



This post is part of a series of weekly professional discussions that occur on Twitter among military leaders in the United States and students and professors at Kings College in London. If you're interested in participating, tweet your response with hashtag [#CCLKOW](https://twitter.com/CCLKOW). A new conversation starts every Monday!

By: [Joe Byerly](#)

We've all done it. While standing in line at the AAFES checkout counter, we glance over at the latest edition of the *Military Times*, and on the front page we see a picture of another fallen leader. We shake our heads in disgust and quickly attribute his or her ethical failure to a lack of values, saying to ourselves, "That will never happen to me!" And while those words may give us assurance that we will never make *those* mistakes, it's important to understand that the complexities of a situation may play a much greater role in our decision-making than our personalities.

For example, two military leaders of the opposite sex who work together may never plan on cheating on their spouses. But add alcohol, a conference on the road, and a couple of minor issues in their marriages to the scenario, and these factors may combine to create a night of ethical indiscretion.

[Research](#) has shown that situational forces impact our behavior, and that even the smallest of tweaks to the environment can affect our judgment. Put simply, depending on the situation, we may throw our [Army Values](#) card out the window. This doesn't excuse unethical behavior or mean we are victims of circumstance, it just means that we need to be aware that we are all capable of ethical failings and that we can take steps to influence the situation so that the situation doesn't influence us.

In their book [Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard](#), authors Chip and Dan Heath found that it is possible to design an environment in which those behaviors that may lead us to *Military Times* infamy can not only be altered, but can be avoided all together. In other words, we can set the conditions ahead of time to avoid ethical lapses.

Changing the Situation

Many of the ethical failures by senior leaders were made without the knowledge of friends or co-workers, and these private decisions had major public consequences for their marriages, their careers, and the military. A good way to avoid making bad decisions in private is to not make them private, thus changing the situation. In the April 2014 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, CDR Dan Stallard and MAJ Curt Sanger wrote an article titled "[The Nathan Solution to the Bathsheba Syndrome](#)," in which they suggest that every leader needs a trusted colleague in their inner-circle with moral courage who will speak out when they see them starting to head down a road of questionable ethics. The idea is based on Nathan, the trusted advisor to King David, who warned King David on multiple occasions that his extramarital relationship with Bathsheba would create major problems for the king

and the kingdom. Whether it's your executive officer, a trusted NCO, or a peer, find someone who you can trust will keep an eye out for you when the situation lends itself to poor behavior.

Establishing Guard Rails

Andy Stanley, a renowned leadership author and pastor, provides us with another tactic, recommending that we establish [guardrails](#) in our personal lives to help us avoid situations that can put our values on the line. Physical guardrails along our roads and highways keep us from straying into dangerous or off-limit areas, and the concept has application in the lives of military leaders. We all know where the highway ends and our personal danger areas or weaknesses begin. These are the areas we need to make a conscience effort to avoid driving into. For some, it might be alcoholism. If you know that when you drink too much, you lose control and say or do things that may negatively impact your life, set your guardrail at a particular number of drinks—and ask a Nathan in your life to help you maintain that guardrail.

While weekend safety briefs and Army Values posters are great reminders to act ethically, we need to be aware that certain situations can strongly influence our behavior. Adopting a mindset of “It will never happen to me” ignores the power of context and opens the door for our own future failings. By taking steps to lessen the situational influence, we can set the conditions for better decision-making and avoid being the cover model for the next edition of the *Military Times*.

What are some other practical approaches we can take as leaders to avoid falling into the trap of unethical decisions? How can we arm our subordinates to avoid the same pitfalls?

For more on this topic, I encourage readers to check out:

Articles

[When Situations Not Personality Dictate Our Behavior By Dr. Jeremy Dean](#)

[Self Control is Exhaustible by Dan Heath](#)

Books

[The Power of Habit by Charles Duhigg](#)

[Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard by Chip and Dan Heath](#)

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