

Left of the Boom: Letters to Myself

by CPT John Mahood and Chaplain (MAJ) Jared L. Vineyard

Dear (younger) John,

Congratulations. You are about to take command and begin one of the most rewarding experiences of your career. The lessons you learn, the people you meet and the places you go will stick with you for a lifetime. I caution you to take this assignment seriously and deliberately. It will be tempting and easy for you to trade your moral values for quick and easy decisions - decisions that when viewed individually will seem insignificant, but later on, could cause you some regrets.

You will feel pressure to perform at high levels because of the incredible peers you see on a daily basis. You will believe you are nowhere near as good as they are. These feelings are normal and should drive you to perform at a higher level. Remember, you will not see their shortcomings, nor will they let them be known. Regardless, you may make bad decisions because you think you have to compromise your morals to "keep up." You will inevitably mishandle some situations, and you will not make everyone happy.

Honest and regular communication between you and your higher headquarters is critically important. I often made compromising decisions based on a perceived lack of time available. You will have enough time to execute the priorities. Your battalion and brigade commanders are smart and understanding. If you feel like there is not enough time to accomplish all they ask of you, you must communicate that with them immediately. They will be able to reprioritize the tasks they have for you or even underwrite the risk associated with not accomplishing all the tasks on time.

Do not allow yourself to cut corners or outright lie about completing tasks. Do not shy away from failing. Failure will grow your character and reinforce your morals and ethics. Do not make a habit of failing, but do so gracefully. Ask for forgiveness, learn and move on.

Above all else, be the person you are. Do not try to change to play the role of a commander. You are who you are based on your upbringing, and that is more than enough for you to be a good commander. Have fun and enjoy the ride!

Whereas all young officers begin their career with a baseline understanding of the Army as a profession,¹ most young officers haven't come to the point of truly knowing what being an Army professional means. And while it might be presumptuous to believe that anyone can ever completely grasp this concept, it is true that it usually takes time, experience and further education to come to terms with the professional status of a U.S. Army officer. That said, a little extra intentionality can go a long way at every level.

This article is designed to remind all officers, both young and old, of the expectations in ethically leading our force today. To help, we will use the famous "be, know, do" mantra the Army adopted and relate it to three topics: the leader as a professional, the character of a leader and the awareness of a leader. Putting it all together, the leader needs to "be" an Army professional, "know" the Army standard for character and live morally aware in his or her operating environment, which is the "do" requirement.

Be: profession of leader

Every Army leader is a professional and doctrinally every Army professional must be ethical. The very first page of Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, **Army Leadership and the Profession**, clearly addresses the topic: "The Army has a dual nature as both a military department of government and a trusted military profession. The character of the Army as an institution and a profession are both essential to accomplishing the Army's mission. However, it is the American people's trust and confidence in the Army as an ethical profession that grants it the autonomy to exercise the disciplined initiative critical to accomplishing missions under diverse conditions around the world."²

The ethical nature of the Army professional is key in the Army profession's mission accomplishment. The leader's ethics grant him or her autonomy as a professional in American society. This autonomy allows the Army to carry out its tasks with confidence. What is the professional task of the Army? What is its expertise in? The Army's collective expertise is the "ethical design, generation, support and application of landpower."³ Therefore, the job of the Army, simply put, is the ethical application of land power and the duties and responsibilities that go along with it.

And while seemingly at a very high level of terms and theory, ethics for the Army professional are more than just a matter of definition. It is a matter of being right vs. being wrong. An Army leader cannot be right unless he or she is ethical. And while this may sound a bit strange, this is exactly how the Army profession has defined the term "right" in the past. The definition is "a decision or action is right if it is ethical (consistent with the moral principles of the Army ethic), effective (likely to accomplish its purpose, accept prudent risk) and efficient (makes disciplined use of resources)."⁴ While Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession*, now stands as a legacy document, it is supported today in the current publication of ADP 6-22 with 13 specific references.⁵

So, doing right means being ethical, effective and efficient. But what does this mean for an Army professional? It means that being right incorporates all three. For example, doing right must take into consideration getting the job done or accomplishing the mission (effective), but must also factor in how the job is accomplished (ethically and efficiently). It means that while a professional may feel the press of time (efficiency), he or she must also feel the press of morality and legality (ethical). It means that cutting corners is not acceptable for a professional (ethical) even while keeping the goal in mind (effective). And while it is true that there will probably be tension among being ethical, effective and efficient, the Army professional cannot drop the first word in the sequence.⁶ Being an Army professional means being ethical, and being ethical means, among other things, being right.

Know: character of leader

Every Army leader must know the standard for character if he or she expects to live that standard. Ethics, doing and being right, are all wrapped up in the idea of character. While the Army gives no formal definition of character, it states that character relates to the moral and ethical qualities of a leader.⁷

The Army continues: "A person's character affects how they lead. A leader's character consists of [his or her] true nature guided by his or her] conscience, which affects [his or her] moral attitudes and actions. A leader's personal reputation is what others view as character."⁸

Character relates to the past, which includes all the education, beliefs and experiences that make us who we are, which relates to the present. And while it is true the issue of character is vast, the Army is concerned with its leaders' character in the present so they will lead well, both now and into the future. Specifically, the "character attributes that are of special interest to the Army and its leaders are Army Values, empathy, the Warrior Ethos and service ethos, discipline and humility."⁹ These are five attributes that the Army specifically and especially looks toward as a standard in the realm of character.

Out of these five attributes, one might argue that empathy and humility are two of the least talked about or understood in and by Army leadership.¹⁰ One could say they are two different lenses that leaders should look through when focusing on people: empathy, the lens one should use when leaders look at others around them, and humility, the lens one should use when a leader looks at himself or herself.

Empathy is the "propensity to experience something from another person's point of view; (the) ability to identify with and enter into another person's feelings and emotions, enabling clearer communications and better guidance (and) the desire to care for and take care of others."¹¹ Empathy should extend to those under one's leadership, those to the left and right, and even to those in leadership positions above oneself.¹² Empathy looks outward.

Humility on the other hand should look inward. Humility in its simplest form is "the absence of arrogance," which is associated with putting mission goals ahead of self-serving ones in which leaders are eager for input and feedback from others to gain a more accurate self-understanding.¹³ Army leaders need the mantra that they are here to serve and not be served, a service that involves honest and accurate output and input.

The lenses of empathy and humility are vital as leaders look at both themselves and others.

Army leaders need to be men and women of character. It is important that every leader knows the standard to live it, to “do” what is right.

Do: moral awareness of leader

While it may seem odd to put awareness, a noun, under the “do” mantra, it is a reminder that all leaders must actively work to gain personal, situational and moral awareness. Moral awareness is quite simply understanding one’s environment to ensure that all is right within that environment. This idea gets at the heart of Army leadership; for instance, the eighth step in troop-leading procedures is supervise. Supervising ensures the right job is accomplished by the right people in the right manner for the right reasons.

While moral awareness should be second nature to an Army leader, the institution has struggled with this concept in the past. A glaring example of this struggle came out six years ago in the monograph *Lying to Ourselves*. Authors Dr. Leonard Wong and Dr. Stephen Gerras stated in the summary: “This study found that many American officers, after repeated exposure to the overwhelming demands and the associated need to put their honor on the line to verify compliance, have become ethically numb. As a result, an officer’s signature and word have become tools to maneuver through the Army bureaucracy rather than being symbols of integrity and honesty.”¹⁴

Thus, instead of finding that Army leaders, and in this case officers, were morally aware of their situations, it found they were instead the exact opposite, ethically numb. The Army can and must do better than this. Leaders at echelon must know what is and what is not going on in their organizations. And when leaders identify gaps, steps must be taken to honestly and wholeheartedly rectify situations, retrain personnel, repair equipment or do whatever needs to be done because that is what professionals with character do.

America’s Soldiers get to wear the jersey of the greatest team in the world, the American Army.¹⁵ Being on this team means something. It means everyone who wears this uniform is a professional and ethical. It means that everyone who wears this uniform is a leader of character. It means everyone who wears this uniform is morally aware of their operating environment, at home or deployed.

It means we can be better today than we were yesterday, and it means we must be better tomorrow than we are today.¹⁶ This is what we ought to be, this is what we can be, and this is what we will be when we are intentional about refocusing on the basics.¹⁷

Dear (older) John,

Congratulations! If you are reading this, things have obviously gone well for you, and you made it through your years as a major in one piece. No doubt you are nervous (as you always have been) about taking on this new role and assignment. Trust in the Army’s decision to place you where you are and know that you are going to enjoy it.

There are three things I want you to think about before taking command: humility, empathy and moral courage. You have been shown these traits in the past by former battalion and brigade commanders, and you know what it feels like to have someone lead with those qualities in their heart. You need to give that same experience to your subordinates now. They deserve to have someone lead them with their best interest in mind.

You’re not infallible. You are human and so are the people in your battalion. Extend them the grace you want from your leaders. Let them know you make mistakes and you encourage them to happen. We can grow as a team by trusting each other to own our mistakes and fix them.

The Soldiers in your battalion do not have easy jobs. They have lives outside the military that will affect their job performance. You have had experiences where you weren’t at your best due to stress not related to the Army. Always ensure your people are mentally and emotionally OK before assuming they failed a task due to laziness or apathy. By asking how your Soldiers are doing, you will show them you care. It goes beyond accomplishing the mission of the day to caring for them as a person. Each Soldier is an individual and unique.

There will be hard decisions to make and you won’t want to make them. Remember your Soldiers and their families. Do not allow yourself to be blinded by the urgency of now. The Army will

continue to move forward if you and your unit are not perfect all the time. If the hard decision is the result of your lack of guidance and foresight, then do not shy away from taking the blame. Do not allow your subordinates to feel they failed because of something you did or failed to do. It is never easy to fall short of expectations, but if we learn and grow as a team, there is good to be taken from that experience.

I hope you (we) are doing well. Have fun, don't take yourself too seriously, and don't forget to smile.

CPT John Mahood is the Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC) team chief, assigned to Command and Tactics Directorate, Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE), Fort Benning, GA. Previous assignments include MCCC small-group leader; commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 77th Armor Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, TX; and commander, mechanized-infantry company, 1-77th Armor, 3rd BCT, 1st Armored Division. CPT Mahood's military schools include MCCC, Cavalry Leader's Course, Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course and Airborne School. He has a bachelor's of arts degree in criminal justice from Marshall University.

Chaplain (MAJ) Jared Vineyard is the ethics instructor and writer at MCoE. Previous assignments include chaplain, Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, HI; chaplain, 225th Brigade Support Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division; chaplain, 743rd Military Intelligence Battalion, Buckley Air Force Base, CO; and chaplain, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Fort Campbell, KY. Chaplain Vineyard's military schools include Field Artillery Basic Officer Leader's Course, Chaplain Basic Officer Leader's Course, Chaplain Captain's Career Course, intermediate-level education, Air-Assault School and Airborne School. He has a bachelor's of science degree in political science from the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY; a master's of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX; and a master's of sacred theology degree in ethics from Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT. Chaplain Vineyard's awards include the Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart Medal and the Meritorious Service Medal with two oak-leaf clusters.

Notes

¹ Every commissioned officer is required to receive 16.25 hours of training related to the profession, ethics and leadership through Basic Officer Leadership Course A and B, according to the Fiscal Year 21 Master Common-Core Task List.

² ADP 6-22, **Army Leadership and the Profession**, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, July 2019.

³ ADP 6-22.

⁴ ADRP 1, **The Army Profession**, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 2015.

⁵ ADRP 1 is included on these pages of ADP 6-22: 1-2, 1-4, 1-5, 1-6, 1-7, three times on 1-8, 1-10, twice on 1-11, 1-23, 6-5.

⁶ Not only do specific words have specific meaning, but the placement of words is also significant. It is more than interesting to note that in all 13 appearances of "ethical," "effective" and "efficient," this is the order in which they always appear. Thus "ethical" always appears first.

⁷ ADP 6-22.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This can easily be seen by the emphasis on Army Values and the Warrior Ethos in most unit areas as well as on what is taught in professional military education at institutional level. Also, one could go to just about any unit in the Army and hear a discussion about discipline in one form or another.

¹¹ ADP 6-22.

¹² An interesting topic for Army leaders to think about is extending empathy toward his or her own family. Oftentimes leaders immediately think of those in the workplace as recipients of empathy, which is appropriate, but very often fail to see how this attribute can and should be used in the leader's own home.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, **Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession**, monograph published by U.S. Army War College Press, February 2015.

¹⁵ GEN Paul Funk, "Ethical Leadership with General Ham," discussion at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command headquarters, Fort Eustis, VA, Jan. 13, 2021.

¹⁶ This idea is the premise found in the preamble of the U.S. Army's founding legal document, the Constitution of the United States, which states, "We the people of the United States, to form a more perfect Union. ..."

¹⁷ Loosely based on GEN Douglas MacArthur's "Duty, Honor, Country" speech upon receiving the Sylvanus Thayer Award at the U.S. Military Academy, 1962.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ADP – Army doctrine publication

ADRP – Army doctrine reference publication

BCT – brigade combat team

MCCC – Maneuver Captain's Career Course

MCoE – Maneuver Center of Excellence