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You stand in the hot sun of a motor pool staring down at a sea of equipment layouts. You have been desperately trying to manage the ream of property book pages as you conduct your change of command equipment inventories. You have been acclimating to your new unit over the past few weeks and are very eagerly trying to earn their trust.

You have reached a decision point, the equipment in front of you is in no way serviceable.

Your outgoing counterpart informs you this is exactly how they received it and it will never be needed. Your timeline is tight, and you know this could really slow you down. The supply representative assures you that this will “take care of itself,” and there is no need to make an issue where one doesn’t exist. Although his words are tempting, you know they don’t sound quite right, though they don’t sound fully wrong either....

### **The Problem**

Scenes like this are commonplace for junior leaders throughout the military. In the moment and with time as a constraint, it can be tempting to rationalize a seemingly small moral-ethical infraction. What is not readily apparent to the small unit leader is that minor moral

choices like these, made every day at the lowest levels, contribute directly to the deployability and overall moral readiness of a unit. Left unchecked, even seemingly small amounts of [ethical fading](#) can be detrimental to a U.S. Army unit.

At scale, it can become disastrous.

This temptation to save time and energy and make quick exaggerated assessments of training and maintenance statistics can result in serious negative consequences. The short-term relief provided may allow you to prevent difficult conversations with your superiors and provide yourself with a false sense of security, but ultimately it can prove detrimental both as an individual and as a military unit. [Reports](#) from the war in Ukraine reference the grossly overstated readiness of Russian combat units. It has been speculated that military officials were fearful of informing their superiors about the poor state of Russian military equipment and training. While it could be easy to dismiss this as the symptom of a vastly different military system and culture, it would be a mistake to not note the lessons learned from our adversaries to prevent ourselves from falling victim to our own fallacies.

Consider this: if you were asked at this moment to take your unit to the field and conduct live fire training, how many vehicles would remain in the motor pool due to maintenance or safety issues? How many Soldiers would be licensed and qualified to operate their assigned platforms? How many of your weapon systems would be able to fire without controlled substitutions? An even more serious matter to consider is if the answers to these questions match the unit reports you attach your signature to? The same signature that serves as a vow of your professional judgment and manifestation of your trust.

This example reflects the need for honesty to ensure readiness. Few would disagree that there is an inherent need for honesty in the Army profession. Yet, on occasion, individuals and organizations may willingly accept something less than the truth to get by. The question then becomes how do we encourage honesty within our organizations and reduce the need for raw moral courage to report accurately? An answer lies in the moral efficacy perceived by those within our organization. [Moral efficacy](#) is the "...degree of confidence one possesses to act ethically." Moral efficacy, and more specifically, means efficacy reflects the subject's belief or confidence that the larger organization will support them in taking ethical action. In organizations like the Army, where mutual trust and collaboration are foundational, it is crucial to establish an environment that promotes moral efficacy and ethical decision-making by soldiers and is supported by leaders to enable readiness and ensure mission success.

## **What Leaders Can Do**

**Be a Moral Role Model.** The popular leadership speaker [Simon Sinek](#) states that the moral tone of an organization is set by its leader through everyday actions. Many of these actions are often dismissed as trivial or insignificant. Sinek illustrates his point by citing an instance where a boss asks his secretary to lie to a caller on the phone by saying they are not available, even when they are. At the time, the leader might not notice or care about the implications of their actions or words. Small acts like this by the leader can create a climate of dishonesty where subordinates view these actions as “normal” and contributes to ethical fading in the organization. Army leaders establish the moral climate of their units through everyday actions, both large and small. As leaders, it is our responsibility to ensure we set the correct moral attitude for our subordinates.

**Be approachable and willing to hear bad news.** [Means efficacy](#), a component of moral efficacy, refers to the external resources and methods available to influence moral action. The most effective tool available in Army units is an approachable leader, who reacts professionally to both good and bad news. For moral actions and corrections to occur, subordinates must know their actions and honesty will be arbitrated appropriately. A leader’s reaction to information sends a message. This message should be that honesty matters and is valued in our organization.

**Encourage moral actions.** One effective tool leaders can use to further encourage a moral climate and honest reporting is recognition. Identify and publicly praise those that do the right thing. Demonstrating a commitment to honesty by rewarding moral achievement establishes your organizational commitment to ethical decision-making. While there are numerous aspects to consider when it comes to Army readiness, moral efficacy is one that is often overlooked despite its importance. Our Soldiers deserve moral organizations with approachable leaders who embody ethical behavior, even when they have to share bad news.

...As you stand in the motor pool surrounded by a pile of unserviceable equipment you take a moment to reflect on the type of leader you want to be. You think about the type of leader your Soldier’s need and the Army expects. You know the Battalion executive officer expects accurate inventories reflective of the unit’s readiness. You also know that you will be supported in this action. From the few interactions you have had with your battalion, you were left with the impression that you are empowered to take initiative and they were not the type of people to react emotionally to setbacks in the timeline. After some contemplation, you tell the outgoing commander that despite not needing it in the past, you do not see how unserviceable gear benefits the unit and therefore it needs to be turned in. You remind yourself that Soldiers are watching and that they will mimic your behaviors and rationalizations. You look to the supply sergeant and explain that issues do not solve

themselves, ignoring or neglecting them simply passes the burden to someone else in the future. You recognize your decision may not be well received but feel comfortable knowing your actions raised the company's readiness and moral efficacy, even if only by a small amount. A small amount, in the right direction.

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