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CHAPTER 6

Obedience and Personal Responsibility

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Dangerous contexts are those in which the stakes are high and where there may be little time to develop or discuss a course of action. Unquestioning and immediate obedience may be demanded precisely because deliberating or discussing might delay responding and thereby increase danger or decrease chances of survival. In some cases, there may be time for deliberation and discussion, even if there is pressure to act quickly. Reaching the right conclusions when the chips are down can be facilitated by having considered in advance one's obligation to obey an order versus responsibility to oneself, one's values, and others who may be affected by actions taken. This chapter considers legal constraints on behavior and scientific evidence that helps frame thinking about the pressures people may face and how to resist them. Two fictitious scenarios are used to illustrate the application of these considerations in practice.

You are a first-line leader responsible for a small detention facility in a remote area of a combat zone where detainees are housed for short periods of time. The detainees are a mixed group who have been jailed for a variety of reasons and consist of a mixture of hard-core insurgents, innocent civilians, common criminals, and foreign fighters. Detainees are interrogated by intelligence personnel to determine whether they should be released or transferred to a larger facility. Your job is to administer the facility, ensuring that the detainees are adequately provided with the necessities of life, providing for internal and external security, and coordinating and cooperating with the intelligence personnel conducting interrogations to provide safe access to inmates as needed.

Your soldiers notice that detainees are returning from interrogations showing signs of physical abuse. The soldiers also report that some of the detainees have told them stories of abusive treatment during the interrogations. You approach your contact among the interrogators, the official to whom detainees are delivered for interrogation, and relay what you have heard. He says, "It's none of your business what goes on in the interrogations. Your job is to provide a safe environment to interrogate the detainees and to keep your mouth shut. The insurgents are trained to lie about their treatment, and by passing on their lies you are only helping the bad guys, who are killing your own soldiers."

For the next few days, you personally escort some of the detainees from interrogations and see firsthand the signs of abuse that the soldiers had reported. You approach your commander to report what you have seen. You tell him that you do not think your unit should be a party to abusive treatment and ask him to clarify with the intelligence authorities what is taking place during the interrogations. He responds that he has "no authority over the intelligence authorities," and even if he did, he would not tell them how to do their job. He adds, "The detainees are the same people who kill and wound our soldiers, and you should reconsider your priorities out here in the combat zone. If you care more about these scumbags than your own comrades, I have no use for you and will send you packing." He says you should "grow up, shut up and get back to work."

You are deeply conflicted about what to do. You do not think it is right to abuse detainees, especially when many of them may be innocent of any wrongdoing. You are pretty sure that the rules prohibit the kind of treatment you suspect the detainees are receiving, though the rules are complicated and this is not your area of specialty. You have also seen the results of insurgent activity and have lost soldiers to insurgent attacks, including a close friend who died the preceding week. You do not want to betray your comrades or dishonor the memory of your friend by being soft on detainees, none of whom seem to care much for you or your people anyway.

You think that you should tell your commander that you are going to report your suspicions up the chain of command despite his instruction to "shut up" and let the chips fall where they may. Your close friends in the unit tell you that you would only be sacrificing your own career and future for a bunch of people who would abuse you far worse if they had the chance. What do you do?

ABU GHRAIB, 2003

The above scenario is fictitious, but contains elements of realities that have played out many times in recent years. One real-world event, the abuses that

took place at Abu Ghraib in fall 2003, has some important parallels with the fictitious scenario here. At Abu Ghraib, a military police unit was given the responsibility of administering a large prison outside Baghdad. This reserve unit was poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly supplied. Their living conditions and security were abysmal. The prison was overcrowded, leadership was largely absent or ineffective, and the chain of command and responsibility was convoluted.¹

Into this situation stepped a cast of infamous characters: Specialist Charles Graner would become known as the ringleader of a group of soldiers whose degrading and disgusting treatment of detainees caused worldwide revulsion. Staff Sergeant Ivan Frederick, Specialist Megan Ambuhl, and Private First Class Lynndie England (among others) went along and participated in the abuse. Graner pushed them to cooperate in the abuse by convincing them that they were simply doing what intelligence personnel wanted them to do—"softening up" the detainees for interrogation. One soldier, Specialist Matt Wisdom, walked off the tier when he saw the abuses and immediately reported them to his sergeant. Another, Sergeant Joseph Darby, became aware of the abuses, could not reconcile them with his values and beliefs, and eventually reported them up the chain. Abu Ghraib became a symbol of all the things that were wrong with the Iraq War, a rallying cry for opposition to the war, and most significant, a recruiting tool for insurgents. Abu Ghraib was also only the latest incident in which soldiers accused of misconduct claimed that they were "only following orders."

SETTING THE STAGE: OBEDIENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Dangerous situations are ones in which, by definition, the stakes are high, and are also often situations in which there is not a great deal of time for reflection or discussion. Many assume that military culture requires unquestioning and immediate obedience to orders from above, and that a similar approach would be required in other dangerous situations outside the military. The reality is more complicated: wise leaders consult others as they develop their plans, and incorporate the advice and experience superiors, peers, and subordinates bring to the table.

Plan Inclusively, Discuss Openly and Honestly, Salute Smartly

Some outside military culture are surprised to learn that there is more to military life than simply transmitting orders up and down a chain of command and closely supervising their execution. Orders within the military are based

on what is called the commander's intent. It comes from the senior leader and articulates the overall plan and end-state of a military operation. Before orders are issued, they are usually subjected to a great deal of discussion and sometimes quite lively debate. These discussions generally include individuals at various levels in the chain of command. This deliberative and reflective component to decision making is essential to ensure that the valuable experience of everyone is brought to bear on what are often life-or-death decisions.

The context in which this deliberation and reflection occur consists of a clear and formal hierarchy of relationships. As a result, it can be a challenge for military leaders to ensure that their subordinates feel comfortable expressing their views, especially when they differ from a superior's. This is, in principle, no different from what happens in nonmilitary contexts; it is simply more public. One important aspect of military culture is that once a course of action is decided upon, debate and discussion cease, and universal commitment to the successful execution of the plan is expected. It is at this point that the realities of military life most closely match widely held beliefs about it.

It Is Our Duty and Personal Responsibility to Disobey Unlawful Orders

During the execution of military operations, a legal obligation remains for service members to disobey orders under certain circumstances. Specifically, soldiers are required and expected to challenge and disobey unlawful orders and are morally obligated to do so by the terms of their oath. "I was only following orders" is not a valid defense for a military member charged with criminal conduct. This requirement places an immense burden on them. If a service member judges an order to be unlawful and disobeys it, and it is later determined that the order was lawful, he or she may be subject to severe sanctions (including court-martial), especially if the incident takes place under combat conditions. On the other hand, a soldier who obeys an unlawful order and commits a criminal act is subject to the full weight of the law for any offense committed, as if the order had never been given.²

Regardless of whether legal consequences ensue from following an unlawful order, soldiers often experience devastating psychological consequences as they confront doubt or guilt about their actions; such feelings sometimes haunt them for the rest of their lives. For example, in March 1968, Varnado Simpson took part in the My Lai massacre. "That day in My Lai, I was personally responsible for killing about 25 people. Personally. Men, women. From shooting them, to cutting their throats, scalping them, to . . . cutting off their hands and cutting out their tongue."³ Since then, Simpson has suffered "chronic and very severe" emotional and psychological trauma. Although we

can discuss these topics in a rational and dispassionate way, the fact is that real people may suffer real consequences as a result of their decisions and actions.

Model and Teach Professional Ethical Codes

These potentially conflicting obligations are perhaps more starkly apparent in military service than in other walks of life, but as John Kleinig argues in *The Ethics of Policing*,⁴ the ethical tensions that exist in some professions are no different in principle from those in most people's everyday lives. These tensions often arise as universal moral obligations seemingly come into conflict with certain obligations assumed as professionals. Soldiers, firefighters, police officers, and medical professionals may have particular obligations that differ by the nature of their profession. Soldiers do not often worry about confidentiality issues, for example, while physicians may. Everyone, however, experiences conflicts from time to time and must be guided in their resolution by the requirements of law and the dictates of conscience. Complicating matters, law and conscience may not always coincide. For instance, medical professionals sometimes experience conflicts between professional ethical and personal religious obligations. The resolution of such conflicts depends on the priority individuals give to the competing obligations. In general, professionals agree to abide by the ethical code of their field. This can be problematic if the individual is new to the profession or is unfamiliar with the relevant code of conduct.

Loyalty to the Organization Comes before Loyalty to Peers

The attachments that form between and among those who share life-and-death experiences are emotionally and psychologically powerful, whether such events occur on the battlefield, in an urban back alley, or in a triage tent. These attachments complicate the purely rational processing of events and add a layer of complexity to the ethical decision making prominent in dangerous environments. Indeed, it has been said that soldiers do not fight for their country or for abstract ideals; rather they fight for one another.⁵ Soldiers and leaders occupy organizational and social roles, and their inclinations as individuals may not always correspond with their inclinations as commanders or comrades. Exposure to common dangers and hardships binds people in ways that outsiders may not fully appreciate. Moreover, those bonds can become so strong that horizontal allegiances (those within the unit) may overpower or replace vertical allegiances to the overall organization or to superordinate entities, such as the society of which the organization is a part. In law enforcement, the popular term "blue wall of silence" refers to the unwritten rule that

police officers protect one another from the consequences of improper or illegal activity. When such behavior occurs, it can corrode public trust and undermine effectiveness.

Commitment to organizational values is further complicated when members are expected to accept values that they may not endorse or may even oppose. There may well be political and ideological differences between most members of an organization and the society it serves. The case has been made by some that this is the situation with today's U.S. military. Duncan Hunter, a former congressional representative from California, has suggested that the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy should not be repealed because the members of the military are generally conservative and should not have values with which they disagree imposed on them, even if they directly conflict with those of the broader society.⁶ It is the leader's job to ensure that subordinates understand their obligations and are ready to live up to them even if they disagree with them or feel conflicting obligations to others around them. Leaders may, therefore, find themselves in the uncomfortable position of seemingly taking sides with "outsiders" against the members of his or her own unit. Leaders must ultimately remain focused on the society they agreed to serve.

The Law

The U.S. military justice system, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, is administered by service members who are all subject to the system and who can be expected to have experienced or to have knowledge of the very dilemmas and conflicts that confront individuals charged with unlawful conduct. Soldiers should thus expect that they will be judged by people who understand and can empathize with the challenges they face and the conditions under which important and morally ambiguous decisions must often be made. Military law comes down squarely on the side of personal accountability when obedience to orders may place a service member in jeopardy of committing criminal conduct. The reality for service members is thus far more complex than the view that simple unquestioning obedience is their only obligation. If only it were so simple.

Organizational Watchdog Agencies

These conflicting obligations similarly afflict police officers, firefighters, and medical personnel, where potential violations will be adjudicated in civil courts. Government entities generally have self-policing and enforcement mechanisms; for example, police departments have internal affairs bureaus that investigate allegations of corruption or misconduct by members. Those

that do not have their own internal investigative groups will often rely on the district attorney's office or higher levels of government to perform this function. Inspector general offices have related responsibilities. Judgment is also sometimes sought through the courts. Challenges to the propriety of orders or refusing to follow orders can be decided through the judicial system, and compensation for right and wrong can be awarded through torts in civil courts.

The potential conflict between one's personal responsibility to the law and one's legal responsibility to obey orders is one which most service members will hopefully never experience. If, however, such a conflict arises, it is likely to be because of ambiguous circumstances, perhaps in a gray area with which the member may have no previous experience, often under conditions of extreme stress, fear, and fatigue and with little time to choose between right and wrong. These conditions are essentially those that the unlucky soldier in the opening scenario faced and also those with which the soldiers at Abu Ghraib had to contend.

When it comes to leadership in dangerous situations, the questions with which one must grapple with respect to obedience and personal responsibility are as follows: (1) How can one develop and sustain a leadership climate that encourages soldiers, police officers, and other first responders to think through the difficult moral and ethical challenges they may face? (2) What training and education can be provided to equip them for morally ambiguous situations in combat and elsewhere? (3) What special considerations, if any, do dangerous contexts compel one to consider when thinking about obedience and personal responsibility?

NEW HAVEN, 1961

Forty-two years before Abu Ghraib, in a psychology laboratory at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, an interesting scenario played out. Citizens answered an ad in a local newspaper to participate in a psychological experiment in return for a small payment. As instructed, they went to a laboratory at Yale University and were greeted by a scientist (the "experimenter") wearing a white lab coat. He told them that they would be participating in a learning study and that they would be the "teachers." They were introduced to a jolly, portly gentleman who was identified as the "learner." They were then taken to an adjacent room, where the learner was strapped into a chair, with one arm bound to a metal plate; the door was closed behind them. They then returned to the outer room, where they were seated in front of an ominous-looking console labeled "Shock Generator." Rows of toggle switches indicated voltage levels. The highest, labeled 450 volts, was marked "Danger: Severe Shock."

A teacher was instructed to read through a long list of word pairs, which the learner was supposed to memorize. When the teacher re-read the first word in the pair, the learner was supposed to provide the second one. If he failed, the teacher would deliver a shock. Each successive error raised the level of the shock. The “teachers” were actually the only subjects in the study; the “learner” received no shocks, but the teacher did not know this until the experiment was over.

Stanley Milgram, the psychologist who conducted this study, found that about two-thirds of the teachers (in the most well-known version of the study) administered the (supposedly) maximum and dangerously severe 450-volt shock to the learner, despite his (faked) screams, objections, medical complaints, and eventual apparent collapse. Many of the teachers were uncomfortable with what they were doing. They frequently turned to the experimenter for reassurance, often asserting that “they would not accept responsibility” for any harm done to the learner, sometimes requiring such gentle prodding from the experimenter as “The experiment requires that you continue.” Nevertheless, under certain combinations of conditions, many of the subjects showed a kind of pathological obedience, obeying instructions they ought to have refused.⁷

From New Haven to the Nazis

The Milgram obedience study, as this experiment came to be known, occurred sixteen years after the end of World War II, at about the time Adolph Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal, was captured and subsequently prosecuted in Israel. Milgram, while reading Hannah Arendt’s riveting account of the trial in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was struck by Eichmann’s sheer ordinariness.⁸ Arendt coined the term “banality of evil” to describe the completely unexceptional nature of people who nonetheless commit exceptional acts of what most would consider to be evil. Lieutenant William Calley, found guilty of personally murdering numerous defenseless civilians during the My Lai massacre, was judged by doctors and psychiatrists to be “normal” and capable of distinguishing between right and wrong.⁹ The subjects in Milgram’s study were also unexceptional people, who he showed were ready to apply dangerous shocks to perfect strangers merely on the say-so of a man in a lab coat. Although the Nazis were seen by many as evil, Milgram raised the possibility that they were really little different from anyone else.

As Milgram studied obedience in the laboratory more extensively and thoroughly, he began to uncover factors that systematically affected it. For example, he found that the closer in physical proximity a “teacher” was to a “learner,” the less likely the teacher was to administer intense shocks; it is

easier to harm someone from a distance than it is to harm someone nearby because one does not have to witness the victim's suffering. He also found that if the teacher is accompanied by other people who join him or her in resisting the experimenter's instructions to apply shocks, compliance with the orders is much reduced.

Milgram began to see an important, but disturbing implication: evil may not, as had been traditionally thought, be the result of bad individuals, but instead might be the product of bad situations. Any person thrust into such a circumstance might be induced by these forces to commit acts that he or she would otherwise condemn. This perspective turned on its head much of the conventional wisdom about human nature. Milgram's situationist perspective raised the possibility that people's self-described values might not have much to do with their actual behavior—that is, whatever people think about humans as moral beings, their conduct is heavily influenced and affected by external factors and contextual variables. As a result, it is up to individuals to be aware of these factors and resist them.¹⁰

Other researchers began studying these situational pressures in more detail, especially in the context of obedient behavior that unfolds over longer periods of time than the few hours it took for Milgram's subjects to be influenced. Milgram's systematic studies of obedience, coupled with extensive research by others in the years following the initial publication of the obedience studies, have produced a picture of the processes that can condition people who may think of themselves as compassionate and ethical to behave in ways that others might consider to be reprehensible. Researchers have identified such mechanisms as authorization, routinization, dehumanization, moral disengagement, bracketed morality, and transfer of responsibility to help explain how situational pressures can affect behavior toward others.¹¹

Authorization is the perception that a particular behavior has been sanctioned or approved by a higher authority. At Abu Ghraib, for example, some of the soldiers who carried out the abuses reported that Graner had told them that he was acting on the instructions of military intelligence officials, who wanted him to "soften up" detainees for interrogation. Some of them had concerns and reservations about the abuses they were committing, but apparently convinced themselves that their behavior was acceptable because it had been authorized by higher-ups. Some careful thinking might have saved these soldiers a great deal of trouble.

Routinization occurs when people are gradually acculturated to commit abuses against others. For example, a soldier might arrive in a combat zone never having heard Middle Easterners referred to by any of the variety of pejorative terms soldiers sometimes use to refer to indigenous peoples in that part

of the world. He or she may resist the use of such terms at first, but then hear them used so often that he or she may begin to use them as well. Increasingly routine behaviors can also escalate into abuse, often without conscious awareness of such a dramatic shift. Colonel H. R. McMaster, as commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq, prohibited his soldiers from using pejorative terms to refer to Iraqis in order to counter these kinds of effects.¹²

An important element in the process of acculturating someone to abuse others is dehumanization. Most people feel certain obligations toward other humans simply by virtue of their being human: people deserve respect and dignity and to be treated according to a set of more or less universal standards of respect. This commitment to respecting others must be overcome if abuse



FIGURE 6.1 A propaganda poster from World War I depicting German soldiers as inhuman, green-eyed monsters. Credit: F. Strothmann.

is to take place, and one way to do that is to categorize people as being something other than human. War propaganda throughout history has purposely dehumanized the enemy to facilitate their killing by armies composed of soldiers who may have little inclination to kill otherwise.¹³

Law enforcement personnel are not immune from these tendencies; referring to suspects as “perps” (perpetrators) and to the “perp walk” can have a dehumanizing effect, implying that perps are somehow different from the rest of us, and perhaps therefore making it easier to slip into disrespectful or even abusive behavior toward them. Prejudice is a preconceived evaluation, a judgment made without evidence. Such judgments are often applied to group members based solely on a perceived group identity, not on an assessment of the individual as an individual. Group prejudice is by its nature a categorical phenomenon, and anything that blinds one to individual characteristics and instead emphasizes group identity has the potential to lead to prejudice. Emergency medical personnel may sometimes use terms, such as “gomer” (Get Out Of My Emergency Room), to disparagingly refer to patients who they feel should not be receiving treatment or other terms that deflect attention away from the individual’s particular needs and circumstances.

Albert Bandura theorized that individuals may slide into “wrong” or inappropriate behavior as a result of moral disengagement, which can be a by-product of physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion.¹⁴ Moral disengagement may be related to the occurrence of so-called repressive coping, in which autonomic and emotional responses to stressful situations diverge.¹⁵ When people are under a great deal of stress, their emotional response may shut down, making it harder for them to formulate good decisions, especially when their feelings or those of others are an important element of the decision-making process, as seems to be the case in ethical decision making.

“Bracketed morality” is a term that derives from an old military cliché: “What goes on TDY, stays on TDY” (temporary duty away from home). Some members of the military believe that they can (and should) act one way while at home station and act another way in a combat zone. This kind of compartmentalization is facilitated by dramatic differences in contextual cues that exist in different settings. These cues can be physical and environmental or social and organizational. Maintaining moral continuity with what was referred to during the Vietnam War as “the World” can be challenging.

The Milgram obedience study has had an immeasurable impact on the way researchers think about obedience. It was dramatic, and the results were shocking. Milgram’s study was also important because its application of rigorous experimental methods to a problem that had previously been addressed mainly as a philosophical or ethical question powerfully influenced

subsequent thinking about the behavior examined. The situationist perspective, perhaps best represented by this study, emphasizes the role of contextual factors in shaping behavior in ethically charged situations. This is not, however, the only theoretical framework through which one can consider these important issues.

PALO ALTO, 1971

Another example of the situationist perspective is the Stanford prison study. While this perspective adds little or nothing conceptually to Milgram's more rigorous and nuanced analysis, it is important to discuss because so much has been made of it in trying to explain the real-world abuses at Abu Ghraib (that resemble the opening scenario). The Stanford study, conducted by Phillip Zimbardo, was designed to demonstrate Zimbardo's view of what happens when people are given power but are not constrained in their exercise of it. Would people remain faithful to their values or would they succumb to the same kinds of behavior observed in the Milgram study, in which ordinary people quite readily acted to harm perfect strangers? Are there situations—as opposed to people—that can compel individuals, or at the very least tempt them, to behave badly? If so, what factors make them more likely to “obey” the dictates of the situation? What factors will help them resist those dictates?¹⁶

The Stanford prison study was ostensibly designed to simulate prison conditions. A group of college students were enrolled in the study and then randomly assigned to be either guards or prisoners. Those selected to be prisoners were picked up and brought to a simulated jail in the basement of the Stanford University psychology department building by Palo Alto police officers. Those assigned as guards were given free rein by the “warden,” Professor Zimbardo.

The study was supposed to last weeks, but it was prematurely terminated after only a few days because the behavior of some of the participants quickly degenerated. Some of the guards became abusive, some of the prisoners became submissive, and the warden could not effectively exert influence to improve the situation; in fact, he may have perhaps exacerbated it. Some of the abuses devised by the guards included putting pillowcases over the heads of prisoners who were forced to wear hospital johnny coats, creating a visual effect that would bear a striking resemblance to some of the photos from Abu Ghraib. Zimbardo interpreted the results as showing that unrestrained authority inevitably leads to abuse and violence. For Zimbardo, evil does not arise because of bad individuals—a few “bad apples” in the much-abused metaphor but rather, evil arises because of “bad barrels.”

In Zimbardo's view, it is the situation—prison and war are two such situations he identifies as “bad barrels”—that produces bad behavior, not the individuals. According to him, “The barrel corrupts anything it touches.” This is the extreme situationist view, which denies any or much of a role for free will and sees behavior as largely determined by external forces.¹⁷

Unlike the Milgram obedience studies, which were carefully conducted experiments, the Stanford prison study was little more than a dramatic demonstration orchestrated by Zimbardo to illustrate his viewpoint on authority. Despite its lack of scientific rigor, the study has been relentlessly promoted and is well known to anyone who has taken an introductory psychology class. Zimbardo quickly seized on the superficial similarity between the Abu Ghraib photos and the photos from his study to claim that events at Abu Ghraib were an example of the kind of behavior he had observed. He offered an analysis intended to exculpate the soldiers who had committed the abuses and instead focused responsibility on high-level generals and government officials for having created the environment that led to the abuses. Zimbardo testified for the defense in the trial of Staff Sergeant Ivan Frederick, one of the soldiers accused of committing abuses, arguing that “the Army should be on trial,” not Frederick. Ultimately, Frederick and others with a direct role in the criminal events at Abu Ghraib were convicted of crimes, while several higher-ranking officers (in one case, a brigadier general) were fined, reduced in rank, or subjected to career-ending administrative discipline. The excuse of “simply following orders” rang as hollow in the wake of Abu Ghraib as it had at Nuremberg.

BEYOND SITUATIONS

The Milgram and Zimbardo studies are often raised in discussions of real or suspected pathological obedience, where people obey instructions that others (and often the people involved, upon reflection) think should have been disobeyed. Mechanisms such as authorization, routinization, dehumanization, disqualification, moral disengagement, and bracketed morality can predispose soldiers in a unit toward pathological obedience or simply toward ethical lapses if they are present. Leaders must be aware of the situational pressures identified by Milgram and others in his tradition and must ensure that such conditions do not occur in their units.

Most people do not accept the idea that human behavior is primarily determined externally, by the situations encountered. Most think that thoughts, beliefs, and values guide individuals' actions. Those thoughts, beliefs, and values are a joint product of biological, psychological, and cultural and social factors. People have a lifetime to refine these thoughts and values, to

develop cognitive schemas or internal scripts governing various situations and challenges. These internal, largely cognitive structures must still be translated into action, into behavior, at the moment of decision. Insofar as leaders need to help shape the internal discussion that soldiers have with themselves when confronted with difficult choices, they must understand and engage soldiers in a meaningful dialogue on these complicated issues, so that they have a set of internal structures that are likely to yield the "right" answer when queried. The leader must engage subordinates at the level of character; he or she must help others develop and refine their moral compass.

Leaders must also help ensure that appropriate impulses are the ones that get translated into action at the moment of decision. One way to think about this is to remember that situational factors are especially good at getting people to act "out of character," especially in unusual situations that they have not had time to reflect on or integrate into their cognitive schemas. Milgram's subjects were deeply conflicted even as they pressed the buttons to shock the learner. Staff Sergeant Frederick, reflecting on his actions at Abu Ghraib, thought that he "should have been stronger" and resisted Graner more effectively. Leaders must engage subordinates in the context of the situation, making them aware of the situational factors that can temporarily throw the needle of their moral compass out of whack.

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING THE RIGHT LEADERSHIP CLIMATE

Leaders at all levels have a responsibility to develop and build character in their subordinates. "Character" is a term that means different things to different people. Some consider it to be nothing more than a pattern of relatively consistent behavior across situations; for others, it represents a set of internal, mental, or cognitive attributes that we use to guide behavior. Whatever it "really" is, most think we know what it is when we see it, and we know that sometimes we do, or see others do, things that are "out of character." Whatever one thinks about "character," there are actions that leaders can take that will help members of an organization develop their own moral compass and follow the needle no matter what.

Education on Standards of Conduct

Leaders are not required to decide independently what behavior is good and what is bad. Military services, police and fire departments, and most other organizations have generally spent a great deal of effort spelling out in detail which behaviors are permitted, and which are not. Ensuring that subordinates

are aware of the rules is the first step. In the military, there are requirements for periodic training on such topics as the Code of Conduct and the Law of Armed Conflict that offers opportunities to reinforce the normative foundation for correct behavior. The Law Enforcement Code of Ethics and the Hippocratic Oath spell out basic ethical standards in the fields of law enforcement and medicine, respectively.¹⁸

Be a Role Model and a Coach

If a particular eventuality can be anticipated and a correct response prescribed, then a leader needs simply to ensure that subordinates are aware of that response. Because organizations cannot anticipate every eventuality, however, they usually articulate general principles to govern conduct in novel or unique instances. The leader's role then becomes more challenging, as he or she must help the subordinate learn to apply these rules correctly to new sets of circumstances. Leaders are most effective at this when they function first as exemplars or role models, actually demonstrating the desired behaviors. Next they must encourage that type of behavior in subordinates by guiding them as mentors or coaches rather than as instructors passing on factual knowledge.

Train and Educate for Moral Ambiguity

As coaches, leaders can use so-called dilemma training to pose challenging scenarios that do not have a "school solution." By analyzing and evaluating the reasoning process applied by subordinates, leaders can help them hone their skills at recognizing the relevant features of scenarios and applying the principles correctly. Leaders can coach subordinates through different "lenses" (rules, outcomes, and values) in analyzing dilemmas. Many leaders are familiar with the concept of recognition-primed decision making.¹⁹ Good decision making hinges on correctly perceiving a situation, because errors often take the form of doing the right thing at the wrong time—that is, thinking that one is in situation A, and applying response A, when one is really in situation B. The phrase "fog of war" captures this kind of confusion. Dilemma training can be an effective way to train people to look for and recognize the relevant features of situations, ignore distracting features that do not contribute to determining a correct solution, and respond quickly and correctly.

Character Development Requires Investment

Leaders must avoid a checklist or rote memory technique for developing character. Having people simply memorize and recite the seven Army Values or quizzing them on the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics or the Hippocratic

Oath is not an effective method of developing character.²⁰ This technique may even be counterproductive if the leader and the subordinate think they really are accomplishing something. Leaders must approach character development in a holistic manner with an understanding that a person's character is constantly being molded and shaped.

CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF DANGEROUS SITUATIONS

There are classes of people and situations to which the unusual conditions found in the Milgram studies are especially relevant. Military personnel are indeed people who may be exposed to situations not unlike the Milgram study. Abu Ghraib did contain some (though not all) of the elements of the Milgram situation. The night shift was isolated from the outside world, and the abuses asked of the soldiers were heinous and inhuman, but not fatal: detainees were not regularly subjected to extreme physical torture or killed. Graner served in the role of the experimenter, egging on the others, but even he had to invoke the unfamiliar authority of the military intelligence authorities to clinch the deal with some of the soldiers. Several of the soldiers involved referred to the social pressures to which they reluctantly succumbed.

In fact, the Milgram and Zimbardo studies both occurred in settings where the application of punishing stimuli to strangers was contextually reasonable: a prison in the one case, and a psychology lab, mysterious to the lay public, in the other. Military and policing settings also include these elements. They also are unusual in that they are generally isolated from others, and it is quite possible for a person to encounter someone he or she may not know but who nevertheless clearly has authority over that person by virtue of superior rank. These contextual variables are among those that may heighten the risk that someone will act out of character. When warning bells start to go off that perhaps one is starting down a bad path, run through a mental checklist and consult with others to see if the situation is one like Milgram has shown can degrade judgment.

There are also additional elements of potentially dangerous situations that go beyond those seen in the Milgram study to potentially degrade judgment still further. These include personal and environmental stressors and the nature of the individuals with whom one is likely to come into contact. Milgram's subjects were stressed by the study itself and the conflicts they experienced, but were otherwise not subjected to external stressors. Soldiers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, and police officers may, on the other hand, be subjected to a wide range of intense stressors that often result

in moral disengagement. These include the threat of injury or death, fatigue, sleep deprivation, lack of sanitation, exposure to temperature extremes, hunger or thirst, and many others. Research has shown that many of these stressors can impair specific kinds of cognitive performance, making it still more difficult for people to respond appropriately in difficult or confusing situations.

The teachers in the Milgram study had no reason to harbor any animosity against the learner; in fact, the learner was a particularly pleasant-seeming man. Soldiers and police officers are often dealing with people who actually want to harm them and who are far from the morally neutral actors the subjects of these psychological studies encountered. For this reason, soldiers and police officers may again be still more susceptible to the effects of Milgram-like conditions than were Milgram's subjects.

Just Fix the Problems

The following scenario is based on the kinds of events that occur daily in an American big-city police department. When improper or unethical behavior occurs, or is suspected or alleged, attention quickly turns to the question of responsibility: Who is to blame? In this scenario, consider the following questions: (1) Did the special operations lieutenant do anything wrong? (2) How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the leadership of the precinct commander, special operations lieutenant, and the sergeant in charge of the field training officers? (3) If you were the chief of this police department, what feedback would you give your subordinates about this series of events?

A local precinct commander returned from a community council meeting that was well attended by influential people in the neighborhood. The commanding officer was asked to address a developing pattern of robberies as well as conditions at a local park where day laborers had begun gathering, consuming alcohol, urinating in public, and fighting with each other.

The precinct commander calls in the special operations lieutenant, who is charged with handling anything in a precinct that is not addressed by patrol radio assignments. The precinct commander relays the events of the community council meeting and directs the special operations lieutenant to "fix the problems."

The special operations lieutenant changes the tours of the anti-crime team (plain clothes officers) to the hours in which the robberies are occurring and moves the field training foot posts to cover pedestrian traffic routes. The anti-crime team and the foot posts are given the directive to increase Stop, Question and Frisk reports (stopping and questioning, as well as patting down individuals suspected of committing the robberies) and to increase the number of summonses issued for violations of the law.

The special operations lieutenant works with the anti-crime teams for one day and also checks the foot posts to ensure that everyone knows what is expected of them.

A newly promoted sergeant and a second group of field training officers are given the task of policing the two parks within the precinct. On three separate occasions within a week, the sergeant and officers enter the park where the day laborers are hanging around and conduct sweeps. All persons committing an infraction, violation, misdemeanor, or crime are summonsed or arrested. On the last two days of the week, the sergeant and the group of officers go to the second park in the precinct. There, they find high school-age children of local residents drinking alcohol, urinating in public, and smoking marijuana. The sergeant orders the officers to conduct the same sweeps as those done in the first park. The sergeant regularly reports to the special operations lieutenant with updates on the units' progress.

The special operations lieutenant contacts the precinct commander halfway through the effort to inform him of the steps taken and the progress made. The precinct commander says he really has no time to go over all the details; it is the special operations lieutenant's call, backed by the precinct commander's support.

At the next community council meeting, the same persons are in attendance. Although the robberies have stopped and arrests have been made, the attendees are upset with the commanding officer. The residents complain about being stopped, questioned, and frisked by officers, because they do not believe they look suspicious or fit the description of the persons who had committed the robberies. They are also upset because they travel the same routes daily, and the police still frisk them and issue them additional summonses. Even more infuriated are the parents of the teenagers in the park. They only wanted enforcement to be conducted against those whom they believed were from outside of their neighborhood. The residents also made phone calls to the mayor's office, resulting in calls to the police commissioner's office. The police commissioner's office then called the local precinct commander to determine what enforcement activity had been conducted and its purpose.

The precinct commander calls in the special operations lieutenant and berates him for the "terrible job" he had done in the precinct. He lets the lieutenant know in no uncertain terms that he thinks he had been overzealous in his planning, ineffective in his supervision, and directly responsible for a major flap between the police department and neighborhood leaders, with whom he had been trying to cultivate better relationships for years. The commander orders the lieutenant to attend the next community council meeting and personally apologize to the community leaders. He also says that he intends to make sure that the lieutenant's poor job performance is documented in his record.

Conflicts between obedience and personal responsibility to others, as in this scenario, can be difficult. The scenario also posits a conflict between obedience and responsibility to oneself as well as to an organization, which is even more trying. People who lead in dangerous environments are often quite comfortable with the idea of selfless service; self-sacrifice comes with the territory. For this reason, there may be a tendency for people like the special operations lieutenant to bite the bullet and take one for the team. Is this necessarily what is best?

The organizational climate in the scenario is extremely unhealthy. There are several features of the organization and its leadership that if unchanged could seemingly lead to serious ethical troubles. To begin with, the precinct commander failed to give the special operations lieutenant specific guidance. There is always a balance to be struck between micromanaging a subordinate and failing to manage a subordinate, but leaders need to make sure that the subordinate understands his or her intent and is aware of any boundaries or restrictions on execution that he or she has in mind. Furthermore, if there are any potential pitfalls or particular ways the effort could turn out badly, the leader should make the subordinate aware of them.

The precinct commander also failed to monitor execution adequately. When the special operations lieutenant reported to the commander after initiating the intervention, he received a lukewarm response and no face-to-face supervision. While leaders are always busy, there is no substitute for personal, hands-on involvement in day-to-day operations to ensure that policies and procedures are being followed, that subordinates understand what is expected of them, and that subordinates have the resources they need to succeed. Moreover, those actually doing the job are a rich source of insight about the approach being taken and potential improvements. By failing to engage subordinates in this way, the precinct commander may have inadvertently communicated that (a) the job did not matter to him all that much and (b) the particular approach taken was not that important.

The precinct commander also failed to show a level of integrity and professionalism commensurate with his position. The ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the intervention must lie with the commander. By responding to the lieutenant's update by saying that he had his support, the precinct commander clearly implied that the responsibility for whatever happened lay at the top. When things went badly, however, the commander placed the blame on the lieutenant. The consequences of this unwillingness to accept the responsibility that comes with authority are likely to include resentment, anger, and reduced creativity and risk-taking on the part of the lieutenant in the future.

The special operations lieutenant was caught in the middle in this scenario; he was required to obey the precinct commander, but also had a responsibility to himself, others working on the intervention, and the organization to try to ensure that a good outcome for the department and the community would result. So who is personally responsible for the failure that occurred here?

In the military, the commander is responsible for everything that happens or fails to happen in his or her organization. Period. Regarding the scenario, the simple answer is that the precinct commander bears the primary responsibility for the failure, but if one assumes that this was not an isolated incident, and instead represents a pattern of performance that had developed over some time, one can begin to consider the role of organizational climate itself in promoting or inhibiting effective performance.

A healthy organizational climate is one in which members are aware of and committed to a common, clearly articulated set of values; leaders set the example by demonstrating personal behaviors consistent with those values; members are willing and able to communicate questions and concerns to others in the organization; and leaders are open and responsive to concerns raised by members. In the scenario above, the sergeants and the special operations lieutenant have a responsibility to refuse to accept blame they do not think they deserve; to do otherwise does nothing to improve the organization and reduce the likelihood of similar occurrences in the future. Their responsibility to the organization requires them to confront their immediate superior, and if this does not lead to a satisfactory result, to pursue the matter further, however uncomfortable or self-serving it may seem. Disobedience is easier to justify when one's actions stand to benefit someone else; by disobeying in these cases, the person takes the moral high ground. When disobedience—or something short of disobedience that questions and challenges the orders one is given, in hopes of changing them—might be perceived as benefiting oneself, the person may be more reluctant to act. It is often in just such cases that the organization loses out, however—when individual interests trump organizational obligations.

OBEDIENCE AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

Should one work to make subordinates more obedient or more responsible? Which is more important? One answer might be that both are important and that the job is to properly balance these two things. It is argued here, however, that given the choice between a subordinate who is always responsible and

one who is always obedient, one should always choose the more responsible person. Why? Because a subordinate who is properly responsible may sometimes be obedient and sometimes be disobedient, but will always be acting in the best interests of all concerned. A subordinate who is always obedient may or may not be acting for the common good.

Focusing on leader and leadership development should result in the cultivation of a sense of responsibility. If it is successful in building an appropriate sense of personal responsibility, there will be little else required in terms of fostering obedience. How does one build personal responsibility? By using the same principles that parents might use to build personal responsibility in their children. One can adapt and extend the same set of tools and techniques that parents use to develop good citizens of the world to develop good citizens of an organization. In the role of leadership developer, one must do the following:

1. *Show subordinates and developing leaders that they are genuinely cared for.*
Trust and commitment are at the heart of responsibility. They cannot be purchased or acquired through mere exhortation. Trust and commitment arise when a relationship of mutual respect deepens during the course of repeated interactions in which each party treats the other fairly, compassionately, and consistently. Trust is a tenuous construct in any relationship; it develops slowly, but can be lost in a moment.
2. *Articulate and model a consistent set of values.*
Values are where accountability begins. One must be accountable to a set of standards; values are the basis of those standards and must be clearly articulated. Values are subject to discussion, even adjustment, refinement, or replacement, but are not negotiable. All members of an organization must accept the values of the group; the organization must ensure that values are clear and understood and that policies are consistent with those values, in reality as in rhetoric.
3. *Provide developmental opportunities to succeed.*
Learning takes place when actions are followed by consequences. When actions are followed by positive consequences, individuals recognize the effectiveness of their actions and are more likely to repeat them in the future. Leaders (and followers) learn best by doing, and the best way to learn to be responsible is to act responsibly and experience the positive feedback.

4. *Provide opportunities to fail.*

Children who are not challenged enough in school—who are routinely successful at their work—may perform well but may also lack the capacity to stick with it when confronted with a problem they cannot immediately solve. Children who are challenged too much—who always confront difficult problems but rarely succeed—may develop learned helplessness; they may then stop trying. The best learning occurs when people are confronted not only with achievable problems, but also challenging ones that sometimes lead to failure. Failure, if it occurs in a supportive environment, is an effective driver of growth. Freedom to fail is more than a slogan; it is an essential characteristic of a healthy environment.

5. *Set and enforce high standards and apply them transparently and universally.*

Nothing is more inimical to the development of a sense of responsibility among members of an organization than a perceived mismatch between what is said and what is done. People are exquisitely sensitive to issues of equity, and their willingness to hold themselves personally responsible for their behavior will not survive the perception that others fail to hold themselves to the same standards and yet escape the consequences of their behavior.

6. *Teach leaders to connect character to every action.*

As has been discussed, circumstances sometimes make it difficult for people to behave as they ordinarily would. Leader developers must help subordinate leaders recognize circumstances that are likely to cause them to act out of character and to resist situational pressures that might lead them to behave in ways they might later regret.

KEY TAKE-AWAY POINTS

1. It is possible to be obedient but irresponsible. Being responsible sometimes means one must be disobedient. The starkest example of this is obeying an illegal order. Being responsible means saying, "I will not do that" to an illegal order.
2. The law is on a person's side when he or she disobeys illegal orders. It may or may not be when disobedience stems from judging orders to be *immoral*, insofar as that judgment goes beyond or even contradicts the legal obligations of respective ethical codes.

3. People have character, and character influences behavior over the long term. "Be more concerned with your character than your reputation. Character is what you really are. Reputation is what people say you are."²¹
4. Situations can also influence behavior in the short run. Being able to think about and reflect on contextual variables affecting oneself are skills (self-awareness and self-regulation) that can be taught and practiced.
5. In dangerous contexts, people are more likely to encounter situational pressures that might influence behavior than they are in more benign environments. This point highlights the need to develop and practice the ability to be self-aware and self-regulate in more benign environments so these skills are practiced automatically in dangerous environments.
6. Character can be developed and supported with the right kind of leadership, mentoring, and coaching. The development must be intentional, planned, practiced, and modeled.
7. Situations can be monitored and controlled to minimize negative influences. (See points three and four.)
8. Personal responsibility cannot flourish in an organization that fails to make consistent demands on all its members. Consistency builds trust, and trust is the basis of commitment.
9. When all is said and done, with all the research and theories about how and why people behave the way they do, the bottom line is that the individual is ultimately responsible for his or her behavior. We can blame Mom, Dad, the weather, the dog, my boss, the cat, my best buddy, the situation, etc., but at the end of the day "the Devil did not make you do it." You did it yourself.

NOTES

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