A Special Operations Forces Ethics Field Guide

13 Ethical Battle Drills for SOF Leaders

United States Special Operations Command
Created by USSOCOM’S Chaplain’s Office and Merit Leadership, LLC
A Special Operations Forces Ethics Field Guide

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SOCOM Teammates,

Selection to serve in SOF units is a tremendous achievement, and more importantly, it is a commitment. Though we are quiet professionals who often work in the shadows, it is remarkable how many eyes are turned on our force each and every day. These are not eyes searching for misdeeds, or skeptical of accomplishments. These are people drawn to our teams for their technical and tactical competence and character. Special operators are both role models and emissaries of the American people.

Being a part of this organization requires the absolute best from each of us. Physical courage, strength, skill, determination, and ingenuity – these are not enough. Our reputation for ethical reasoning, moral courage, and integrity must be held in equal or higher regard. Competence means nothing without character, discipline, and accountability. Together, these elements build a foundation of unshakeable trust inside and outside of our formation. As Chaplains, you are a valuable part of developing and maintaining that foundation.

SOF operate in the most challenging, ambiguous environments imaginable where ethical decision-making is tested daily. Modeling and upholding good ethical behaviors takes work, and you must train for it with the same zeal and focus that you apply to any other aspect of the profession. This handbook provides some thoughtful vignettes to bolster discussion and deepen ethical reasoning within the chaplaincy. This will aid SOF Chaplains as they advise their commands and counsel special operators in the field.

Trust is our currency with the American people. This is a powerful but fragile credibility. When called up, we must win for the Nation with our values intact.

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Welcome

General H. Norman Schwarzkopf said, “Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without strategy.”

Training is an integral part of what we do as special operators. We spend our entire career dedicating our lives to intense and appropriate training so that when our nation needs us on the “X”, we are ready to successfully complete that mission. As warriors, we know our immediate reaction drills and our emergency procedures. We know how to clear our weapon, solve a parachute malfunction, react to contact, and respond to an in-flight emergency. Our training has made those reactions instinctive. That same high-level of training and expertise must exist when we respond to ethical situations.

This guide is a tool that has been developed so our community can train on the immediate reaction drills and emergency procedures needed when we are on the “X” of a tough decision. You will find that not all problems have easy answers. More important than finding the “right” answer, is how you process and work towards making the best decision while remembering all the implications that our decisions carry. America does not question the courage that her Special Operation Forces have displayed throughout our nation’s history. The history books are full of our story. However, courage takes many forms, and having the moral courage to make the right decision while on the “X” is just as important as the courage to clear a contested building. And the “X” isn’t limited to battle; you will find the “X” in many areas of your life. Building on the opening quote, General Schwarzkopf reminded us of the importance of moral courage when he said, “The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it.”

It is my hope that training with the ethical battle drills in this guide will prepare you to make the morally courageous decision when you are on the ethical “X”.

GEORGE T. YOUSTRA
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface: How SOF Leaders Can Get The Most out of this Field Guide</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why the Need for a SOF Ethics Field Guide</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fundamentals of Handling Character Challenges with Honor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Internal and External Dangers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Step-by-step “SOP” for Ethical Decision-Making</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for Challenges to Your Character</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Establishing Your Character Brand</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening Your Ethical Leadership</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Ethical Battle Drills</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing Courage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 1—Standing up to Power</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 2—Intervening</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 3—Repairing Wrongs</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting the Job Done</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 4—Sacrificing Personal Values</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 5—Using Questionable Means</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 6—Stretching Standards</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 7—Concealing the Truth</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 8—Balancing Conflicting Interests</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 9—Staying Loyal</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 10—Keeping Promises When Circumstances Change</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 11—Having Suspicions without Enough Evidence</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 12—Dealing with Unfair Advantage</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Battle Drill 13—Showing Mercy</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Rest of the Story”</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface: How SOF Leaders Can Get the Most Out of this Field Guide

Any cursory online search will reveal thousands of books and articles that try to help you become a better manager or leader. According to many of these texts, managing involves activities such as budgeting, staffing and problem solving; while leading involves establishing direction, motivating and inspiring people and creating positive change. This Field Guide proposes a third set of skills that are often neglected in leadership courses and books but are essential for effective leadership, especially when leading the elite: the clarification of individual and team values as well as finding a way forward when these values conflict. This Field Guide will help you develop those skills and apply them to become a more effective leader.

Ethics as a Skill

Ethics is more than a matter of good intentions. Being a good person does not ensure that your choices will be ethical. Good intentions are not enough. Difficult ethical situations require the thoughtful application of a particular set of skills.

Those ethical skills are especially necessary for leadership. For example, you need to be more than just a nature lover to be able to lead a party safely through the wilderness. You need the skills and experience of a wilderness guide. In the same sense, wanting to be ethical falls short of an actual ability to guide others through ethically precarious terrain. Ethical intention is a necessary starting point, but you need ethical ability to be a useful leader.

Your goal as a leader includes the need to hone your ethical character, the combination of intention and ability. As you go through each of the thirteen ethical battle drills pay attention to how these situations root out where you might have had bad intentions. But also notice how these dilemmas shine a (sometimes harsh) light on where your current ethical skills fall short. Those skills include an ability to recognize ethical dilemmas, balance competing values, persuasively communicate ethical ideas, and act with greater integrity.

Not all ethical challenges are easy to spot and not all dilemmas are the same. That’s why being proficient in each of the thirteen ethical battle drills is so important. If you don’t really know what the challenge is, you’re unlikely to come up with a successful course of action. As the nature of the dilemma changes, the skills and strategies necessary for success change as well. For example, how you manage a request from a superior officer to do something you consider to be wrong will differ from how you manage a request for mercy from someone who reports to you. As you train on the thirteen ethical battle drills, you will quickly understand the key leader tasks associated with each.

Fortunately, according to scholarly research, ethical challenges tend to happen in predictable ways. The vast majority of ethical challenges you will face on the “X” fit into one of these thirteen categories. Quickly recognizing the nature of the ethical challenge requires practice. But the ability to identify dilemmas is a skill that can be developed. With practice you’ll be better able to see the heart of an ethical problem and understand what values are in competition. That, in turn, will help you design better strategies for resolving your dilemmas.
Balancing Right vs. Right

This Field Guide addresses moments when values conflict, situations called “character challenges.” These situations are particularly difficult because they don’t lend themselves to the typical framework of right versus wrong. Instead, the special operator is asked to choose between two highly prized values: say, keeping one’s word to honor confidentiality versus protecting a loyal friend; avoiding an unfair advantage versus bringing the best value to the organization.

Whether or not they are recognized as character challenges, these “right-versus-right” decisions arise all the time, in every military situation imaginable, for every kind of warrior, in every unit. Thus, clarifying values and resolving conflicting values are not tangential tasks but, rather, are central to mission success. Your ability to hone these essential skills can make or break your organization and your career.

Resolving character challenges also impacts your personal well-being. The supposed line separating the professional from the personal is largely imaginary. Decisions you make in carrying out your mission affect your character and emotional state just like the decisions you make in any other circumstance. Rarely will you find someone who hasn’t stayed up late into the night trying to help a loved one process a difficult and emotionally-wrenching decision. The good news is that with tools and practice, you can make increasingly sound ethical decisions.

Communicating Persuasively about Ethics

The majority of the time, your ability to bring about the right outcome will hinge on how well you can communicate ethical ideas to others. Rarely are we in situations where we can act on our own to resolve a moral dilemma. (Note how contrary this feels to the image most people have of ethical dilemmas: a lonely soul caught between two choices and left to work it out on his or her own.) Because you’ll need the help of other people, you can assume that you’ll often need to convince them to help.

As you train on the thirteen ethical battle drills, rehearse how you would speak convincingly to those up and down the chain of command. This is similar to rehearsing actions on the objective, something all military forces do in preparation for battle. It’s one thing to describe what you might tell your superior in a tricky situation, and another to actually find the words. You’ll quickly realize that persuasive communication about ethics is a skill you can refine. Crawl, walk, and run to build ethical readiness!

A Wilderness Guidebook

Like the guidebooks that outdoor adventurers’ study before a trip, and also take along in case of emergencies, this Field Guide can help whenever you are confronted with an ethical challenge. And, like those books, this one has been developed by experts with special knowledge in the field. Using the Field Guide, you can identify the particular issues at stake and develop COAs for dealing with those issues. The aim is not to tell you what to do in every circumstance, but instead to help you think through complex situations in order to arrive at COAs with a high chance of achieving an honorable end state.

With the help of the Field Guide you will be able to engage ethical dilemmas with more confidence and avoid major pitfalls that have snared other warriors. You’ll then become the ethical-combat expert, effectively guiding others through the dangers posed by various dilemmas.
The Fundamentals of Handling Character Challenges with Honor

We provide time-honored thinking frameworks and other essential information in four sections comprising *The Fundamentals of Handling Character Challenges with Honor*. In these sections we describe the internal and external factors that contribute to unethical behavior—including rationalization processes, organizational structure, and so on. We provide a one-page toolkit that summarizes classical approaches to ethical reasoning, along with the problems and questions that emerge from each approach. We also offer steps for being ethically proactive and give advice for becoming an ethical leader. You can either read over this material first, or go directly to the ethical battle drills and then return later to these chapters.

The Thirteen Ethical Battle Drills

This Field Guide contains dozens of real-world scenarios, shared by members of Special Operations Forces. Every story is used by permission, although the individuals and their organizations have been made anonymous. One of the chief goals of presenting these real-world dilemmas is to reduce the risk to our force and minimize moral injury for future warriors.

Thus, these ethical battle drills are organized into the thirteen dilemmas you’ll face in your career. For each battle drill, you will be presented with a sample challenge, an explanation of the nature of the dilemma, guided questions that can lead to COAs, common pitfalls, and tips for minimizing the dilemma in the future. At the end of this Field Guide, we provide *The Rest of the Story* to the thirteen ethical battle drills.

We encourage you to keep this Field Guide handy and refer to it often. Your efforts to resolve these character challenges will enhance your ability to make ethical decisions on the “X”, now and in the future. With practice and resolve, you can become an ethical leader—one who in the midst of carrying out the mission, clarifies organizational values and points the way for others when those values conflict.
Why the Need for a SOF Ethics Field Guide

With thousands of operators deployed globally, difficult decisions are a regular occurrence within the Special Operations community. Still, leaders throughout our formations face difficult ethical challenges. Most successfully overcome these challenges. From failure to report inappropriate actions, to turning a blind eye to corruption, to personal temptations to cross the line, we are often faced with opportunities to respond in ethical, or not-so-ethical, ways. Over time we are expected to refine our skill in being able to handle these challenges not only with integrity, but also with overwhelming confidence. This is why we need proven ethical battle drills as much as we need combat battle drills.

Various mottos and creeds within our community remind us of our noble calling. They speak to who we are and the high standards we champion.

“I will always keep myself mentally alert, physically strong, and morally straight” Army Rangers

“I am a Special Warfare Combatant-craft Crewman: a quiet professional; tried, tested, and dedicated to achieving excellence in maritime special operations” Navy SWCC

“Always Faithful. Always Forward” MARSOC

“I am an American Special Forces Soldier! I will do all that my nation requires of me” Army Special Forces

“In times of war or uncertainty there is a special breed of warrior ready to answer our Nation’s call. A common man with uncommon desire to succeed” Navy SEALs

“Any place. Any time. Anywhere” AFSOC

“Night Stalker’s Don’t Quit!” Night Stalkers

“Empowerment, Professionalism, Innovation, Commitment” JSOC

Unfortunately, some have fallen short of the high expectations deeply embedded in the fabric of these noble mottos and virtuous creeds. We have learned the hard way that courage in the face of ethical battles is every bit as critical to mission success as courage in the face of a hardened and determined enemy.

The purpose of this Field Guide is to help you make valorous decisions when faced with competing values and paths that are clouded by uncertainty. These thirteen ethical battle drills will assist you in fine-tuning your ethical azimuth as well as mastering the skills necessary for your team to thrive in unforgiving environments.

Warriors are not born with ethical maturity. As warriors we develop our moral compass in the same way we develop combat skills—through hard work, effort, experience, training, trial and error, and observing the tremendous example of honorable warriors who have fought and won our nation’s wars for over two centuries. Recall the effort and determination that you devoted to your years of training. Recall how that high level of dedication earned you your noble status as a defender of freedom and peace throughout the world. You are one of America’s elite warriors. You have earned your reputation as a strong, brave fighter; trained, skilled, and experienced in battle; a warrior who gets the job done. By honing ethical decision-making skills, we ensure that honor is more deeply embedded throughout our formations. Just like the knights of medieval history, we must exemplify respect for others, and even a degree of chivalry that includes courtesy, generosity, valor, loyalty and honor. With the wisdom of this Field Guide, our ability to decisively engage in ethical battles will vastly improve. More important, our decisions will demonstrate to the world our unflinching dedication to the highest levels of integrity and personal courage.
In this Field Guide you will be taken through thirteen distinct ethical battle drills. You may find it helpful to consider each of these thirteen drills as COAs that the enemy employs in an attempt to destroy your character; his means of assaulting your record of honorable service. This Field Guide includes real stories from special operators who faced the enemy’s attack without the knowledge of proven ethical battle drills. In some scenarios the operators must choose between being true to themselves or to the mission. As we’ve all learned through our professional and personal experience, the “right thing to do” is not always apparent. In fact, there may not even be a single “right thing” to do at all.

Remember that ethical decisions are always personal, often influenced by the decision makers’ values and their organization’s culture. You may wonder, “What would I have done in that scenario?” You may feel uncomfortable as you read some of these dilemmas. Sometimes that discomfort is a good way to develop your moral sensitivity, something each of us should cultivate in order to demonstrate strong moral leadership. Don’t push these feelings away. Instead, take on the persona of a warrior who seeks to “engage in close combat” with the enemy. However, keep in mind that in these scenarios the enemy seeks to destroy your honor, not end your life.

None of us would ever question the importance of being proficient in our warrior tasks and drills. That same type of professional vigilance should be the hallmark of our approach to developing the moral courage necessary to be proficient in our ethical battle drills. When you look yourself in the mirror, the feeling should be one of pride in your honorable service, not the burden of regret and dishonor that always lingers from unethical choices. As you improve your proficiency with each of the thirteen ethical battle drills, you will find that your strength of character becomes a tremendous combat multiplier, a battlefield asset that is needed for our Special Operations community to thrive and serve our nation with continued distinction.

_Ebrace the journey of an honorable warrior!_
The Fundamentals of Handling Character Challenges with Honor

Understanding Internal and External Dangers

Social scientists have identified a number of ways that we are predisposed to failing our character challenges. We group these factors into *internal dangers*—harmful ways of thinking that we easily fall into, because we’re human—and *external dangers*—forces outside of the mind and body that can exert undue influence on our decisions, particularly if we are not aware of them.

**Internal Dangers**

Our brains play tricks on us. For a variety of reasons, the mind engages in thinking errors, such as rationalization—often to convince itself that we have made a solid choice. This allows us to make unethical decisions and still feel that our character is intact.

**Rationalization**

Rationalization occurs when we make excuses for our behavior that make us feel better about ourselves. This process usually happens at the edges of our consciousness—such that it often goes undetected. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of rationalizations is that they generally rely on some element of truth.

Luckily, awareness goes a long way in neutralizing our tendency to rationalize. When you are familiar with common mistakes, you can recognize when your thought processes are “on the wrong azimuth.” Through self-honesty and introspection, you get your thinking back on track.

The following are examples of rationalizing toward poor ethical choices.

1. **Denial of Responsibility:** Denial of responsibility means we place the responsibility for our actions on someone or something else. Our brain insists we are not accountable for our behavior.

2. **Denial of Injury:** To help us feel better about something we did or plan to do, we tell ourselves that no one was (or will be) hurt by our actions—or, at least they won’t be hurt very much.

3. **Denial of the Victim:** Sometimes called victim blaming, we convince ourselves that the wounded party is actually the party at fault—and thus not really a victim at all.
4. **Condemnation of the Contenders:** To combat the criticism we fear because of our actions, we focus on finding fault in the entities or people who might criticize us.

5. **Appeal to Higher Loyalties:** As noted in this guide, ethical dilemmas often require you to choose one value over another. This makes appealing to your higher loyalties a particularly effective rationalization technique.

6. **Moral Ledger:** Like "cheat day" on a diet, the moral ledger technique gives you permission to act less ethically in some domains because of all the good you have done in other domains.

7. **Defense of Necessity:** Sometimes there is a compelling reason something has to be done. More often, our brain exaggerates the necessity to help us feel better about what we are about to do.

8. **Claim of Normalcy:** This is the "everyone's doing it" excuse. By noting cultural, national, or unit-specific norms, you convince yourself that your course of action is acceptable. (Hint: Look again. More often than not, everyone isn't doing it.)

9. **Denial of Negative Intent:** You admit that your actions hurt people, but you tell yourself it's okay because it wasn't your intent to hurt them.

10. **Claims of Relative Acceptability:** To justify what you've done, your brain feeds you examples of people who have done much worse. Your actions seem not so bad by comparison.

11. **Postponement:** Action is needed but you stall, reasoning that if you don't make any decision, you are not responsible for the consequences.

12. **Use of Euphemisms:** Subtle changes in the words you choose can disguise your action's full impact—even from yourself.

**Locus of Control**

People who believe that their destiny is controlled by their own actions are said to have an internal locus of control. By contrast, those who believe that their fate is determined by factors they can’t influence have an external locus of control. Those with an external locus are more likely to act unethically.

**Script Processing**

Our brains have the amazing ability to create scripts, or memorized patterns of behavior, for tasks we perform often. However, scripts can blind us to information in our environment that tells us we need to act differently this time. Our automatic response is not always the best response.

**External Dangers**

Outside forces often influence our decisions and actions. The following are external dangers that can negatively impact our ethical choices.

**Obedience to Authority**

As noted earlier, for society to function well, we need authority structures as well as obedience to those structures. Thus, as a general rule, obedience to authority is a positive
virtue. However, there are times when having obedience as the highest priority, or even blindly carrying out an authority figure’s orders, can lead to unethical behavior.

**Role Taking**

We all take on various roles in society. You have taken on a particular role in the Special Operation Forces, which comes with a set of expectations. Meeting such expectations is normally considered a virtue. But, role taking can go too far. Your status as a SOF operator does not entitle you to act unethically.

**Diffusion of Responsibility**

In some situations, the person who is responsible for acting is clear. However, in other situations, the responsibility to act is shared. When there are multiple people who are all capable of taking the action and there is no clear responsibility, we often find that no one acts.

**Group Norms**

Any time one joins a profession, institution, or team of any sort, one is socialized into the existing norms of that organization’s culture. Those norms, such as the incredibly positive norms found within the Special Operations Forces, can provide very positive motivation. However, group norms can also become destructive.

**Psychological Distance**

We tend to treat people who are like us with greater respect, dignity, and justice. Psychological distance is created when we perceive others as being different from us—perhaps of a different race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, political persuasion, age, socioeconomic background, alma mater, and so on.

**Societal Culture**

Societies have also developed norms over thousands of years. Anthropologists refer to these norms, values, beliefs, and rituals as elements of culture. Such elements of our society’s culture profoundly affect the way we act and think. Many national cultures include corruption, where entrusted power is abused for private gain in the form of bribes, fraudulent reporting, and various other corrupt activities. We cannot always rely on the norms to help us act ethically.

**A Step-by-step “SOP” for Ethical Decision Making**

As you’ve seen in this guide, ethical dilemmas are often complex and difficult. Fortunately, you are not the first person to be confronted with such challenges. Leaders have been dealing with moral challenges for centuries. Many very smart individuals have provided us with their ideas on how to think through ethical issues. This chapter consolidates their wisdom.

It begins by introducing a formal decision-making process—a step-by-step framework for structuring your deliberation and actions when faced with an issue of moral relevance. You'll then read an overview of various perspectives, or “tools,” that can be used to address ethical issues. Like the important equipment you take on a military mission, these ethical decision-making tools will be useful in a wide variety of situations.

The SOF Ethics Toolbox (Table 1) is a chart outlining the tools, including decision criteria, weaknesses, and questions raised by each approach. The Toolbox provides questions, based on the tools, that you could ask yourself when confronted by any ethical challenge.
As you will see, each of the tools, while helpful, also has limitations. For this reason, thinking through ethical dilemmas using multiple tools will provide greater insights and will help you to make better decisions.

**Decision Process**

A structured process for ethical decision-making can keep your thinking clear so you will arrive at a solution you won’t regret. Consider the following steps.

1. **Identify the important facts.** What do you know about the situation, and what other information could you quickly obtain that would be helpful in making your decision?

2. **Identify the ethical issue(s).** What about this circumstance gives the decision moral weight or moral intensity? Write down the values you would like your decision to honor, and note how those values may compete. Also attempt to place your ethical issue in one of the thirteen common character challenges discussed in this Field Guide.

3. **Identify the stakeholders.** Stakeholders include the decision makers, the actors, and those who will be influenced by the action.

4. **Identify potential solutions.** List all of the alternatives that come to mind, then use your creativity to think of more.

5. **Assess the solutions using ethical perspectives.** Run your solutions through the time-honored principles shown in Table 1. As noted, one principle alone can lead you to shaky conclusions, but in combination, these perspectives supply important rationales as well as talking points. Also, utilize the intervention questions provided for each of the thirteen common character challenges.

6. **Assess any new potential solutions.** Usually, working your way through the ethical perspectives will bring new possibilities to mind.

7. **Act in accordance with your ethical analysis.** This can be uncomfortable, but it may be easier than you anticipate, especially when you’ve done so much preparation work.

8. **Assess your actions and the outcomes.** Incorporate this new knowledge into your decision-making process. If you can, discuss the situation and its results with someone you respect. Write down what you learned and how this experience might help you process the next ethical dilemma for you and your team.

**Ethical Perspectives**

The questions in Table 1 are based on formal ways of looking at ethics—frameworks that have been used in various ways for decades or centuries. While these philosophies often point to disparate courses of action, and thus are not sufficient for definitively “solving” a dilemma, they can help you think through your choices in important ways. More importantly, they can also help you explain your decisions to superiors and members of your team.
Table 1 is a summary of these ethical perspectives and provides questions you can ask yourself when faced with a character challenge.

**Table 1. The SOF Ethics Toolbox**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Roots</th>
<th>An action is ethical when...</th>
<th>Questions I should ask myself</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
<th>Discussion starters (in “business-speak”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deontology</strong></td>
<td>I would be willing for it to become universal law</td>
<td>What are the core principles at stake?</td>
<td>Difficult to manage competing principles, Difficult to bound the conditions</td>
<td>“Would we be content if others (competitors, employees, partners) did what we plan to do?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It treats other people as ends in themselves, and not just as a means</td>
<td>Am I protecting others’ rights? Does my decision preserve others’ dignity and agency?</td>
<td>Difficult to balance conflicting rights, Lack of agreement about rights</td>
<td>“Will our decision make some people feel that they are just being used?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It is reversible (as per the Golden Rule)</td>
<td>Would I be willing to be the other party to the transaction?</td>
<td>Multiple parties to satisfy, Difficult to anticipate how others really feel</td>
<td>“Are we treating our stakeholders as we would like to be treated?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits and costs are equitably distributed</td>
<td>Will this decision be fair to all involved?</td>
<td>Difficult to measure costs &amp; benefits, Lack of agreement on fair shares</td>
<td>“Will any of our stakeholders feel this decision is unfair to them?”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Utilitarianism</strong></td>
<td>It provides the greatest benefit to the most people</td>
<td>Who will be affected by my decision? Who will benefit, and who will be harmed?</td>
<td>Difficult to measure costs &amp; benefits, Majority may disregard rights of the minority</td>
<td>“Let’s talk about who our decision will impact the most. Who are the key stakeholders here?” “What decision would add the most value to us and our stakeholders?”</td>
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| **Virtue Ethics** | It helps me become a better person | Who am I? What kind of person would this action make me? | Relies on individual feelings
All have implicit self-serving biases | “Let’s consider what kind of organizational identity we want to convey to the public.” |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I would be willing to have it broadcast to the public | How would I feel if my reasoning and decision appeared on the news? | Public isn’t always right
Historical/cultural biases | “How will this decision affect our image or reputation if it becomes public?” |

| **Social Contracts** | I am fulfilling my obligation to contribute to a harmonious society. | Am I fulfilling my societal duties? What are my obligations or promises (explicit or implicit) to others? | Difficult to balance conflicting duties
Lack of agreement on duties | “What do we owe our stakeholders?”
“How might this decision affect our environment (the market, the national economy, our industry) at large?” |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|

| **Ethics of Care** | It benefits those with whom I have a special trust and obligation, or those who are vulnerable. | Am I taking care of the people who are most important to me, or those who are most vulnerable? | Danger of favoritism & nepotism
Difficult to balance competing relationship demands | “How does this decision affect the people or groups who trust us the most (e.g., employees, customers, etc.), or who are vulnerable in this situation?” |

1. Adapted from the Marriott School Ethics Toolbox by Brad Agle, Dave Hart, and Jeff Thompson.
Preparing for Challenges to Your Character

When you’re going into battle, you prepare by studying maps, packing the necessary items, and developing contingency plans. Similarly, it is easier to face character challenges when you’ve put in some work ahead of time.

You should engage in four areas of preparation: (1) identify your values and commit to living them, (2) develop the right social structure, (3) earn a reputation as an honest and ethical person, and (4) create habits of ethical reflection and skill building.

Clarify What Matters Most to You

You want to do what’s right. Unfortunately, ethical dilemmas usually force you to choose between two right things, or two things you highly value. Moral philosophies can provide answers to right-versus-wrong dilemmas, but they only provide some insight into right-versus-right dilemmas. Time spent evaluating your priorities—ideally, in advance of the defining moment—can help you align your choices with the things that really matter most to you.

Identify Your Values

While clarifying one’s values is not an easy task, the rewards can be life-changing. Here are some suggestions for discovering what matters most to you.

1. **Complete a values clarification questionnaire.** For example, at viacharacter.org, you can take a free assessment that will help you better understand your own values.

2. **Make a list of people you admire.** Write down which of their characteristics you aspire to develop. Then write down ways you could demonstrate those characteristics in your current circumstances.

3. **Examine your perspectives on a set of ethical dilemmas, including the ones you encounter in this Field Guide.** As you think through what you would do in these situations, answer the question, “What values are honored by my choice?”
4. **Read thoughtful books.** Learn all you can from the perspectives of experienced authors. Two excellent choices are *How Will You Measure Your Life* by Clayton Christensen and *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch.

If possible, complete these exercises with the assistance of people who care about you. They may have insights about your values based on their experiences with you.

**Commit to Living Your Values**

It is not enough to merely identify your values—you must commit to living them. One way to remember your values is to write down and display them in a prominent place. Make sure to periodically update your values and goals to keep them current and meaningful. Expect some setbacks and use them as opportunities to learn about yourself. Share with people close to you your personal commitment to practice moral discipline; that is, to “choose the right because it is right, even when it is hard.” Ask for their feedback and support.

**Build a Social Structure that Facilitates Ethical Behavior**

Don’t underestimate the value of social support in ethical decision-making. To return to our battle metaphor, hike with people you trust and whose risk tolerance is similar to yours, stay far away from natural hazards, and pack appropriately. The same advice applies in the organizational world.

**Join Organizations that Share Your Values**

Through organizational socialization, the organizations we work for exude an important influence on how we view what is appropriate in an organizational setting. Thus, it is critical to join organizations that promote your most deeply held values. Congratulations! You have joined an organization whose expressed values are of the utmost integrity and honor.

**Connect with Honorable People**

Particularly early in your career, you are generally junior in rank relative to those with whom you work. As noted in the Standing Up to Power dilemma, this power imbalance can create ethical difficulties. One of the best ways of dealing with these dilemmas is through your social network. Find mentors both within and outside of your organization who can provide wisdom, experience, and support. Ideally, they may have some authority to help you as well.

**Stay Out of Debt and Save**

One of the most significant pressures on people to act without character is financial dependence. The need to meet financial obligations, coupled with the desire to maintain a positive self-image, creates a powerful motivation for the mind to engage in crippling self-deception and rationalization. One of the best strategies for protecting yourself from the temptation to act unethically is becoming financially secure.

**Develop a Reputation as an Honest and Ethical Person**

In marketing, people often talk about “brand equity,” or the value derived from the reputation of a product or service. Just as organizations have brands, so does each individual and military unit. One important aspect of your brand is your ethical reputation.

Investing time and energy into developing your personal character brand will yield significant benefits. For example, you may be able to avoid many unethical situations because your teammates will know not to ask you to participate in anything questionable. You will also experience positive peer pressure: the expectation of others for you to do the right thing can help motivate you to act ethically. You will attract other ethical people to you and to your organization. Teammates experiencing an ethical challenge will come to you for advice. This will enhance the positive impact you can have on the organization and its culture.
Suggestions for Establishing Your Character Brand

Work Diligently at Your Job

The most fundamental duty of a worker is to work! Warriors are expected to effectively perform the tasks they have been selected to perform. Demonstrating your dedication to the organization through consistent hard work goes a long way in contributing to your reputation as an honorable person.

Act to Benefit Others

One’s apparent self-interested or other-interested motivation is important when dealing with ethical dilemmas. People with reputations for caring about others are likely to be given the benefit of the doubt when managing difficult character challenges—including when others disagree with their choices or they make a mistake. In other words, consistent effort to benefit others can protect your ethical reputation.

Use Inspiring Stories

Organizational stories about how warriors proactively established a strong ethical culture or acted virtuously under difficult circumstances can have tremendous power. Pay attention to others’ positive actions and share your observations of moral courage often—in meetings, trainings, publications and, especially, one-on-one. Help to socialize newcomers toward ethical behavior by retelling these stories often.

Avoid Judging Others

While being a voice for strong ethical principles is important, you should be careful to avoid seeming self-righteous. When others perceive you as being self-righteous, they are more likely to discount your ideas and scoff at your advice. You can avoid this by focusing on the accomplishments of others instead of your own. Share positive stories instead of negative ones, which could make you seem judgmental. Find ways to convey respect for others’ values, even as you seek to live your own.

Create Habits of Ethical Reflection and Skill Building

Consistent effort is always a necessary ingredient of lasting change. Fortunately, your habits of ethical reasoning and moral courage will reduce the effort needed to act ethically. In the words of Aristotle: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” In order to become an ethical leader, your vision cannot be confined to merely making the right decision when a problem arises. Instead, you must cultivate a pattern of regular ethical reflection and skill building.

Continued Professional Development

There are wonderful materials on the subject of ethics, including books, films, articles, TED talks, YouTube clips, and so on. Discuss with teammates what you are learning and processing.

Make Time to Think

You might set a calendar appointment a few times each year to re-read your branch’s creed, policies, and other guidance. During your review, think about your recent actions and the decisions that might come up in the future. Are there ways you can help your organization better live up to its values?

Spirituality is an important determinant in many people’s ethical considerations. If spirituality is important to you, make time to participate in the practices that bring you strength or peace. For example, many leaders find that prayer, meditation, or the study of sacred texts enhances their sense of connection to others and reinforces their commitment to integrity.
Develop Skills

Ethical decision-making, courage, and leadership entail specific, learnable skills. For example, you must be able to communicate effectively in difficult conversations. You might read the book *Crucial Conversations* and practice using the STATE model from that book: Share your facts, Tell your story, Ask for others’ paths, Talk tentatively, and Encourage testing.

In addition to the skills you develop through your own experiences, you can practice ethical decision-making and courage by thinking through others’ situations. You might watch episodes from the TV show “What Would You Do?” and contemplate how you would handle the situations presented. Or you might ask colleagues or friends to share their ethical dilemmas with you.

Write It Out

Finally, maximize your learning by keeping a journal of your daily ethical challenges, your decisions and rationale, and the results. Document what went well and what you would do differently next time. Simply writing about current dilemmas can clarify your thoughts and feelings and help you arrive at a more ethical choice. As a bonus, your record could help when you’re challenged on a decision or when you second-guess yourself.

Strengthening Your Ethical Leadership

This Field Guide began by discussing how articulating and resolving value conflicts is a critical leadership skill. In the previous sections, you learned a lot about how to develop this skill. This chapter gives insights from other research in ethical leadership. In particular, you will learn about the following topics: (1) ethical leadership, (2) ethical role modeling, and (3) designing an ethical organizational culture.

Ethical Leadership

Research has found that there are two critical dimensions that determine whether people are perceived as ethical leaders. The researchers described the dimensions as “moral person” and “moral manager.”

Being a moral person refers to your own personal ethical behavior and is, of course, absolutely critical to developing a reputation as an ethical leader. However, contrary to what many think, being a moral person is necessary but not sufficient for gaining a reputation as an ethical leader. The second dimension, being a moral manager, is also required. Leaders can become moral managers by doing things that make good ethics visible, things like (1) serving as a role model for ethical conduct in a way that is visible to employees; (2) communicating regularly with employees about ethical standards, principles, and values; and (3) using a consistent reward system to hold all employees accountable to ethical standards. Without this strong evidence of moral leadership, employees will more likely view you as morally neutral. So, to optimize ethical behavior in your organization, make an effort to demonstrate your character in public as well as personal ways.
Ethical Role Models

Researchers found that many leaders people considered ethical had their own ethical role models. Researchers then investigated the characteristics of these ethical role models. From interviews with leaders, the research team identified four qualities of ethical role models.

1. **Interpersonal Behaviors.** Role models were seen as individuals who were caring and showed concern and compassion for others. They were also hardworking and helpful, and they supported and took responsibility for others while valuing and maintaining relationships. Ethical role models tended to accentuate the positive. Finally, these ethical role models were also willing to accept others’ failures.

2. **Ethical Actions and Self-Expectations.** Role models were seen as having honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, and humility. They held themselves to a high ethical standard and were consistently ethical in both public and private life. Ethical role models also sacrificed for the benefit of others and, interestingly, accepted responsibility for and were open about their own ethical failings.

3. **Fairness toward Others.** Role models distributed resources equitably. They respected people equally and were never condescending (even in disagreements). Further, role models sought and were open to feedback, and they routinely offered explanations for their decisions.

4. **Articulating Ethical Standards.** Role models were non-compromising and consistent in their ethical values, and they communicated high ethical standards to others. They put ethics above personal or company interests. Finally, they held others ethically accountable. While, as noted above, they were understanding of people’s mistakes, they had less tolerance than other leaders for deliberate violations of ethical standards.

Creating an Ethical Organizational Culture

Because research demonstrates that organizational culture has such a strong influence on the behavior of organizational members, it is critical that leaders create the kind of culture that facilitates and promotes ethical behavior. Ed Shein “wrote the book” on organizational culture in 1980. Among his insights is a list of the ways that leaders can and do embed their beliefs, values, and assumptions in their organizations. You can think of these embedding mechanisms as the levers by which one creates and changes organizational culture. Schein groups the levers into two categories: primary and secondary mechanisms. Let’s apply these mechanisms to the task of developing an ethical organizational culture within a military unit.

**Primary Embedding Mechanisms**

Primary embedding mechanisms involve specific leadership lines of effort that signal the organization’s priorities. These levers are critical to establishing and maintaining an ethical culture.

1. What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis.
2. How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises.
3. How leaders allocate resources.
4. Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching.
5. How leaders allocate rewards and status.
6. How leaders recruit, select, promote, and discipline.
Secondary Embedding Mechanisms

Secondary mechanisms involve structures, systems, and processes; the physical layout of the workplace; and organizational communication—both the informal sharing of stories and the formal publication of creeds or goals.

1. Organizational design and structure.
2. Organizational systems and procedures.
3. Rites, rituals, and culture of the organization.
4. Design of physical space, facades, and buildings.
5. Stories about important events and people.
6. Formal statements of organizational philosophy, creeds, history, and codes of conducts.
13
Ethical Battle Drills
Showing Courage (Ethical Battle Drills 1-3)

EBD 1: Standing Up to Power

Someone in power is asking you to do something unethical.

SOF Character Challenge:
First Lieutenant Morgen has been ordered by his battalion commander to ignore safety protocols and fire mortar rounds too close to trainees.

1LT Morgen is the weapons platoon leader with the Ranger Regiment. He is a new 1LT to the Regiment and he wants to make a good first impression with his commander. The commander is a decorated soldier who has become a Ranger legend with a Silver Star/Purple Heart received on a raid in Iraq for a high-valued target. The commander’s favorite saying is, “If you can’t cut the mustard, then I’ll find someone who will.” 1LT Morgen is so new to the organization that he hasn’t even had his first performance feedback with the commander yet.

As part of their training, the battalion is now on a live-fire range in support of two companies of Rangers assaulting a hilltop. The weather has been extremely poor, with heavy rains and poor visibility. In the pre-mission planning, the commander directed 1LT Morgen to land his mortar rounds as closely as possible in front of the assaulting troops so they can “feel the concussions of the rounds as they detonate and experience what combat will be like.”

1LT Morgen expressed his concerns to the Battalion XO following the pre-mission brief that landing rounds where the commander expected would be clearly outside of the safety fan and very dangerous to the Scouts and Forward Observers. The XO counseled, “You better do what the old man tells you if you want a future.”

From the outset of the assault, 1LT Morgen followed standard safety protocols for the exercise and targeted his rounds safely within the safety fan. The commander is not pleased with the proximity of the detonating rounds to the assaulting Rangers and calls 1LT Morgen on the radio, demanding that he bring the rounds closer to the assaulting force. 1LT Morgen tries to calmly push back but is told, “Either you put those rounds closer where I told you or I will find a Lieutenant who will.” 1LT Morgen quickly assesses all the information that has been given him about the reputation of the commander, what the XO told him, and his future in the Army. What can or should 1LT Morgen do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 52.

| What’s your story? |
| Think of an experience when someone in power asked you or someone you know to do something unethical. |

Nature of the Character Challenge:
Authority systems are important for the proper functioning of organizations. However, there are times when individuals should push back against authority. This character challenge involves knowing how to effectively stand up to authority or power.

Intervention Questions:
1. Are there others in the organization who agree with you?
2. Does the powerful party have the authority to ask you to do what they are asking?
3. Are you being asked to do something that is illegal, violates the regulations, policy, SOP, ethos, or the values of your organization?
4. What is this person attempting to accomplish through what they’re asking you to do?
5. Is there a different way of accomplishing this?
6. Can you obtain an official waiver to do what you are being asked to do?
7. Is there someone in your organization who can give ethical guidance/moral advice on this?

Pitfalls:
1. **Charging the Hill** - Where possible, avoid vocally and stridently opposing the request. Explore all of the indirect approaches that can lead to an ethical outcome. These include using softer language, asking sincere questions, and finding creative alternatives.

2. **Giving in Too Quickly** - You might be tempted to think that just giving in will allow you to take care of the problem quickly and move on to other things. The danger is that if you do what’s being asked, you’ll get a reputation for being reliably unethical.

3. **Not Protecting Yourself** - When it’s time to assign the blame, people with more power tend to win out. Don’t be caught in situations where it’s your word against theirs. Whenever something seems amiss, it’s time to start documenting.

4. **Assuming Too Much** - Don’t assume you know all that you need to know. Try to get as much time as you can. Use that time to collect useful information. Be a good listener.

Planning Ahead:
1. Build professional relationships, especially with superiors.
2. Be ethical in the little things.
3. Work on creating an ethical culture.

Similar Character Challenge:
SGT Jin just reported to the accounting office, working for Mr. Ostrander, a prickly GS-15 who plays golf weekly with the Commanding General, his West Point classmate and long-time friend. Mr. Ostrander wields a lot of influence in the command and has a reputation of making or breaking the careers of those who work for him. Mr. Ostrander tells the Soldier in his first assignment on his first day that the office is preparing a mandatory requisition report that needs to clear all hurdles in order to keep a currently deployed unit from the command properly supplied. The GS-15 continues by saying, “You need to make the numbers work on tasks 2 and 3. I’ll deal with the next round of reports.” SGT Jin knows that what he’s just been ordered to do is technically illegal. What can or should SGT Jin do?

**Wisdom**

“Develop enough courage so that you can stand up for yourself and then stand up for somebody else.”

–Maya Angelou

**Additional reflection on your story of EBD1:**

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SOF Character Challenge:

Sergeant First Class Dallon has the ability to cleanly eliminate a group of men who are sexually assaulting a young woman, but doing so might jeopardize a rescue mission.

SFC Dallon’s team is in a concealed location in a city within the sector, where another team is on a mission to rescue a number of girls being detained by foreign nationals against their will. The intel provided to the commander of Dallon’s team is solid and the commander has signaled that the rescue will take place at 0530 the next morning. While on watch, two members of Dallon’s team spot a foreign security team raping a teenage girl in the proximity of the rescue target. Each of these individuals is laughing as they take their turn with the girl. SFC Dallon requests permission to intervene and states he can take them out cleanly.

His commander replies that the team is not to break cover. One team member pushes back with the commander that they shouldn’t just stand by when they could stop the rape. SFC Dallon knows what he is watching is wrong, but faces risks if he tries to stop it. If the team breaks cover, they will likely jeopardize the mission. A second team member appeals to the team’s most experienced operator, MSG Gibbon. The MSG responds to the team that the mission is crucial and they need to follow the commander’s order. The team is visibly agitated. Staying quiet means the team can carry out its mission, but the girl suffers terribly. Taking out the rapists means saving the girl, but risking the rescue mission and the team’s safety. What can SFC Dallon do? What can or should the commander do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 52.

What’s your story?

Think of an experience when you or someone you know saw something wrong and did not know how to proceed.

Nature of the Character Challenge:

We often see things that are wrong. This character challenge involves understanding when, how, and why we should and should not intervene.

Intervention Questions:

1. Does the urgency of the situation require you to act now?
2. Would your intervention create other short- or long-term problems/issues/ negative effects?
3. Is the problem the result of one person’s behavior or is it a system-wide failure?
4. What are your motives?
5. What is the scope of your mission?
6. Do you have the personnel and/or resources to intervene?
7. Can someone advise you in this situation?
8. How can you create the least harm to everyone involved?
Pitfalls:
1. **Signaling Acceptance** - Not acting is still a morally significant choice. You set a standard by not intervening, signaling the behavior is okay.

2. **Acting without Information** - Acting without the right information leads to potentially disastrous consequences. You don’t want to falsely accuse anyone or hurt a third party you hadn’t considered.

3. **Communicating Harshly** - Avoid needlessly combative language. Be a good listener as people respond to you.

4. **Demonizing Wrongdoers** - Although wrongdoers often need to be punished, don’t overdo it. Keep a goal in mind for a fair outcome and ask yourself if how you are intervening helps you get that outcome.

5. **Discounting Culture** - Remember that culture matters. Are you seeing wrongdoing where everyone else sees acceptable behavior? If so, you might misunderstand the expectations and it could be that within this context, the wrongdoing isn’t really wrong.

6. **Ignoring Expertise** - Let the right people handle the right problems. There are likely people who have better training and more extensive experience than you do. Utilize these types of resources.

Planning Ahead:
1. Practice leadership by standing up for what is right.
2. Rely on relationships to help you display moral courage and make good choices.
3. Be prepared to sacrifice to get the right outcome.
4. Live your values now so people don’t distrust your motives.

Similar Character Challenge:
Cryptologic Technician Third Class Bonner, an introverted Sailor that many have mischaracterized as a jerk, knows that one of the most well-liked Special Operators in the Team has attended a local political rally in his duty uniform as an invited guest. No one else in the Team knows. What can or should CT3 Bonner do?

### Wisdom

“Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”

– C.S. Lewis

### Additional reflection on your story of EBD2:

| Reflection | Reflection | Reflection | Reflection | Reflection |
SOF Character Challenge:
*An administrative failure meant to help a friend is about to backfire.*

SSG Hernandez is the training operations NCO for his unit and is responsible to maintain everyone’s jump log. SPC Smith has been busy TDY attending training courses for advancement and so has not been able to keep up with his jumps to remain current. SSG Hernandez also knows that SPC Smith and his new family have been going through some financial challenges so he did not submit the paperwork to halt and recuperate SPC Smith’s jump pay. SSG Hernandez was informed by his buddy in HQ that an inspection of unit jump logs is coming tomorrow. What can or should he do?

*See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 52.*

**What’s your story?**
Think of an experience involving the dilemma of repairing a mistake you or someone you know made.

**Nature of the Character Challenge:**
Sometimes we, or the people for whom we are responsible, make mistakes, even ethical ones. This character challenge involves correcting things when a mistake has been made.

**Intervention Questions:**
1. Does the other party want you to fix the mistake?
2. Was the error foreseeable? By whom?
3. Did you act unethically?
4. Is this wrong really your fault?
5. Is the blame shared by others?
6. Who should bear the cost of this blame?

**Pitfalls:**
1. **Fixing Things by Yourself** - There’s a high likelihood that people will be particular about the way the problem is repaired. Also, when people have been hurt, they can feel better by participating in the solution. Remember that the injured people may want nothing to do with you. Be sure to respect that.

2. **Not Apologizing** - Apologies matter because they are a type of emotional repair. Apologies inspire confidence that you’ll make sincere efforts to avoid this mistake in the future. Avoid making a false apology.

3. **Delaying** - Waiting too long can make the problem worse. Almost always it is far, far worse to wait until you get caught.
Planning Ahead:
1. Learn from your mistakes.
2. Develop strong professional friendships.
3. Be open to criticism.
4. Encourage a culture that allows for mistakes.
5. Review your work to minimize mistakes.

Similar Character Challenge:
Army medic, SPC Avery, has readily been making Ambien available to team members in a high operational tempo counter terrorism deployment with almost nightly direct-action missions. One team member starts to behave erratically. The leadership wants to understand what is going on with this operator. The team does not want to get the medic in trouble for making the medication available. What can the team do? What can or should SPC Avery do?

Wisdom

“Righting wrongs for which we haven’t been caught is the litmus test of who we are; it shows the core of our honor.”

–Anonymous

Additional reflection on your story or EBD 3:
Getting the Job Done (Ethical Battle Drills 4-7)

EBD 4: Sacrificing Personal Values

Living true to your own beliefs might impose a burden on others.

SOF Character Challenge:

A little more weight on the trigger and Staff Sergeant Ray protects his forces, but in doing so he kills a nine-year-old boy.

SSG Ray is on his third combat tour in a remote location in the Middle East. He’s assigned as the leader of a split-ODA. The task for his team is to establish a clandestine observation post in an abandoned two-story apartment building in the heart of a volatile city. Fighting has been going on for months and contact with the enemy is daily.

On the third day of the mission, SSG Ray is informed of an imminent raid by an Army unit on a suspected insurgent house. His team provides designated marksmen overwatch for troops maneuvering within his sector of responsibility. During the past three days, his team identified a group of high-value individuals (HVIs) that pose a danger to the Army unit. But the team also noticed a young boy approximately nine years old. The young boy has some relation to the HVIs and often plays soccer in the cool of the early morning and right before sunset. The team has taken to calling him “Little Milad.” SSG Ray is fond of the boy, who reminds him of his nine-year-old nephew who recently passed away.

The Army unit conducts their hard hit on the target house and begins their exfil towards SSG Ray’s position. All of a sudden, local insurgents close to the position retreat back into adjacent buildings. Just then, Little Milad comes out of a store building and starts to walk in the direction of the soldiers, which was in a 360-degree security posture. SSG Ray watches as Little Milad walks towards a car and picks up an assault rifle in his small hands. The Army unit can’t see him. SSG Ray doesn’t know if Little Milad can see the patrol, but the boy charges the rifle and pulls the bolt to the rear. The boy then does an operational check on the weapon and, with his hand on the trigger, holds the rifle in the direction of the patrol. If someone comes around the corner, they will die.

SSG Ray begins to sweat profusely. His eyes water as he thinks of his young nephew and the incredible suffering his sister is going through. SSG Ray slows his breathing, puts his weapon on fire, and places the boy center in his sights. The boy is standing there frozen as SSG Ray’s heart still pounds inside his chest. A little more pressure on the trigger and SSG Ray will have protected his forces, but he’s still unsure whether the patrol is the target of Little Milad. What can or should SSG Ray do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 52.

What’s your story?

Think of an experience when you or someone you know struggled with sacrificing personal values to reduce the burden placed on others.

Nature of the Character Challenge:

Each individual has a set of personal values. However, personal values do not always align with the values of a group. This character challenge involves being true to one’s own values while simultaneously trying to create unity as a group.
**Intervention Questions:**
1. What costs are you willing to bear for your beliefs?
2. Would expressing your values/beliefs negatively affect unit cohesion?
3. Does involvement directly promote the behavior that conflicts with your beliefs?
4. Were you sufficiently aware of this conflict to have avoided it?
5. Do you believe your actions would hurt your organization or U.S. interests?
6. Are you acting on your own behalf or as an agent for others?

**Pitfalls:**
1. **Seeing Only Yourself** - Be careful not to be the person who only thinks about his or her own values; reciprocity matters. By actively recognizing and personally sacrificing to allow others to live their values, you are more likely to get support for your own.

2. **Forgetting Your Loved Ones** - Because the consequences of your decisions can affect others, it is critical that you and your loved ones have a mutual understanding about the sacrifices you are willing to make to uphold your values.

**Planning Ahead:**
1. Play out scenarios ahead of time and get feedback from those you trust.
2. Think about what really matters to you and why.
3. Try to take the perspective of others as you consider what really matters to them.
4. Look to your superior officers for guidance.
5. Seek input from moral mentors before you have to deal with these types of difficult situations.

**Similar Character Challenge:**
1LT Nystrom has just arrived at a remote location in a Central Asian country. He is the ranking officer of a SOF team tasked with reconnaissance and training some locals on counter-insurgency. The officer learns that the most important tradition for any new military leader is to break bread and raise a cup (of local alcohol) with the local community leaders on the first new moon after their arrival. The problem is that due to his personal beliefs, he doesn’t drink alcohol. However, not drinking together will be considered a deal breaker for the locals, and their guerilla support is vital to the counter-insurgency efforts. What can or should 1LT Nystrom do?

**Wisdom**
“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”
- Abraham Lincoln

**Additional reflection on your story or EBD 4:**

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EBD 5: Using Questionable Means
You could achieve justice by doing something that is normally considered unethical.

SOF Character Challenge:
“If I can get information out of this guy by threatening his family, I’ll be able to save some of my friends,” Senior Chief Ham thinks.

SOCS Ham and his team must execute a time-sensitive target on an IED cell that has been operating in their area of operations—but they haven’t had much luck in getting the information they need. In a related operation, they pick up someone who might be able to help: a local national who is uninvolved with the cell, but may be able to get them some of these answers. This man seems to know everyone in the area well. It’s highly likely that he can at least point the team in the right direction. However, the local national is unwilling to cooperate, and the team has been clearly directed that they cannot use enhanced interrogation techniques. Another member of the team suggests threatening the man, which SOCS Ham tries to no avail. Seeing the concern, the captive has for his wife and children, a team member recommends that the Senior Chief threaten his family to coerce his cooperation. Everyone present can tell that the local national is worried about what the cell might do to his family.

SOCS Ham considers his options. He could tell the man that they will put word on the street that he has been helping the Americans and that his family are informants. The Senior Chief could further inform him that they will drive him downtown and release him in the public square, where the Senior Chief will kiss him on both cheeks. SOCS Ham knows that making a threat like this is questionable, but information that leads his team to the IED cell could prevent more harm in the future. The team is looking intently at the Senior Chief, waiting for him to decide what to try next. What can or should SOCS Ham do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 52.

What’s your story?
Think of an experience when you or someone you know could achieve justice by doing something that is normally considered unethical.

Nature of the Character Challenge:
To be ethical, we generally apply principles of fairness, respect, humane treatment, and so on. However, because there is evil in the world, we sometimes have to use means that are outside of these principles (e.g., kill people, take them prisoner, etc.) to create a more just and humane world. This character challenge involves understanding when it is appropriate to use unethical methods to achieve ethical outcomes.

Intervention Questions:
1. Would your actions really bring about justice or the greater good?
2. Does your plan minimize the harm that must be done to the other party and how dirty you will play?
3. Does harming the other party help any other party other than yourself?
4. Does this action harm your reputation or make it more difficult for your organization to complete missions in the future?
5. Does this action make it more difficult for you personally to operate in the future?
6. What example do you set?

**Pitfalls:**

1. **Getting the Facts Wrong** - Before you do something that is generally considered unethical, be sure you have your facts straight.

2. **Excusing Revenge** - This is not the time to seek revenge; your action should right the wrong without escalating the situation. A lot of people have gotten themselves in trouble by seeking to punish the other party, as opposed to bringing about justice.

**Planning Ahead:**

1. Prioritize your values in advance.
2. Think about how your behavior muddies the water for everyone else.
3. Gather information through your chain of command and other moral mentors.

**Similar Character Challenge:**

Air Force JAG officer, Major Daniels, is working on a patent for certain plastics. He recently found out that a private sector firm wants to license the patent pending for a specific use. Maj Daniels felt that a fee of 1% would be fair, and the firm’s representatives agreed. He then learns that they have lied and want to use the license in a much more lucrative way. So, he plays dumb and says that the contract must contain a rider relating to all other uses. They agree, though they don’t know about the intel the JAG has on their deception and intended use. What can or should Maj Daniels do?

**Wisdom**

“To sin is a human business. To justify sins is a devilish business.”

- Leo Tolstoy

**Additional reflection on your story of EBD5:**
EBO 6: Stretching Standards
You could keep a rule for a worse outcome or bend it to achieve some good.

SOF Character Challenge:

On a Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET), Captain Tobo runs into issues with the ammunition allotment between the ODA he commands and the host nation.

During the pre-deployment site summary, CPT Tobo is clearly directed that this new JCET has a narrow training focus that is being closely monitored by Congress. He also learns that the host nation reported that their soldiers would be shooting AK 47 7.62 MM weapons. However, when the team arrives in country for the rotation, they find that the host nation’s weapons have been replaced by weapons that shoot 5.56 rounds. The team brought 5.56 and 7.62 for themselves (bought with U.S. unit funds), but only 7.62 for the host nation (bought with another pot of U.S. funds).

CPT Tobo knows that the team can share their ammo and get quality training for both their element and the host nation, but regulation says that the host nation is only authorized to shoot the 7.62 (the ammo bought with the correct pot of money). The team is falling behind in their training schedule and the host nation cannot understand why everyone cannot begin training. This is putting strain on the team’s relationship with the host nation and CPT Tobo must decide whether or not to permit the host nation to use the unauthorized 5.56 ammo. What can or should the team leader do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 52.

What’s your story?
Think of an experience when you or someone you know could keep a rule for a worse outcome or bend it to achieve some good.

Nature of the Character Challenge:

Rules and standards are important for the proper functioning of organizations. However, those who develop standards are not always able to foresee every situation in which such standards may be applied. This character challenge involves understanding those rare occasions when standards should be violated, or knowing how to move forward when standards conflict.

Intervention Questions:

1. Whom is the rule intended to help or benefit? Does breaking the rule reduce that help?
2. Does breaking the rule achieve fairness and does it support the mission?
3. Why does this rule matter?
4. Can someone give you prior authorization to waive this requirement?
5. Does breaking this rule encourage inappropriate rule breaking by others?
6. Would those with authority over the rule want you to break it?
7. Can you accept the likely consequences for breaking the rule?
Pitfalls:

1. **Signaling Disregard** - Be thoughtful about the appearance of breaking rules, not just the direct effect. Following rules sends signals like loyalty, trustworthiness, confidence in leadership, and valuing the group or community. You might break a rule for the right reasons but send the wrong signals in the process.

2. **Leaning on Loopholes** - Poorly designed rules can be easy to get around, but that doesn’t mean you should. Don’t let the existence of the loophole be your only justification.

3. **Skirting the Punishment** - If it’s right to break the rule, it’s probably also right to accept the consequences. If you get away with breaking a rule, it’s tempting to not go back and be accountable for doing so. Once you have made the choice to break a rule, don’t assume you are out of the woods.

4. **Letting Rules Define Your Ethics** - Sometimes we think behavior is ethical as long as it doesn’t break any rules. But rules are imperfect. They can be poorly drafted and/or have unintended consequences. Good leaders are better than bad rules.

Planning Ahead:

1. Know the rules.
2. Know the purposes of the rules.
3. When things get complicated, seek guidance from a SME.
4. Be mindful of the optics of your choice so you don’t encourage rule-breaking.
5. Establish good guidance, rules directives, etc. that are easy to follow.

Similar Character Challenge:

Captain Boatright’s team has been tasked with creating a perimeter around a group of local refugees in a high-rise apartment complex. Because refugees have been shot at by the local military, the Rules of Engagement (ROE) specify that the Captain and his team will protect the refugees from the friendlies in a 360-degree defensive perimeter. However, the situation is complicated by the refugees’ previous actions. The refugees incurred the wrath of the friendly locals by siding with an occupation force of another country during the recent invasion. This alliance between the refugees and the hostile occupation resulted in many deaths of the host country’s Special Forces and their family members (men, women and children). During the current mission, one of the friendly local citizen leaders approached Captain Boatright with a picture of his five-year-old daughter’s body. The young girl had been tortured and killed. The picture showed she had been sexually assaulted and had multiple entry wounds from an electric drill in her skull. The father tearfully and angrily asked, “Who would do this?” Now the local citizens want revenge on the refugees more than ever. While the Captain and his team continue their protection mission, individuals among the refugees begin throwing trash and fecal waste on them.

The host country citizens begin mobbing the area with signs that say “Go Home” or “We don’t want you here!” It’s clear now that neither side wants the Americans there. So Captain Boatright calls a team meeting. He starts the discussion by saying, “We’re threatened from the rear and the front in a circular defensive position. Recommendations?” The Senior NCO offers, “Our ROE doesn’t cover this.” The Captain responds, “We can always defend ourselves.” He suggests that they create a larger perimeter outside the refugees’ throwing range and create an alternating defensive perimeter with weapons at 12 and 6 positions. While this will clearly weaken their defense of the refugees, he wonders if this might help them avoid another Beirut or Mogadishu. The rest of the team stays silent, awaiting orders on the required distance perimeter assignment. What can or should Captain Boatright do?
Wisdom

“Example is leadership.”

- Albert Schweitzer

Additional reflection on your story of EBD6:
EBD 7: Concealing the Truth
Misrepresenting or concealing the truth could create a better outcome.

SOF Character Challenge:
Will Lieutenant Colonel Shawn lie to keep the confidence of one of his pilots?

Lt Col Shawn, the squadron commander, was recently approached by Maj Young, a pilot who has served honorably for his entire career. The Major told Lt Col Shawn privately that he has been experiencing major life and financial issues in adjusting from a deployment a couple of months ago and has decided to seek help at the base behavioral health clinic. He asked the commander to keep this information confidential.

Lt Col Shawn later received a call from another pilot, indicating that the pilot’s spouse had seen Maj Young leaving the base behavioral health clinic. The pilot expressed concern about whether Maj Young was okay. The pilot also shared that he had spoken with other pilots in the squadron about Maj Young’s mental health.

Lt Col Shawn decides to call a special staff meeting to address the squadron’s readiness. The commander wants to advocate for mental health awareness for his squadron, but simultaneously does not want to violate their privacy. To protect Maj Young from speculation, the commander considers telling his staff that Maj Young has been at the health clinic on assignment, to help gather important information for the unit on the clinic’s new capabilities. What can or should Lt Col Shawn say and do regarding Maj Young?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 53.

What’s your story?
Think of an experience when you or someone you know could create a better outcome by misrepresenting or concealing the truth.

Nature of the Character Challenge:
This character challenge is similar to the “using questionable means” challenge, except that it does not necessarily involve a “bad guy.” Sometimes in order to protect people or information, you need to act as if you don’t know something, or not reveal your true emotions or thoughts. This character challenge involves knowing when you should “put on an act” to protect others.

Intervention Questions:
1. Why do you want to misrepresent the truth?
2. Are you misrepresenting the truth to protect others who need to be protected?
3. Would you tell the truth if the cost of truth-telling were lower?
4. Do you have authority to reveal the truth?
5. Are you at fault for a misunderstanding?
6. Do you have an obligation to clarify the misunderstanding?
7. Is there a way to get at what you want without concealing the truth?
Pitfalls:

1. Ruining Your Reputation - A reputation for deception stains everything, and people will hesitate to trust you under a wide range of circumstances. Engaging in one act of deception could label you for a long time.

2. Ignoring Others’ Assumptions - If someone else reasonably expects you to correct a misunderstanding, then your silence could be seen as equivalent to telling a lie. This is especially true if the other person misunderstands something that you have an obligation to clarify.

3. Letting Negotiations Pressure You - Be especially careful in negotiations. These are often high-pressure situations where you have to make quick decisions. It’s easy to tell small (or big) lies when working out an agreement.

4. Avoiding Coming Clean - If you’ve already deceived someone, don’t discount the value of coming clean. Everyone lies at some point, and everyone knows that. We are far more forgiving of a person confessing their dishonesty than of a person who is caught and only then comes to regret the lie. Never underestimate the power of a heartfelt apology.

Planning Ahead:

1. Anticipate the questions people might ask so you don’t lie on the spot.
2. Clarify expectations with others.
3. Invite honesty.
4. Understand privacy rules (e.g., HIPPA, sexual assault reporting, and confidentiality).

Similar Character Challenge:

MSgt Sears is ecstatic to be serving again with SSgt Hickman, his friend since boot camp at Parris Island and brother through the most grueling deployment of his career. He is particularly delighted to see his old friend so settled and happy, with his new wife, Michaela, dotingly by his side. While attending a party at the Hickman’s home one evening, MSgt Sears is talking to Michaela in the kitchen when she asks him if he was deployed with her husband when he rescued the school children from the fire in the village, adding how proud she is of her husband. MSgt Sears, however, recalls the event and knows that his old friend wasn’t there. He’s not sure how to respond to the happy bride and wonders if SSgt Hickman has embellished more about his past. What can or should MSgt Sears do?

Wisdom

“Rather fail with honor than succeed by fraud.”

- Sophocles

Additional reflection on your story or EBD 7:
Balancing (Ethical Battle Drills 8-10)
EBD 8: Balancing Conflicting Interests

Multiple roles put you (or your team) at cross purposes.

**SOF Character Challenge:**

“It is not right for our unit to receive food that is not specified in the contract, but my team needs good chow to do their jobs, and the Army bureaucracy is not getting it to them,” Sergeant First Class Reck reasons.

As the Special Forces ODA operations funds (OPFUND) manager, SFC Reck feels a strong duty to protect the money of the Army, but he also feels a keen obligation to take care of his people. He is currently working on a major project in another country. This has meant working hard to manage the interests of a number of contracting companies, all jockeying for position to work with (or take advantage of) the Army. Contracts like this are big business for these companies, and they seem to be willing to go the extra mile to land a deal with SFC Reck. The contract bids have been narrowed down to two companies, one of which Reck has a long history with. He knows the company to be flawlessly dependable and prompt, and he also knows the trusted company will provide commodities, under the table, that SFC Reck believes his ODA needs but are not on the OPFUND approved list. In their austere environment, side benefits like fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables would make for a big boost to morale, and would inevitably make his life easier, too.

The problem is that this company’s bid is slightly more expensive than the other company’s bid. As an OPFUND manager, SFC Reck has an obligation to choose the most cost-effective option that meets the contract requirements. The other company has a cheaper bid that does everything he’s requested, but it doesn’t come with the extras that he and the team want. What can or should SFC Reck do?

*See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 53.*

**What’s your story?**

Think of an experience when multiple roles put you or someone you know at cross purposes.

**Nature of the Character Challenge:**

Due to the nature of life and work, we are often in multiple positions or roles that have the potential to conflict with one another. This character challenge involves recognizing and properly managing such situations.

**Intervention Questions:**

1. Are there any clear regulations or standard operating procedures that you should be following?
2. What are your driving orders/rules of engagement/directives/guidance?
3. Who has a right to know the details, and how do you let them know those details?
4. Have the other parties done or could they do anything to free you from your obligation to them?
5. Would your actions cause others to question your motives?
6. Is there any way to uphold both of your obligations?
7. Is there a way to remove yourself from the conflict of loyalties?

Pitfalls:
1. **Not Recognizing the Conflict** - Conflicts are much more common than people realize, so we often don't see them. We also tend to miss them when the conflict results from a change in circumstances.

2. **Running from or Hiding the Conflict** - Conflict of interest situations will generally be revealed, so running or hiding will only make the situation worse in the long run.

3. **Assuming Disclosure is Enough** - Research shows that the act of disclosure tells others you are trustworthy, which makes it easier for you to take advantage. Be proactive in making sure that others’ interests are protected.

4. **Pretending Objectivity** - We are never really totally objective. Our values, experiences, and interests all color what we notice and think about things. The best bet—for you and everyone—is to acknowledge that you’re human and attempt to resolve your conflicting interests.

Planning Ahead:
1. Recognize the obligations you owe others.
2. Clearly define requirements.
3. Watch out for nepotism (favoritism given because of family relationship or common association).
4. Acknowledge trade-offs in keeping one obligation at the expense of another.
5. Develop training and a system for reporting conflicting interests.

Similar Character Challenge:

A week ago, Chief Master Sergeant Oliver reported to an AFSOC Special Operations Squadron as the Senior Enlisted Leader (SEL). He didn’t have a formal turnover, but learned from telephone conversations with his predecessor that the squadron runs a “little snack bar” that produces “a few hundred dollars a month” to help with expenses for the annual holiday party—a party the commander highly values as a morale booster for the squadron. With the party only one month away, CMSgt Oliver discovers that the “little snack bar” is actually a very lucrative enterprise. The snack bar requires airmen to make routine supply runs in government vehicles, attracts outside customers who otherwise patronize AAFES and food truck vendors, and generates revenues resulting in a current balance of $23,000. Meanwhile, the squadron is abuzz with excitement about the upcoming holiday party and the quality of the anticipated door prizes. Lieutenant Colonel Sheridan, the squadron commander asks the Chief to come to his office and update him on the progress of planning for the holiday party. The commander mirrors the enthusiasm of his airmen, explaining that he uses the holiday party to communicate his vision for the upcoming year and boasting that his party is the best in the Wing. He’s counting on his new SEL to see this through and help the squadron finish the year well. When Lt Col Sheridan prompts him for a response, the Chief is hesitant to broach the subject of what he sees as a conflict of interest. He wonders if he is jumping to conclusions and if it’s better to wait until after the holiday party to address the issue. What can or should CMSgt Oliver do?
Wisdom

“The most difficult thing is to recognize that sometimes we too are blinded by our own incentives. Because we don’t see how our conflicts of interest work on us”

- Dan Ariely

Additional reflection on your story or EBD 8:

[Blank lines for reflection]

41

SOF Ethics Field Guide
SOF Ethics Field Guide

EBD 9: Staying Loyal
You’re not sure how much you should give up to protect a teammate.

SOF Character Challenge:

Staff Sergeant Ojeda knows that he should probably report the theft of thermal scopes he just witnessed, but the perpetrator saved his life.

SSgt Ojeda is an Air Force combat controller assigned to a Navy SEAL team in Afghanistan. SSgt Ojeda and this team have spent a lot of time together and have built up a strong relationship of trust, which is critical in their current mission. One of the operators even saved the air commando’s life. Last night as Ojeda was patrolling his area, he observed this operator stealing scopes from a warehouse where equipment for a partner force was stored. Other members of the team also observed the theft, but for whatever reason they didn’t do anything about it.

SSgt Ojeda knows that he should report this incident to his commanding officer, but he wonders if the theft is important enough to ruin the career of a man who saved his life. On the other hand, not reporting him means they’ve got a thief in their midst who could potentially put the current mission at risk, compromise the team’s combat readiness, embarrass SOCOM, and reputationally harm the country. What can or should SSgt Ojeda do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 53.

What’s your story?
Think of an experience when you or someone you know were not sure how much you should give up to protect a teammate.

Nature of the Character Challenge:
Loyalty is a virtue celebrated by most societies. In order for teams to work effectively, there needs to be a sense of loyalty to each other. However, loyalty to principles is oftentimes more important than loyalty to people. Thus, this character challenge involves being loyal to your principles when doing so challenges your loyalty to your team or leader.

Intervention Questions:
1. Does showing loyalty make you sacrifice other loyalties?
2. Does showing loyalty sacrifice your ethics and values?
3. Does your choice make you more trustworthy?
4. Would the other party want your loyalty if they knew all of the costs?
5. Is this person taking advantage of you?
6. Did you ask for this person’s loyalty?
7. Has the individual shown loyalty to you?
8. Can you quietly confront the individual?

Pitfalls:
1. Offloading Accountability - Loyalty is not a substitute for personal responsibility. Make sure each act is your own, not just something required of you by someone else. Accountability means you are always responsible for your choices, even if you are doing what someone else has asked of you.
2. Trusting Blindly - Beware of those who overvalue personal loyalty, especially when they exhibit significant character flaws. They are usually not interested in your well-being, reputation, or character. Those who overvalue personal loyalty are more likely to ask you to act unethically.

3. Taking Advantage - Be careful about what you let others believe about your relationship with them. If you sit by and let them help you, allowing them to think that you don’t owe them a thing because you didn’t ask for their help, you are taking advantage of them.

Planning Ahead:
1. Choose loyalty to values over loyalty to people.
2. Be trustworthy to do the right thing.
3. Lead through shared commitment.
4. Inspire loyalty in others.

Similar Character Challenge:
While on a combat mission with his new team, SGT Cori sees a teammate hide away a thirty-pound bag of pure heroin powder in his gear. As a newcomer to the team, the operator is torn. It is possible that the heroin is a plant by a local warlord to see what the team will do with it. This type of thing happened all the time in his last assignment in South America, but Cori doesn’t know if that is the case here. Loyalty to teammates is a critical component of building and maintaining trust, but this is wrong and the operator knows it. What can or should SGT Cori do?

Wisdom

“Blind loyalty lacks integrity. People who are blindly loyal to a person, when they know that person is causing harm, lack integrity.”
- Maria Consiglio

Additional reflection on your story or EBD 9:
EBD 10: Keeping Promises When Circumstances Change

Conflicting commitments force you to choose which to keep.

SOF Character Challenge:
Due to a mission change, village children will not receive medicine they desperately need and have been promised.

Captain Ingrossano is the leader of a MSOT operating in a dangerous remote location. The team is now four months into a six-month deployment near a village where people have proven to be trustworthy and provided various means of critical support at great risk to their own safety. Capt Ingrossano has developed a personal rapport with one of the leaders of the village who is well-liked by his Marines. This village leader has made significant sacrifices for the team. In their time in the AO, the team has discovered that this leader and his courageous friends have young children who need a particular medicine that is unavailable in the country, but is available through his medical supply channels. With Capt Ingrossano’s authorization, a corpsman has requisitioned the medicine and promised the partner force leader and his village that it will arrive.

During one of his weekly VTCs with his Task Force Commander, Capt Ingrossano is informed that his team must begin to pull out immediately due to a change of mission. Capt Ingrossano lets his commander know of the promised medicine and of his concerns about the relational impact of failing to follow through. When his concerns are acknowledged but dismissed because of mission requirements, Capt Ingrossano replies, “Understood Sir.”

As word filters down, one of Capt Ingrossano’s NCOs shares, “Sir, we’ve promised medical supplies for these people. They’ve been good to us and they could use the help. Regular forces can’t get it to them. The UN can’t get it to them. And now we’re leaving in short order. It doesn’t seem right and it doesn’t look good on us.”

Capt Ingrossano feels his NCO is on point. The children of these partner forces clearly need the medicine, and they have done everything they could to keep the peace and be supportive of US efforts. Leaving without keeping this promise will greatly damage the trust and valuable relationships the team has built with them. But the team has been given an order to leave and can’t do anything about that. Still, it feels like there’s something more they can do. What can or should Capt Ingrossano do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 53.

What’s your story?
Think of an experience when changing circumstances forced you or someone you know to choose between new commitments and promises made before the circumstances changed.

Nature of the Character Challenge:
Keeping promises is a fundamental ethical principle. We make many promises in life (e.g., wedding vows or some religious vows), some very specific and others fairly broad. However, sometimes things happen that force us to choose between our promises. This character challenge involves knowing how to prioritize and keep promises when circumstances change.

Intervention Questions:
1. Can you still keep your promise in other ways?
2. What will happen to the other promises you’ve made if you don’t keep this promise?
3. Does the other party still want you to keep the promise?
4. Could you have predicted the way that the circumstances changed?
5. Is there an alternative that would satisfy the other party as if the original promise was kept?
6. How does this promise affect the mission?
7. How does the mission affect strategic outcomes?
8. How do the outcomes affect National Defense Strategy?

**Pitfalls:**

1. **Assuming the Promise Isn’t That Important** - When the cost of fulfilling a promise rises, it is easy to assume others are not really counting on us to deliver. Often, the costs to others are greater than we realize.

2. **Deciding Alone** - It’s usually a bad idea to break a promise without talking with the other party. If breaking the promise makes sense, the other party is likely to release you from the commitment. Discussing the issue allows both of you to act with more information.

3. **Looking for Excuses** - It’s easy to find reasons to break a promise. Work hard and be creative in keeping promises, even when doing so is difficult.

4. **Imposing on Others** - Often, when the others learn that you want out of your promise due to changing circumstances, they will often release you from your obligation. However, it’s possible that they won’t be happy about the situation or think well of you. Asking to get out of a commitment for selfish reasons will damage your reputation.

**Planning Ahead:**

1. Think carefully when making promises, especially if outside your direct control.
2. Don’t overbook yourself and leave others hanging.
3. Build and maintain solid relationships based on trust.

**Similar Character Challenge:**

Ten years have passed since Mack was killed in action, but SFC Haas remembers it like it was yesterday, as he recalls his wartime promise to take care of his friend’s family if he didn’t return home. He was initially there for the grieving widow, Mia, and her children, faithful to his commitment with his time and finances, and remained active in their lives several years until she remarried and her new husband asked him to limit his contact. Mia agreed it was for the best, that it would help her move on, and assured SFC Haas that he had honored Mack’s wishes.

But now Mia is reaching out to Haas for financial help. She and her husband are behind on their house payment and bills are stacking-up. SFC Haas observes that they live way beyond their means, with an upscale house in a gated community, two high-end automobiles, and the children enrolled in private schools. He recounts his promise to Mack, but questions if he’s still bound to his wartime commitment. What can or should SFC Haas do?

**Wisdom**

“People with good intentions make promises, but people with good character keep them.”

- Unknown

**Additional reflection on your story or EBD 10:**

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Judging (Ethical Battle Drills 11-13)

EBD 11: Having Suspicions without Enough Evidence

You believe that something wrong is going on, but you are not sure.

SOF Character Challenge:

It appears to Petty Officer First Class Nguyen that fraternization is occurring, but she isn’t sure.

PO1 Nguyen is assigned to support the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force in Afghanistan and has been serving in the J1 shop for the last three months. One of her coworkers, Marine Staff Sergeant Wilson, arrived a few weeks after she did, and his cubicle is right next to hers. SSgt Wilson has demonstrated a great work ethic and PO1 Nguyen really enjoys working with him. He is quick to help her and others in the office, and he never tells anyone that lending a hand isn’t part of his job. Last month, a new Navy LTJG Ellis arrived on station to help with manning requirements. She is outgoing, loves to laugh, and really brought some fun to the mundane tasks in Afghanistan.

One day after work about a month ago, PO1 Nguyen saw LTJG Ellis talking and laughing in the hall with SSgt Wilson. Their interaction seemed a bit personal, but PO1 didn’t want to overthink it. She knows that LTJG Ellis is outgoing and that she sometimes puts her hand on someone’s shoulder when she comes up to talk. PO1 Nguyen also knows that SSgt Wilson is married, with two young children at home whom he loves to brag about.

Over the next couple weeks, PO1 Nguyen notices that LTJG Ellis seems to be coming by SSgt Wilson’s desk more often. It also seems that SSgt Wilson isn’t talking to his wife over the phone as much, and their conversations seem to be shorter.

Today when PO1 Nguyen walks over to his cubicle to ask a question, she sees that the picture of his wife and kids is no longer sitting on his desk. While the two are talking, LTJG Ellis comes over in her typical friendly manner and sits down next to his desk to chat. This time though, it seems to PO1 Nguyen that SSgt Wilson and LTJG Ellis are looking at each other differently. PO1 Nguyen greatly respects SSgt Wilson and his work ethic, and she really likes how LTJG Ellis has brought some life back to the office, but she feels like something more is going on between them. What can or should PO1 Nguyen do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 53.

What’s your story?

Think of an experience when you or someone you know suspected that something wrong was going on, but were not sure.

Nature of the Character Challenge:

At times we observe or receive information that someone may be acting inappropriately. If we act too fast on this information, we may wrongly accuse an innocent person. However, if we don’t act, we may be guilty of allowing negative acts to continue. This character challenge involves knowing how to move forward when confronted with suspicion of wrongdoing, but no clear evidence.

Intervention Questions:

1. Who is accountable for solving this problem and how do you best inform them?
2. What will happen if the suspicions are true and you do nothing?
3. What will happen if you act on the suspicions and they are false?
4. Does your gut push you to believe or dismiss too quickly?
5. Considering what might happen, does the quality of your information justify action?
6. Who deserves the most protection?

**Pitfalls:**

1. **Delaying Action** – It can be easy to hope that the situation will simply go away. Don’t wait to do something until you are forced to by a crisis.

2. **Not Reporting Appropriately** – Be familiar with reporting requirements. There’s always a chance that policies or laws require certain kinds of actions to be reported to higher authorities.

3. **Acting Hastily** – If someone brings a suspicion to you, keep in mind that sometimes informants aren’t just trying to involve you, but to recruit you. They may have ulterior motives for what they’re telling you. Take time to find out more before making an accusation.

4. **Not Gathering Sufficient Information** – If you are in an authority position investigating an allegation, avoid being sloppy with information. Take careful notes. Protect the documentation you gather. Try to corroborate the truth with multiple sources. The quality of your evidence will protect you from accusations of bias or dishonesty.

5. **Appearing Overly Biased** – When you look into a potential problem, appearances matter. Take care to avoid appearing unfairly biased. If you seem to have an agenda, others will question your intent.

**Planning Ahead:**

1. Establish reporting channels with the people above and below you.
2. Build a culture of fairness.
3. Anticipate allegations and misunderstandings.
4. Avoid accusatory tone when asking for information.

**Similar Character Challenge:**

SGT Meno’s wife tells him that she suspects a fellow operator of spousal abuse. The Sergeant is new to the command, and his wife has just made friends with the spouse she thinks is being abused. SGT Meno is confident in his wife’s assertion because she has seen this before and deeply regrets being slow to act in the past. However, she doesn’t have proof beyond the bruises she’s seen on the wrists (like she had been grabbed with force). The operator in question has an impeccable reputation and is highly respected by the command. By all indication, the operator is a stand-up guy with a happy, healthy marriage. The Sergeant knows he hasn’t established any credibility with the command yet, and a false accusation will destroy his chances. What can or should SGT Meno do?

**Wisdom**

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

- Aristotle

**Additional reflection on your story or EBD 11:**
**SOF Character Challenge:**

_Special Operator First Class Marco has been recommended for a promotion for which he does not yet qualify._

Navy SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team Platoon (PLT) Leading Petty Officer (LPO) SO1 Marco has enjoyed an exemplary career, advancing through the ranks upon reaching each year of eligibility. However, when SO1 Marco’s Chief notifies him that his periodic Evaluation Report (EVAL) is complete and ready for his signature, the petty officer walks into the Chief’s office with mixed emotions. SO1 Marco is confident that he will receive an outstanding EVAL, but he knows it won’t be enough to help him make Chief. Despite a stellar record and having met the required three years in rank, SO1 will only have eleven months of experience as a PLT LPO when the next Chief Petty Officer Selection Board convenes. He will be just one-month shy of the minimum requirement of milestone leadership for Chief selection in his community.

Once in the Chief’s office, SO1 Marco sits down and reviews the EVAL. To his surprise, the “time for your position as PLT LPO” in Block 29 is inflated by two months, qualifying him for consideration by the next Chief selection board. He can’t believe it! LPO Marco continues reviewing the document, and the narrative in Block 43 confirms that his leadership is giving him a Report to prepare for the board. But then Marco thinks about his peers, fellow SO1s vying for promotion without that competitive edge from their leadership. If he signs the EVAL as-is, SO1 Marco is accepting an unfair advantage over them. If he protests and the Chief corrects the report for the Lieutenant to sign again as Reporting Senior, he not only diminishes his chance to make Chief this cycle, he may place the Chief in an awkward position with the Lieutenant and the command. What can or should SO1 Marco do?

*See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 53.*

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**Nature of the Character Challenge:**

At times we may receive an advantage that is not appropriate, or we may be disadvantaged because someone else received an unfair or unjustified advantage. This character challenge involves understanding how to act in scenarios where you or someone else has an unfair advantage.

**Intervention Questions:**

1. What makes the advantage unfair?
2. Did the other party play a role in the advantage that you have?
3. Can you make the advantage fair?
4. Did you contribute to the unfair advantage?
5. Who else stands to benefit from, or be hurt by, the unfair advantage?
6. What obligation do you owe them?
Pitfalls:

1. **Counting on Your Current Position** - Remember that power does shift. Don’t be overconfident. Think of fairness as an investment or insurance policy. Fairness begets fairness.

2. **Justifying Your Decision** - There are many ways to rationalize an unfair decision. You might pretend you are acting in the best interest of others. You might claim that you have earned your position. You may be blinded to others seeing an unfair advantage in your act of mercy. But you can’t manufacture fairness.

3. **Blaming the Other Party** - Do not blame the other party for not catching you in your bad behavior. People reasonably assume good faith from others around them. People’s trust in you should never be considered a weakness.

Planning Ahead:

1. Work hard so you earn what you get.
2. Think long term and trust that fairness comes back to you.
3. Practice fairness in little ways.

Similar Character Challenge:

Team Chief, MSgt Tobin, accidentally learns the date and time of a surprise inspection next week and knows that his group isn’t anywhere close to ready. He has been in a fierce informal competition with another Raider Team, and passing this inspection will give him bragging rights and more if his team wins. If he tips off his team so they can pass this “surprise” inspection, he will also get an official commendation. But he believes that the competing group is actually more deserving due to their diligent preparation. What can or should MSgt Tobin do?

Wisdom

“Above all, do not lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others.”

- Fyodor Dostoevsky

Additional reflection on your story or EBD 12:
SOF Ethics Field Guide

EBD 13: Showing Mercy
You could grant forgiveness or forbearance, but don’t know if you should.

SOF Character Challenge:

Which is more important between old friends, justice or mercy?

CDR Lee has a tough decision to make about his friend and team member SOCM Jackson. This legendary Master Chief has been a rock within the Frogman community for many years. His professionalism, bravery on target, and his care for his team members is exactly what a Naval Special Warfare senior leader should be. When Lee was an Assistant Platoon Commander in a previous tour, Jackson was a SO1 in his platoon. Both men have now served several deployments together in combat and have developed a close professional and personal relationship. Recently, SOCM Jackson was reassigned to a team that CDR Lee is commanding. The friends are excited about reuniting and being in command leadership to bring this team through training and to take it in to combat.

One night following a week of hard training, several team members go downtown to relax and enjoy a few adult beverages. Pretty soon, SOCM Jackson is clearly inebriated. Eventually, the bartender asks him to go home for the night and sleep it off. Before anyone can ensure that the Master Chief gets into an Uber, he starts driving his own car home. He doesn’t get very far before the State Trooper sees him weaving down the road and pulls him over. After speaking with Jackson, the officer gives CDR Lee a phone call. The officer shares the situation and tells CDR Lee that if he will come pick up SOCM Jackson, the officer will forget that the incident occurred.

CDR Lee picks up his friend and takes him home. He wants to help SOCM Jackson, a fierce warrior and solid NCO, whom he really needs for the upcoming deployment that is only four months away. He knows the Master Chief is confident that their friendship can keep this DUI stop from becoming known and an embarrassment in the community. What can or should CDR Lee do?

See what happened next in this real-world scenario in The Rest of the Story, page 53.

What’s your story?

Think of an experience when you or someone you know had to decide whether or not to grant mercy to another person who made a mistake.

Nature of the Character Challenge:

At times those we supervise act inappropriately. This character challenge involves understanding when it is or isn’t appropriate to provide some level of merciful relief to the guilty.

Intervention Questions:

1. Is mercy yours to give?
2. Is doing so a precedent you want to set?
3. Is mercy more important that justice in this situation?
4. Does granting mercy violate organizational policy?
5. Who bears the immediate cost of not implementing justice?
6. Does it provide for greater safety to grant mercy or to implement justice?
Pitfalls:

1. **Endorsing Poor Behavior** - By forgiving mistakes, you may inadvertently send the message that you endorse bad behavior. If you choose mercy, be sure to make future expectations and penalties clear to everyone involved.

2. **Punishing Improperly** - Punishing in the wrong way sends the wrong message. If too severe, your punishment will damage trust with others. Alternatively, you might be inclined to forgive completely, which could harm your credibility. Send a message to everyone in the organization that you don’t endorse the mistake, but you value the person who made it.

3. **Avoiding Transparency** - It’s tempting to keep the mistake and the outcome hidden from view. Not being transparent about the decision and your reasoning behind it will cause others to assume the worst. You will likely lose their trust.

4. **Forgetting Conflicts of Interest** - The choice to show mercy can be influenced by a conflict of interest. You may owe an unrelated obligation to the person seeking mercy. This can make it hard to refuse the request, even if the costs will be enormous.

5. **Ignoring Cost** - Whatever you do, don’t forget who bears the cost. Extending mercy that isn’t yours to give is unethical and puts the burden unfairly on someone else.

Planning Ahead:

1. Leave room for justice and mercy, knowing that both are important and need balance.
2. Empathize with others as a means of building trust.
3. Encourage open communication, especially about mistakes and poor judgement.

Similar Character Challenge:

Airman Jaworski has been reporting to training 30 minutes late every day. He stays after for at least that and more each day to get his assignments done and done well. The OIC, Maj Moreno, finds out that the Airman has been caring for an ailing parent. What can or should Maj Moreno do?

**Wisdom**

“Mercy, detached from justice, grows unmerciful.”

- C.S. Lewis

**Additional reflection on your story or EBD 13:**
“The Rest of the Story”

This section captures the decisions made and actions taken by the individuals faced with ethical dilemmas in each SOF Character Challenge for the 13 Ethical Battle Drills. These accounts are recorded without judgment regarding the appropriateness of the action—that’s for you to consider as you analyze the character challenge with the principles you are developing as an ethical leader, preparing yourself to face similar challenges in the future.

**Showing Courage Drills**

**EBD 1—Standing up to Power**
ILT Morgen succumbed to the pressure of his commander. However, he decided to do what he could do to minimize any possible casualties. First, he had his targeteers set his aiming point on the extreme bottom of the safety fan... as close as he could land his round to the assaulting Rangers but stay within the safety fan. Second, because the extreme rains had made the ground extremely soft, he had the fuses on the mortars set to “delayed” instead of “impact” or “air,” in the hopes that a short round would bury itself in the soft ground and explode there, instead of above ground causing more casualties. As fate would have it, a round did land short, in the middle of the scout position. However, it detonated below ground instead of on impact and no scouts were seriously injured. The commander continued to rise into the highest ranks and publicly and humbly credited 1LT Morgen with saving his career.

**EBD 2—Intervening**
Neither SFC Dallon nor his commander intervened to stop the rape. Their cover was maintained. The next morning a successful mission was completed in which over 100 girls were rescued from captivity.

**EBD 3—Repairing Wrongs**
SSG Hernandez quickly submitted the paperwork to stop Smith’s jump pay and recover the additional pay erroneously made during the TDY, acknowledging his “oversight” to the command. He also informed the enlisted leadership of SPC Smith’s financial situation. SSG Hernandez didn’t avoid punishment, but his leadership connected Smith to the financial resources on post to help his family through this difficult time.

**Getting the Job Done Drills**

**EBD 4—Sacrificing Personal Values**
SSG Ray shared: Five meters before the patrol turned the corner, Milad dropped the rifle and ran back into the store. I did not shoot. I exhaled a quick breath, put my head down, and tried to bring my adrenaline down.

**EBD 5—Using Questionable Means**
SOCS Ham informed the man that if he doesn’t cooperate, everyone in town is going to believe that he is an informant to the Americans when his team releases him. The man cooperated, exposing the IED cell, and the team protected the man’s identity.

**EBD 6—Stretching Standards**
CPT Tobo felt that keeping good relationships with the host nation and successfully completing the training was vitally important to national strategic interests, but he did not want to overtly violate the “pot of money” directive. Since his team had both 5.56 and 7.62 rounds to fire, he conveniently “co-located” all the ammunition and issued magazines of 5.56 to his instructors for those students firing on the range that day. The team had brought enough weapons with them that each instructor was able to check out several weapons for their stations on the range. The host nation students fired American rounds through American weapons. Training was accomplished.
**EBD 7—Concealing the Truth**

During the meeting, Lt Col Shawn mentions that Maj Young is out taking care of an appointment to learn more about readiness, and also shares that Young is coordinating quick action response training with local law enforcement (housed in the same building as the base behavioral health clinic) in preparation for an upcoming mission.

**Balancing Drills**

**EBD 8—Balancing Conflicting Interests**

SFC Reck was able to justify his preferred company as the best-value contract, based on their proven record of dependability and promptness. However, when the company was the subject of a broader DoD investigation two years later, the newly promoted MSG Reck was criminally charged for his part in the scandal.

**EBD 9—Staying Loyal**

SSgt Ojeda reported the theft to the CO. Initially, Ojeda felt stigmatized by many team members for speaking-up as he did. When the investigation that followed exposed a series of thefts with multiple participants, it became clear that the air commando was right. Two operators and a logistics specialist where convicted for their crimes. SSgt Ojeda, however, didn’t fully recover from the stigma he felt and decided not to reenlist when his time was up.

**EBD 10—Keeping Promises when the World Changes**

Capt Ingrossano discretely sought advice from another leader higher up the command of chain. Through those leadership contacts the team was able to hand off their concern and still keep their promise indirectly. The delivery was carried out through an entirely different organization and the credit went elsewhere officially. But the village and the village leaders always gave credit to the team and the U.S. for keeping their word.

**Judging Drills**

**EBD 11—Having Suspicions Without Enough Evidence**

SO1 Nguyen decided not to do anything. Soon the LTJG grew tired of the SSgt and moved on. The SSgt was devastated and sent nude pictures of the LTJG to some friends in the group. This then caused both him and the LTJG to be relieved of duty, and one was dishonorably discharged.

**EBD 12—Dealing with Unfair Advantage**

SO1 Marco pointed out the inaccuracy of Block 29 to the Chief, noting that his time as PLT LPO was two months less than specified in the report. The Chief acknowledged the discrepancy, but explained that it was to correct an error in his own leadership that unduly penalized Marco. The Chief had intended to move Marco into the LPO slot earlier in the year, knowing that he was approaching eligibility, but his intentions were overshadowed by the OPTEMPO of the platoon. He assured the LPO that he was ready to promote and the Lieutenant was onboard with the EVAL. He also reminded the petty officer that the E-7 advancement examination was only two months away. SO1 Marco signed the report, but left the office with a feeling of uneasiness. Less than seven months after Marco aced the exam, the Chief of Naval Operations released the names of the new CPO selectees, and SO1 Marco was one of them.

**EBD 13—Showing Mercy**

After a heart-to-heart conversation with SOCM Jackson, CDR Lee decided that there is a middle-ground between justice and mercy. The Master Chief underwent eight weeks of counseling and remained alcohol-free through the remaining pre-deployment cycle. He deployed with a renewed, healthy disposition on life.
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A Special Operations Forces Ethics Field Guide

13 Ethical Battle Drills for SOF Leaders