Leadership and Ethics across the Continuum of Learning

The Ethical Leadership Framework

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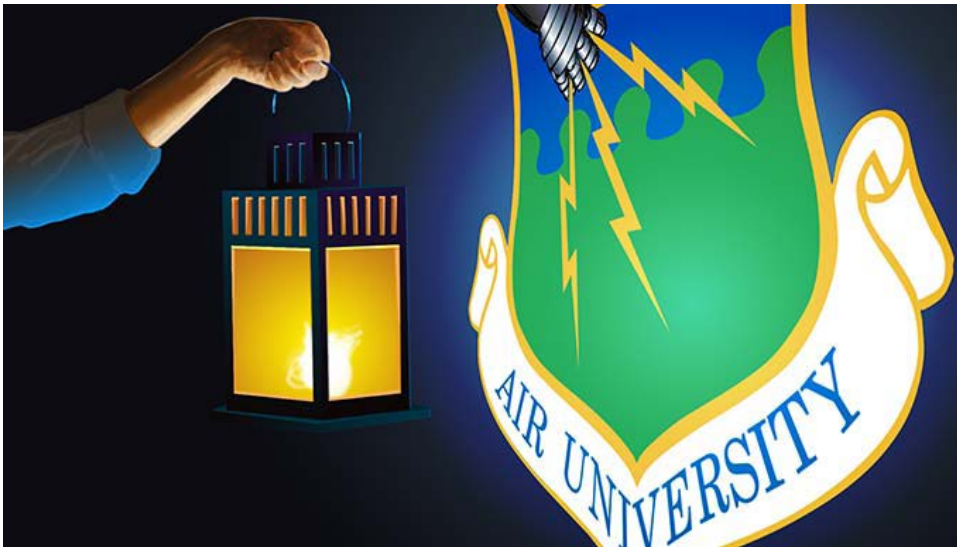Jessica Weise
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For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*

When broaching the subject of ethics, Airmen tend to hone in on the lapses of sound ethical judgment that often result in public and embarrassing behaviors.[1] The Air Force's nuclear cheating scandal and basic military training instructor abuses stand as stark reminders of the damage unethical behavior can have on individuals' safety and well-being, unit morale, and mission effectiveness.[2] Military ethical failures and lapses concerning sexual harassment and violence, in addition to increased awareness of notions of gender and

gender roles, have led to an increase in public investment and awareness of military operations.[3] The Air Force Core Values—*integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do*—provide a clear expectation of the institutional values and norms Airmen should live by, yet these negative events can generate a significant loss of trust between the Air Force and its nation's citizens and civilian leadership. As foundational and critical as these principles of conduct are for Airmen, it is important to recognize that ethics goes beyond preventing acts of ethical turpitude and reinforcing the seemingly obvious choices between known rights and wrongs.

According to the *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States*, "the increasingly complex security environment is defined by rapid technological change, challenges from adversaries in every operating domain, and the impact on readiness from the longest continuous stretch of armed conflict in our Nation's history."[4] Additionally, academic literature recognizes military organizations face several ethical dilemmas due to the increasing complexity of warfare; increased use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV); blurred lines between civilian and combatant; and, often, a lack of clearly defined combat zones.[5] Leaders must be prepared to make ethically-sound decisions in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment.[6] Thus, ethical leadership requires Airmen to do more than not be "unethical;" it requires them to deliberately lead others, navigate situations, and execute daily missions guided by ethical decision making.

Air University (AU) is utilizing its quality enhancement plan, *Leadership and Ethics across the Continuum of Learning*, to pursue efforts that will help create a more deliberate, coherent, and comprehensive approach to leadership development. Informed by the research and theoretical underpinnings of leadership development, this article introduces the Ethical Leadership Framework (ELF). AU has developed and is implementing the ELF framework to guide its deliberate efforts to improve strategic, ethical decision making across Air Force educational programs. In the past, ethical leadership and ethical thinking frameworks have been treated as separate from overall leadership development. In the ELF, all leadership is viewed and framed within an ethical context. Given the unique global perspective and context Airmen operate within, the framework focuses on three specific strategic capacities (behaviors)—absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and decision-making capacity—which are foundational traits and the skills necessary to create ethical leaders who think and act strategically.[7]

Ethical Leadership Review

Current literature in the context of military leader development focuses on the need to increase ethical development in military personnel and provide general conclusions for leadership development.[8] First, ethical leadership occurs in two

continuums: sociocognitive and interpersonal.[9] Previous research on ethical leadership development focused almost exclusively on developing ethical individuals; this heavily influenced existing military tendencies to train and develop ethics exclusively at the individual level.[10] Much of the instruction at the individual level has been taught through the lens of virtue ethics or ethics that reflect an individual's virtues of mind and character. Through the lens of virtue ethics, values vary across individuals and cannot be forced upon individuals in the learning process.[11] Literature suggests the development of leadership, ethics, and values at the organizational level is needed to foster a culture of ethics within organizations.[12] In addition to virtue ethics, ethical leadership development education should address the interpersonal continuum and focus on follower internalization of norms and behaviors through relationships.[13]

Strategic Leader Review

The Air Force's mission is to "fly, fight, and win in air, space, and cyberspace," and Airmen bring a unique global and strategic perspective to the joint warfighting efforts.[14] To develop strategic leaders, deliberate development must occur holistically across an Airman's entire career. A leader must begin developing and exercising the foundational traits and skills of a strategic leader, cognitively, behaviorally, and socially at the beginning of a career, not upon entry into the upper echelons of an organization.[15] Air Force leaders must have the ability to continue to learn and adapt to the evolutions of global, social, and cultural context.[16] Through these complexities, an emerging leader develops skills in critical thinking and decision making; interpersonal and public communication; personal competencies and capabilities; organizational structures, processes, and controls; interpersonal, group, and organizational relationship management; identifying, selecting and developing future leaders; creating and managing organizational culture; and infusing an ethical and values system.[17]

To develop ethical leaders within the context of the Air Force environment, the ELF focuses on three specific strategic capacities. These three capacities—absorptive capacity, adaptive capacity, and decision-making capacity—are integral to the development and maturation of Air Force leaders and an ethical Air Force organizational culture.

Absorptive capacity

Absorptive capacity is the individual's ability to learn through directed and self-directed learning and to apply the knowledge to specific contexts.[18] Development in the absorptive capacity includes the individual or organization's ability to seek

out applicable external knowledge and use that knowledge in a transformative way.[19] As the commander, Air Education and Training Command, Lt Gen Steven L. Kwast, reminded Airmen: "A warrior's ability to assimilate vast quantities of information, make meaning out of that input, act decisively, and almost simultaneously evaluate effects to influence subsequent action, constitutes the intellectual warfighting acumen that has prevailed in every age and in every challenge."[20] An individual's absorptive capacity is dependent on the procedures of an organization, including their policies, degree of socialization, and quality of relationships within an organization.[21]

Adaptive capacity

Adaptive capacity is the individual's ability to change or adapt in moments of incongruence, complexity, and changing environments.[22] Development in the adaptive capacity requires creativity and innovation and the ability to seek out new solutions or options to conflict. Adaptive capacity requires input from all members of an organization because this capacity is reliant on the cognitive, behavioral, and adaptability abilities of each member of the group as well as the adaptability of the group as a single entity.[23] The *2018 National Defense Strategy* outlines the need for the joint force to "out-think, out-maneuver, out-partner, and out-innovate" threats to national defense.[24] Air Force Chief of Staff Gen David L. Goldfein and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright articulated this need when they told command teams: "The game-changing idea that will alter the course of history is in the mind of one of our Airmen today. . . our job is to nurture the environment that unleashes this brilliance and allows the idea to make it to a decision-maker who can act."[25]

Decision-Making Capacity

The *decision-making capacity* of an individual is the ability to understand individual and organizational actors, individual and organizational relationships, and how to make decisions at the appropriate time while creating and maintaining relationships.[26] The AU commander and president, Lt Gen Anthony J. Cotton, outlined that to meet the rapidly shifting global security environment, education must recognize "a competitive battlespace will require a joint force that has the habits of mind and practice to act boldly upon commander's intent."[27] This tenet of strategic leadership relies on the social intelligence of the individual, the ability to leverage relationships to gain multiple perspectives on the complex situations leaders face, and the ability to make the right decision at the right time.

Conceptual Framework

The ELF seeks to address development across all domains and ranks to provide a more holistic approach to the development of ethical, strategic Air Force leaders. The ELF directs leadership development at the three levels integral to leadership development: the individual, team, and organization. In the context of the military, leader development often addressed each element of leadership development separately. Development in each individual domain is important for the overall ethical leadership development of an organization yet neglects to acknowledge the value of considering how each element of leadership must work together to create a holistic view.

Informed by the research and theoretical underpinnings of leadership development such as Leader-Member Exchange theory, Vertical Leadership, the Full-Range Leadership Model, and Meta-Leadership, the ELF seeks to address the growing ethical dilemmas military personnel face through the deliberate development of ethical leaders.[28] The authors define ethical leadership in the Air Force context as individuals who behave ethically in their personal and professional lives, and "actively influenc[e] employees to be conscientious of ethics and encourag[e] them to act."[29] An ethical leader demonstrates ethical leadership through accountability, "communication, discipline, and the effects of role modeling."[30] Specifically, the conceptual framework integrates the intersection of ethical leadership and strategic leadership focusing on the development of the three domains integral to leadership development.

Depicted visually in figure 1, the framework conveys a relationship between an individual's understandings of "self," their ability as a "team" leader to create an environment that fosters subordinates' individual development, and the capacity to foster a culture/climate in the Air Force as the organization. This recognizes the dyadic relationship of influence between Airmen, the teams they lead, and the Air Force as a broader organization. Air Force programs and development efforts must ensure that Airmen are deliberately developed in these capacities across a continuum of their learning, from introductory concepts during accessions and early stages of their careers to more advanced concepts and applications as they mature in their experiences and levels of responsibility.
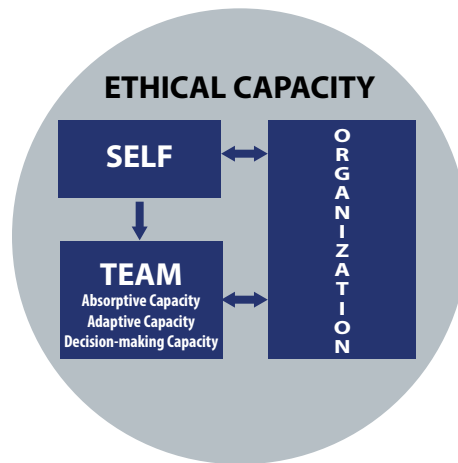
Figure 1. Ethical leadership framework

Figure 2 is a visual representation of the ELF in the context of the Air Force. This leadership development process proceeds horizontally and vertically; Airmen develop as leaders with increasing roles and responsibilities and develop in each domain, deepening their skills as a part of the development process.

Figure 2. Ethical leadership framework in Air Force organization context

The following section provides an overview of the three domains of the ELF conceptual framework, with a specific focus on ethical development.

Individual. The foundation of ethical development begins with the development of the ethical self where one identifies ethical beliefs and values and is able to act on those internal beliefs through ethical reasoning and decision making.[31] Ethical traits include honesty, courage, responsibility, agreeableness, respect, duty, loyalty, conscientiousness, and empathy.[32] The key focus of development at the

individual level is to provide the opportunity to identify and reflect on one's internal beliefs and connect individual ethical values to USAF values, so that individual Airmen see their beliefs as aligned with the Air Force as an organization; in short, their internal beliefs align with organizational ethical beliefs.[33]

Indoctrination and mass briefings are not enough to ensure ethical behavior.[34] While behavior reinforces value identification, and values are reinforced by practice, simply behaving ethically is not enough to ensure ethical behavior and ethical leadership in peers and subordinates. In leadership development curriculum, traditional ethical theory is especially relevant in this development process. For example, Schulzke applied Kant's moral theory to military operations, specifically to drone use to help Airmen consider ethical ramifications of UAV use.[35] Through the use of ethical theories, Airmen should see ethics in everything, and ethical decisions should be habitual by developing an automatic trigger of ethical schemas.[36]

Development at the individual level is facilitated by opportunities to apply ethical decision making in real-world settings with real-world rewards and punishments.[37] Airmen should be encouraged to act ethically through an equitably applied system of rewards and punishments, and they should also be encouraged to report ethical violations. This is important to reinforce individual ethical development and demonstrate how individual ethical beliefs align with organizational beliefs.[38] Research suggested ethical individuals are more likely to behave ethically even in the presence of unethical leadership.[39]

In the ELF, development in the individual domain seeks to guide Airmen to develop an ethical foundation and act in accordance in their personal lives. The measurable outcomes for Airmen in this domain include the ability to: identify personal values as they align with Air Force values of integrity, service, and excellence; demonstrate ethical traits; identify the values of others; recognize the ethical dimension of a situation and the values at stake; judge an ethical question or dilemma and communicate this judgment; act in accordance with judgment in an ethically responsible manner; and be held accountable for actions and decisions.

Team. Within the team domain, ethical leadership training and development focuses on creating an environment that fosters a subordinate's individual ethical development while building, reinforcing, and enforcing the Air Force as an ethical organization. Prior research suggests low levels of training and poor unit discipline are indicators of misconduct, and high levels of stress lead to an increased likelihood of unethical behavior.[40] Additionally, subordinates are more likely to engage in unethical behavior when following orders and are reluctant to report ethical violations for members of their unit, which is a key consideration in addressing sexual violence and harassment.[41] These findings are in contrast to the suggestion that ethical lapses are individual; organizational culture, leader charac-

teristics, and environment all contribute to the ethical behavior of subordinates. Research suggests leaders cannot assume Airmen know what is right and will behave ethically, as is typical in a laissez-faire leadership model.[42] Ethical behavior is developed through constant and consistent attention to ethics.

At the team level, leaders must continue to behave ethically at the individual level and create an ethical culture for those they are responsible for. A leader must discipline ethical violations equitably without regard to differences in rank and must reward ethical decisions, reinforcing both the ethics of obligation and the ethics of aspiration.[43] Leaders need to model ethical behavior, connect with subordinates by showing respect equally, regardless of rank, and know subordinates as individuals.[44] Additionally, it is important that leaders foster conversations about ethics and provide opportunities for discussion and reflection, especially in cases where the ethical decision is not clear.[45] This is a key aspect of engaged leadership, where direct leader involvement creates a culture where they are not the only one holding Airmen responsible for ethical decisions, but Airmen hold each other accountable as well.[46] An ethical leader at the team level is responsible for determining the key areas that support the Air Force mission and values by creating systems of checks and balances that communicate those values to Airmen and hold them accountable.[47] Finally, leaders need to create an environment that is, as much as possible given the constraints of the field, stress-free, supportive, and meets the basic needs of the Airman.[48]

In the team domain, development seeks to help Airmen to learn how to practice ethical management and influence subordinates to make ethical decisions. The measurable outcomes for Airmen in this domain include the ability to: model ethical behavior, develop ethical behavior in subordinates, reward ethical behavior in subordinates (ethics of aspiration), punish unethical violations equitably (ethics of obligation), and foster an environment that supports ethical behavior (e.g., safe, secure, and stable within the constraints of the field).[49]

Organization. Ethical behavior should be an institutional norm and should occur in an ethical organization.[50] This can be achieved by creating and reinforcing structures that punish ethical lapses equitably, providing channels for dissent that do not interfere with the larger mission of the Air Force, and reinforcing ethical norms.[51] As such, leaders need to facilitate organizational conditions that allow individuals to ask questions, dissent, and report violations without fear of repercussion.[52] Further, there needs to be an implementation of checks and balances both intrateam and intergroup where senior leaders are similarly held accountable for their behaviors just as subordinates are.[53] Finally, it is key that senior leaders build and communicate a shared vision to subordinates.[54]

The development of emerging leaders individually supports the collective development of a team of emerging leaders. The development of the individual and collective, in turn, facilitates emerging leaders across the continuum of a career to support leaders across their respective continuums of learning and development. Fostering an environment that continually develops and supports emerging ethical leaders helps create an ethically sustainable environment. Incorporating the development of ethical behavior in this domain should lead to the long-term success of the Air Force organization.

In the organization domain, instruction seeks to help Airmen to develop and promote an ethical organizational structure. The measurable outcomes for Airmen in this domain include the ability to: reinforce organizational ethical values through modeling, open conversations, rewarding ethical behavior and enforcing punishment equally for violations; create a shared vision; implement checks and balances for personal leadership roles; and provide opportunities for dissent (e.g., dissent channels).[55]

The ELF purposefully integrates the areas of ethical and strategic leadership to provide Airmen a pragmatic construct and model to bring the essence of leadership and ethics to the forefront of all the Air Force does and to wholly-assimilate ethical leadership into the psyche of Airmen.[56] By addressing all three interpersonal development domains—individual, team, and organization—with a specific focus on the three capacities—absorptive, adaptive, and decision making—the framework provides a construct that will promote a deliberate and methodical way to analyze, evaluate, develop and assess existing and future leadership development programs across AU.[57]

Conclusion

In a February 2019 memorandum to all DOD personnel, Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan stated:

> Congress and the Nation have placed their trust in us—trust that we will deliver high performance results and remain accountable to the American people as good stewards of their tax dollars. As we continue translating strategy into action, we must demonstrate our commitment as leaders in carrying this trust forward. A key component of leadership is reinforcing ethical behavior across the full spectrum of our work and recognizing ethics principles as the foundation upon which we make sound, informed decisions.[58]

In support of the Air Force's fourth strategic priority to "develop exceptional leaders. . . to lead the world's most powerful teams," AU is reinvigorating and focusing on the development of leaders in the profession of arms.[59] As *the Intellec-*

tual and Leadership Development Center of the Air Force, leadership development is an AU-wide endeavor and occurs across all centers, schools and major programs. In turn, AU programs reach virtually every Airman across the Total Force, whether officer, enlisted or civilian. AU is dedicated to providing leader development opportunities that are cutting-edge, relevant, and impactful; opportunities that are coherent and cohesive for our Air Force as an organization, while meeting the unique needs for every Airman's individual development. AU is using the ELF to help create a more deliberate approach to leadership development, focusing on the fusion of ethical and strategic leadership to create a more cohesive experience for individual Airmen that spans the educational opportunities throughout an individual's career, and to build cohesion across the Air Force, creating common frameworks, language, and experiences for officer, enlisted and civilian development. The ELF will guide concerted efforts to develop and improve strategic, ethical decision making across all leaders in the Air Force.

The creation and implementation of the ELF seeks to reframe the idea of ethics for Airmen and to better develop the ethical-strategic decision-making competencies for Air Force leaders. Drawing increased efforts and resources to the ethical development of military leaders is a step toward fostering a culture and organization that inherently values ethics in all areas of leadership, rather than a focus on limited sets of right/wrong scenarios. Though created within the context of the Air Force, the ELF has practical implications for other military branches and organizations to develop the ethical decision-making skills of leaders. ✪

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Notes

1. The authors acknowledge that morals (morality) and ethics (ethical) are related and unfortunately frequently interchanged. Morality is used as both a descriptive concept and a normative concept. In the descriptive sense, *morality* is used to describe or refer to certain specified codes of conduct established by a group or society (e.g., the "moral" codes found within the five major world religions) or as an internalized code embraced by an individual. In the normative sense, *morality* refers to a code of conduct or behaviors that, given specified conditions, would be followed by a rational person. The definition of *morality* in either sense frames the development of an ethical theory and in turn, the definitions of *ethics* and *ethical*. The descriptive use of morality is reflected in the ethical codes of professions. It reflects the identification of behaviors that are considered right or wrong for an individual in that profession. The ethics or ethical behavior is thus a social construct of rules of conduct and in some cases, an implied social contract. For the authors' purposes, the Air Force's core values, the profession of arms, rules of engagement, and so forth, convey a descriptive view of the underlying moral and imply an ethical code of conduct. This view creates morals as the philosophical underpinning and ethics as the guiding principles/standards/expectations for behavior.

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