By Benjamin Ordiway

As a military, we profess that we are a values-based organization. We excel at *writing* about our values. Just look at our posters, vision statements, or the latest memo you and your staff crafted. Why, then, when we *talk* about ethics—which the military regards as rooted in values—does the discussion often center around rules or policies?

To be sure, this is not a "takedown" on rules. Any profession requires them. We all know some need compliance-based mechanisms—rules and regs—to keep them in line (hopefully this isn't you). Rules are *necessary* as guard rails but *insufficient* in showing us the narrow path to the ethical high ground—that key terrain in the defense of our Nation. Yet,

overreliance on compliance to regulate our profession may indicate that we've lost sight of what our values call for: *action!*

Furthermore, compliance-based approaches to ethics often are reactionary, narrowly focused (e.g., appropriate use of social media or Hatch Act violations), and often have an air of negativity about them. The best organizational maintenance is preventative and uses [positive feedback](#) approaches.

One such approach might be finding and affirming those (sometimes anonymous) [*moral multipliers*](#) who quietly demonstrate our [values through action](#). Amplifying their story will inspire others to be like them and will strengthen the collective moral fiber within your organization. What is more, pulling examples from within your organization has real merit—it's material people will actually engage with (thanks to shared experience and a bit of [in-group bias](#)). Also, this approach doesn't require you to use stock scenarios or to outsource ethics education and training to those who would jump at the opportunity to improve your organization—for a fee.

As for positive feedback, highlighting the moral multipliers will create antibodies in your organization that are far more powerful than the viruses of cynicism, narcissism, and selfishness. These viral bodies replicate best in a vacuum of disengaged or distracted leadership—the kind of vacuum where servicemembers learn to equate with "mandatory training," an inconvenience, a "tasking."

Another approach—one that requires a different kind of courage—is to share a leadership story of personal struggle. Here's an example:

Picture yourself as a graduating student at the National Defense University. The [commencement address](#) is from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Mark A. Milley:

I should not have been there. My presence in that moment and in that environment created

a perception of the military involved in domestic politics. As a commissioned, uniformed officer, it was a mistake that I have learned from. And I sincerely hope we all can learn from it.

I think there are two lessons on the ethics we learn from General Milley's example. The first is that he admits he made a mistake, and he led by example in making that statement. There is no question that he, at risk to his career, lived our values at that moment and rescued the most fundamental aspect of our military—our apolitical nature. He demonstrated *selfless service* to the military, *loyalty* to the Constitution, and *personal courage* to speak truth to power.

The second lesson is that he understood the power of his rank and position and the respect afforded to both to effect positive change in our military. Notice, General Milley didn't lead with a memo. Instead, he ensured his message could reach everybody—from a political pundit to an Army private. In doing so, he boldly affirmed our values by reminding us of who we are and what we are called to be—servants to the Constitution.

In any organization that I've been a part of—whether as a private, lieutenant, or captain—there were leaders who understood their role in managing the command climate by focusing on the daily command weather. Those leaders who decided to be engaged *well below their station*, *investing* their time and leveraging their position and presence each day, were the true stewards of the organization's identity—an identity rooted in the professional military ethic. They, like General Milley, did it by affirming the values of the organization, creating the conditions for our values to leap from their vision statements into the actual world.

A few questions worth considering:

How are you affirming the values of your organization? Are you engaging at the lowest levels, asking questions, and listening to the (sometimes silent) answers? Are you creating

positive feedback mechanisms by seeking out moral multipliers and amplifying their example? Do you encourage moral courage by incentivizing it, or do you hope those under your charge do the right thing when away from the flagpole? Do you prioritize ethics by investing your organization's time in impactful education and training, or do you just throw money and a quarterly LPD at it? *In other words, when it comes to ethics, are you breathing life into your organization or just blowing hot air?*

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