



By Benjamin Ordiway

When dealing with a crisis, **spending** time having the entire organization [stand down](#) may be a missed opportunity to **invest** in the very people you should be standing up...

There's an old saying often attributed to investors and farmers: *If you want to make two million, start with four.* There's always a bit of truth in humor; it's the *punch* in the punchline. The truth is: blindly spending money to make money may leave you staring at the red ticker tape or the barren field in disbelief. Likewise, if leaders in military organizations consider their time in terms of monetary *spending*, they risk equally unfortunate yields. Time is a non-renewable resource that we never really possess. It is not ours to spend; rather, we are charged to invest it. *Managers spend their time. Leaders invest their time.*

Adopting a time-as-investment mindset will improve your organizational culture—something worth greater consideration as [unfortunate headlines](#) continue to mar the hard-fought

reputation and [trust](#) military leaders are responsible for stewarding. While senior leaders acknowledge that an ethical culture is the [foundation of trust](#), exactly how leaders should fortify this foundation is less clear. This concept is especially true if the organization is in the middle of a [crisis](#). Speaking of extremes, many leaders may wonder which extreme on the organizational bell curve they should invest their time in when seeking to move the cultural needle.

Let's begin with the assumption that most people in your organization will do the right thing if they perceive the organizational support for doing so exists. So (adapting a bit of [counterinsurgency](#) thinking), assume that the bulk, say 70% of the organization—the *influenceable intermediate*—can be swayed by incentives. These may range from an “atta boy” to an achievement medal. This group may equally be swayed by disincentives—ranging from written counseling to a career-ending letter of reprimand. Within this population are the habitual cynics and those who, while maneuvering within the bounds of organizational culture, engage in political stratagems for the sake of career advancement. Yet, within this group are those huddled masses yearning to be inspired and those who can make the intellectual leap from “just a job I do” to a purpose-driven, “this is my profession” mentality.

Next, let's say 20% (fingers crossed it's that high) of the organization pursues the moral high ground for its own sake. They are the *moral multipliers*. These are often your true, quiet professionals who, while appreciative of recognition, do not anticipate nor calculate their decisions based on what the organization rewards or punishes. A word of caution, leaders would be wise not to confuse this 20% with those whose evaluation reports beam bright with high marks, e.g., “[Most Qualified](#)” (though, more likely than not, there is a strong correlation).

While standard performance metrics may capture this 20%, members of this group sometimes operate outside the traditional, visible spectrum. In other words, if your leadership style or so-called “philosophy” isn't calibrated to detect or respond to this

population, you may not know they exist in your organization. (It is also worth noting, so-called “top performers” may be doing just that, [performing](#). Their motivations and behaviors may only be tied extrinsically to what is politically advantageous. In contrast, moral multipliers are intrinsically motivated—they perform without making a performance. Superiors do not hear [trumpets](#) as moral multipliers pass by.)

Then there’s the 10% (fingers crossed it’s that low) who are actually bad actors; they are the *organizational insurgency*. How they arrived in your organization in the first place is a question you may not be responsible for answering. (Perhaps they are in your organization because earlier in the organizational “pipeline,” those in a position to screen candidates [neglected to assess for moral development](#)). However, if the organizational culture you are responsible for shaping created an insurgent...tag, you’re it.

The majority of this organizational insurgency, let’s say 90% of it (about 9% of your entire organization), often stays just under the radar of senior leaders. Still, to everyone else, they are known quantities. These people are your *overt organizational insurgents*. They are [underperforming](#) stock. They take more than they give; they exploit loopholes; they seek to be served rather than to serve others.

Unfortunately, mid-level leaders often resort to compartmentalizing an overt organizational insurgent’s corruptive influence on the organization. These bad actors are pushed from one staff position to the next where they can, so the thinking goes, do little harm. Alternatively, they are written off as “the cost of doing business” and are allowed to move out of the current organization to become someone else’s problem. This just means a future leader will likely have less time to invest in their organization’s moral multipliers.

Finally, the remaining 10% of this subgroup (about 1% of your entire organization) are the *covert organizational insurgents*. These bad actors joined the profession for the wrong reasons—perhaps the hierarchy and societal esteem attracts those with a Nietzschean [will](#)

[to power](#). These types look upon the organizational “servant-leader” values and hierarchy as instruments of manipulation. Subordinates, peers, and superiors are nothing more than the [means](#) to a covert organizational insurgent’s ends.

The problem: these types are often seen as effective despite their questionable moral foundation. They might even be viewed as your top performers. That is to say, they may be your [overvalued](#) stock (relative to their [fair-market](#), moral value). Possessing a dangerous combination of charisma and cunning, they advance unchecked through an organization, lacking metrics to identify and isolate them and often lacking the will to remove them altogether.

The U.S. Army’s [Battalion Commander Assessment Program](#) may be an exception. Still, waiting nearly 20 years to (possibly) offramp a covert organizational insurgent from the command track is poor portfolio management. In their 20-year wake, the covert organizational insurgent has left a trail of burned-out, [cynical](#), and disillusioned subordinates. These hidden, immoral agents delegitimize the organization’s values in the eyes of those who stare in horror at what success looks like. Worse still, they may be passively recruiting the next cohort of covert organizational insurgents from the influenceable intermediate. After all, what the organization rewards is what it gets.

Eventually, covert organizational insurgents tend to bring about their own destruction. Either their [toxicity](#) becomes intolerable or, as they become more convinced of their own abilities, they grow bolder and eventually commit one moral transgression too many. They become a headline. Once in the news, the organization goes into reactionary, spend time mode, e.g., the public affairs office scrambles to develop talking points, the lawyers determine how much legal exposure the command faces, and the remaining 90% of the organization braces for the inevitable impact of the bureaucracy’s response.

Despite the reputational damage and moral volatility that a covert organizational insurgent

brings to an organization, mobilizing the lion's share of your resources and spending the bulk of your time addressing them head-on is akin to throwing good money after bad. Too much time spent creating systems aimed directly at this population comes at an opportunity cost that you should not accept. Spending time on this population squanders opportunities to invest your time in your moral multipliers, hamstringing the right side of the organizational bell curve's ability to recruit the influenceable intermediate.

Leaders are likely giving the bottom 10% far too much influence in their organization by spending time creating systems to thwart them and dedicating resources to explain and apologize for them. This time is not well spent nor well-invested. In fact, mobilizing the bureaucratic machine against the broader organizational insurgency may have the unintended consequence of educating the next generation of covert organizational insurgents.

To be sure, this is not a “pay no attention to the few bad apples ([toxic assets](#))” argument—this is an argument for creating a culture (the barrel) where the good apples are inspired to root out the rot, thereby preempting the need for the morale-draining, often compliance-themed, shotgun approach (e.g., the “[Stand Down](#),” the “[Comprehensive Review](#),” the “[Reaffirmation Memo](#)”). This perpetuates a compliance-based organizational culture which, by definition, is less likely to gain commitment (much less commitment to virtuous thinking and doing) from the bulk of its population. *Managers proscribe; leaders prescribe.*

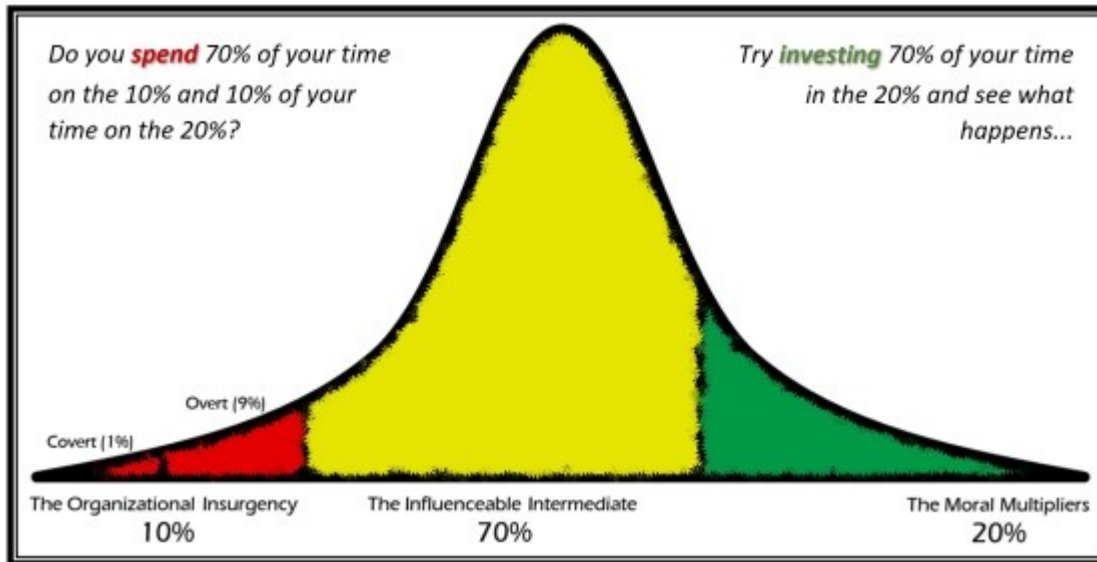
Leaders should pursue influencing the intermediate population by recognizing the moral multipliers for what they do. As it stands, many leaders seem to adopt a “that's your job, why should you be recognized for doing it?” mentality. To illustrate the point: do you have your subordinates write their own negative counseling statements? Didn't think so. Now ask yourself, how many of your subordinates have written their own awards? Your answer to the second question might reveal how you weigh punishment relative to recognition as a means

of influencing organizational culture. Ultimately, in spending time on the organizational insurgency, leaders abandoned an opportunity to influence the mean of the organizational culture's bell curve to the point where there is, for lack of a better term, a "moral majority."

In summary, behaviors regress to the organization's cultural mean. Leaders would do well to invest their time to move the mean toward the 20% of moral multipliers. Reinvesting your time in these true, quiet professionals will make your organization's portfolio more resilient by raising the *overall culture's commitment to the organization's values*. You will foster a culture of [*defensive stocks*](#), which will isolate the organizational insurgents, possibly preventing them from becoming toxic assets.

Moreover, viewing these exemplars as organizational change agents and messaging their example may, like preventative maintenance, [*deter*](#) organizational insurgents. By swaying the intermediate population toward a culture of commitment, leaders increase the certainty that bad actors will be held accountable for their misdeeds. After all, organizational insurgents likely avoid interacting with moral multipliers. To shape organizational culture is to wage a counterinsurgency against the 10% by investing time in the 70% *by, with, and through* the 20%.

Parting thought: crises are opportunities. They reveal the underlying assumptions at work in organizations. They signal to leaders where they've been spending too much time and where they haven't invested enough. When you are not facing a crisis, do you proactively invest your time in your moral multipliers to ultimately recruit the influenceable intermediate and bring about a positive return? Or, do you spend your time on the organizational insurgents, perpetually reacting to the symptoms of an organizational culture that you, in part, fostered by neglecting your best stocks?



Benjamin Ordiway is a Civil Affairs Officer currently pursuing an M.A. in Philosophy at the University of Michigan. He enlisted as a Cavalry Scout in the Army in 2004 and received his commission as an Armor Officer from the United States Military Academy in 2012. You can find him at www.linkedin.com/in/benjaminordway.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)