

Sex, Lies, Deceit and National Secrets:

A case study on the largest United States Navy ethics breach since the Cold War

Peter Lawless, Master of Arts Candidate

Human Dimensions of Organizations, The University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

This capstone discusses the “Fat Leonard” Navy ethics breach and describes the human dimension element that would give the illusion that unethical behavior is somehow acceptable in certain cases. It illustrates how different personalities and cultures can define ethics rules differently, the human costs, the elements that exist for individuals to compromise ethical values, how narcissism plays a role, and finally what’s needed to reduce unethical behavior in the United States Navy.

Methods

- Scholarly/peer reviewed research on military and business ethics.
- Dissertation reviews on ethics from the Navy War College and the Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, CA.
- Anecdotes, illustrations and experience drawn from my 23 years as a naval officer, five tours of duty as a commanding officer, and combat zone experience.

Literature Cited (not all inclusive):

Verrastro, Paul, “Applying commercial practices to navy husbanding services contracts,” Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey CA, 1996

Thompson, Garry, "Relationship Between Self-Development, Mentorship, and Senior Military Officer Moral Judgment" (2019). Dissertations.

Brown, Michael E., Linda K. Treviño, and David A. Harrison, “Ethical Leadership: A Social Learning Perspective for Construct Development and Testing,” Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 2005

Results

- Given the right set of circumstances to include opportunity, pressure and rationalization, ethics breaches can occur at all levels of the military, including Admirals and General officers despite “mindfulness” of wrongdoing.



Cultural and personal traits play a part in ethical decision making. It’s therefore necessary to establish strict ethical guidelines, with uncompromising penalties for breaches, and teaching moral absolutes.

What needs to occur to change the landscape?

- Training:** “Invasive” training with moral absolutes
- Mentorship:** Mentoring early in careers with sustained communications
- Accountability:** Uncompromising penalties for ethics breaches
- Environment:** “Tone at the top” - Leaders can set the tone for ethical behavior
- Measurement:** Counseling and performance; data capture



Conclusion

- The “Fat Leonard” bribery scandal rocked the Department of the Navy, and delivered a “black eye” to the navy from nefarious actions from a few.
- Humans are motivated by different stimuli, and that can be challenging to manage as leaders.
- Ethical rules can sometimes be twisted by individuals to meet desires.
- Motivation to break the rules vary, but there are common denominators including opportunity, pressure and rationalization that are present.
- Stricter penalties, enforcing rules, implementing internal controls, forming meaningful mentorship programs, and intense “invasive” training can help curb ethics violations.

- “Tone at the top” can have a positive impact on ethical behavior.



Acknowledgments:

- My bride, Phyllis, of 33 years.
- My Texas Longhorn daughter, Caroline who motivated me to be a Longhorn, her wonderful husband, Joey and their children Luke and Emily.
- HDO’s amazing professors, staff and Class of 2022 cohort!

Further Information:

Peter.n.lawless@gmail.com
<https://uthookedin/user/795652>

