



Photo: Army Times, “Report: Army officers admit to (and defend) their lying”

by Jim Jimenez and Chris Slininger

Every leadership book we’ve ever read would agree: lying is not a hallmark of a good leader. Yet in the Army we lie habitually and nearly universally—and not just senior leaders. In their 2015 [monograph](#), “Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession” Dr. Wong and COL (Ret.) Gerras famously captured this reality: “The military...profession’s foundation of trust is slowly eroded by the corrupting influence of duplicity and deceit.”

While there has been significant effort to excise overt dishonesty, the Army norm of ‘pencil whipping’ remains unbudging. Pencil whipping—a common, unspoken practice—occurs when leaders approve an action without proper review or present false information as accurate. Classic examples include small-unit leaders recording a fitness test that didn’t happen, or a Company Commander making their Defense Training Management System (DTMS) figures “green across the board” regardless of reality. The act of ‘pencil whipping’ is fraught with good intentions—shielding individuals who did not appropriately prioritize training, inflating the appearance of competence in subordinate leaders or organizations, or other seemingly justifiable reasons. Sometimes pencil-whipping is expected or even demanded of the leaders pencil-whippers intend to impress!

Pencil-whipping may not be intentionally malicious, but its effect is just as corrosive as deliberate dishonesty. Moreover, in the past twenty years, the Army's pencil-whipping junior leaders of yesterday who acquired those habits in the Global War on Terror have become today's strategic leaders. As junior leaders, the habits we acquire and the actions we tolerate today lay the foundation of the leaders we will become. They—we—have built a culture that tolerates and even encourages this kind of minor dishonesty. But to be blunt, pencil whipping is nothing less than lying. It contradicts the Army Values we claim to profess, eroding the trust required for the Army to be effective.

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Wong and Gerras continue: "Ignoring dishonesty as a minor shortcoming or writing it off as an inevitable aspect of bureaucracy accomplishes nothing...the Army must take drastic measures."

Solving our lying problem starts with dissecting why we do this to ourselves and our profession. There are several reasons. First, as leaders, we want to make our subordinates and units look competent to observers at echelon - from our bosses to potential mentors. Real or not, quantifiable quality metrics build trust, confidence, and freedom of maneuver with superiors to conduct operations. Second, it would be dishonest to discount the legitimate pressure to receive a "Most Qualified" rating from our senior raters—to make them think we are focusing on things that are important to them whether we actually are, or even can. These pressures increase as we become more senior or move in and out of key developmental positions. They can cause us — consciously or not — to focus on the appearance of success at the risk of improving actual competence and achieving our missions. Third, we fail to prioritize. The Army gives us too much to do with the resources, time, and people we have. The easy answer is to complain, or to simply let the problem "roll downhill."

"When did you last catch yourself lying? What about lying to yourself?" An instructor recently asked these questions in an online personal development [course](#). He then asked us to write down indicators to identify our use of deception. Several that we came up with for ourselves include:

For Chris:

- I experience cognitive dissonance during or soon after the event—essentially, I have an uncomfortable conversation with myself because I did not follow through or hold the standard I wanted to hold.

- I catch myself pushing the ownership of the situation onto others—especially, copping out by blaming my higher headquarters instead of accepting my role and ability to change the situation.

For Jim:

- I start complaining about my superiors. Even if it's only internally, it's a subconscious effort to shift the blame instead of deliberately prioritizing.
- I have an Eisenhower box on a whiteboard on my wall with my Commander's priorities on it. I use this every day to give the staff, commanders, and myself daily priorities. Sometimes I catch myself reluctant to look at or update it. For me this is a major indicator that I need to take a moment and catch myself before I start acting dishonestly.

Prioritization and communication of our priorities are at the core of leader responsibilities. We owe our subordinates, our superiors and ourselves the clarity on which assignments are the most important or urgent. We owe our leaders full effort behind the things they care the most about, instead of minimal effort into everything. If we choose not to prioritize a tasking or training, we must stand by those decisions and communicate our reasoning.

As the Army returns to a garrison lifestyle and leaders fill training calendars, we need increased attention at every echelon to manage requirements appropriately. As leaders, we are responsible for taking this on ourselves, not just following mindlessly. This requires four focused lines of effort:

1. Identify your indicators for when you lie to yourself. These will be present when you start to veer off course professionally. If you know them, you can consciously correct your actions.
2. Prioritize your taskings and communicate with your headquarters, subordinates, and peers so everyone is on the same page. Your subordinates will gain a shared understanding of what needs to be done and work together to accomplish the mission in unison.
3. Execute. The overabundance of taskings and the dishonesty they engender can cause decision paralysis that leaves us worse off than we were before. If you can't decide what the priority is, do one thing. Worst case scenario, your to-do list will be shorter.
4. Take time to reflect. Prioritizing in the middle of execution is confusing and difficult. When we are overtasked and under-resourced, anything that takes time seems like more stress. Simply taking 30 minutes away to think about your problem set holistically and

prioritize efforts will make execution that much smoother.

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Everyone has different indicators too. Knowing our indicators enables us to catch ourselves *before* lying to ourselves and others. Awareness of this phenomenon, not just as a general malaise but as specific, discrete indicators in our own lives, is crucial for all of us to work together to combat it - collectively and each of us as individual leaders.

Few of us start out to be dishonest. But, we can get overwhelmed by lack of time, resources, manpower, or by other natural stressors. Then, whether we wanted to or not, we can find ourselves operating in an environment of dishonesty that we must ruthlessly and deliberately destroy. If we cannot be trusted to be honest with small things, how and why should our Soldiers and leaders trust us on the battlefield?

*Benjamin "Jim" Jimenez is a Major in the Army and has served at every level, from Company to the Army Staff, most recently as a Battalion Executive Officer. His service has taken him around the globe, from Afghanistan to Burundi to Korea. Chris Slininger is a Captain in the Army and a former Field Artillery Officer with the First Infantry Division and currently serves as a Watch Officer on the HQDA G2 Foreign Intelligence Watch. Their views are their own and do not represent the United States Army or any unit or commander they have served, the Department of Defense, or the United States Government.*

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