scenario-based training supports a consequentialist approach by allowing subordinates to consider the outcomes of their decisions and thereby maximize the overall good. Similar to back casting and scenario planning, commanders start at the endpoint and identify key decision points and ethical moments. This alignment creates a structure for effective training. Importantly, scenario-based training keeps the unit focused on mission

results and supports a consequentialist method. To further support ethical decision-making, dialogue and rehearsals set the unit up to make moral choices. Additionally, repetition and clear communication skills are imperative for shared understanding and ethical outcomes. To achieve this, commanders must clearly state their intent while maintaining a broad operational approach. The operational approach broadly defines the mission, operational concepts, tasks, and actions needed to accomplish it. A commander's intent is a: "clear and succinct expression of the operation's purpose and desired end state. It provides focus and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the desired results, even if the operation deviates from the plan."<sup>49</sup>

Clear, concise commander's intent is key to success. A well-crafted commander's intent is central to enabling a consequentialist approach. By clearly portraying the operational environment and establishing boundaries, commanders provide shared understanding and empower leaders on the ground. This intent supports momentum, ethical decision-making, and operational effectiveness. Flexible rules of engagement further complement these efforts.

The practice of AARs is at the heart of the Army's commitment to continuous learning and moral advancement. Regular AARs reveal both situational understanding and the real consequences of choices. They help leaders proactively determine who benefits from specific courses of action. By making AARs integral, the Army ensures that learning, operational morality, and adaptability drive improved mission outcomes. This process, combined with adaptive leadership and thorough pre-mission analysis, creates the flexibility needed to achieve both operational success and moral clarity.

In conclusion, commanders can maximize the ethical triangle through continuous ethics training, deliberate role modeling, and leveraging flexibility in rules of engagement. By

applying systems thinking and sense-making tools, such as the Cynefin framework, commanders and subordinates can better understand the impacts of their decisions. This includes second and third-order effects. Such understanding helps optimize outcomes for the greatest number of people.

Commanders achieve operational success by fostering a shared understanding. They must clearly state both the current position and the desired end state and issue transparent guidance. By intentionally incorporating vagueness in the operational approach, commanders enable adaptability and sound judgment as conditions change. This flexibility is fundamental in complex environments. It ties directly to consistently meeting mission and ethical objectives.

A precise and clear commander's intent provides boundaries for a consequentialist approach, enabling subordinates to act with purpose and flexibility within ethical parameters. To ensure alignment on ethical priorities, delivering intent both in person and in writing is essential. This approach also strengthens decision-making and trust. Furthermore, consistent AARs reinforce this alignment and bolster adaptability.

Additionally, repetition and rehearsals are crucial for achieving an ethical outcome. Supporting techniques, such as scenario planning and dialogue, further enhance informed and ethical leadership. Taken together, all of these are crucial for achieving the mission. **IAJ**

## Notes

- 1 Narine Karapetyan, "Leadership Accountability and Ethical Decision-Making," *Journal of Defense Resources Management* 16, no. 1 (2025), 65-76, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/armyuniversity.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/leadership-accountability-ethical-decision-making/docview/3215258707/se-2>.
- 2 Jeri Goldman, "The Supervisor's Beliefs about People and the Supervisory Plan: McGregor's 'Theory X' and 'Theory Y' in the Schools," *The Clearing House*, 56 no. 7 (1983), 306-309, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30186202>.
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