

Nobody Asked Me but ... A Model for Ethics Training

CAPT Elizabeth Holmes, USN (Ret.)

Practical step-by-step training in ethical decision-making would help all personnel recognize issues, decide what to do, and then act on ethical dilemmas in combat operations where leisurely reflection is seldom an option.

Current operations have confirmed the importance of GEN Charles C. Krulak’s “strategic corporal,” and that concept must be extended to the actions of junior officers as well. Recently, the Department of Defense announced that all U.S. service personnel in Iraq would receive more training in military ethics. Also, the findings from DOD’s recent mental health review will likely call for more resiliency and hardiness embedded in the leadership curriculum. Those are psychological concepts, but one way to do that is to give officers more control with a model that leads to better decision-making, forestalling guilt and trauma later over improper decisions.

The plethora of ethics training programs out there does not offer a coherent, unified approach. Ethics training now takes place largely by osmosis; we expose our future officers to the Navy’s and Marine Corp’s traditions, cultures, and mores, hoping that they absorb it all. Other approaches are to examine the lives of leaders of character, tell “sea stories” to illustrate various virtues, or use case studies. None of these approaches explore the decision-making process or the factors influencing it. They are no help when trying to choose among competing values, in right-vs-right dilemmas. Nor

do they teach how to make decisions in a step-by-step way and so may be ineffective when officers have to act in real-life situations, playing out quickly in real time.

We need a more effective way to teach people how to make practical, pragmatic ethical decisions, a model based on sound theory and validated by research.

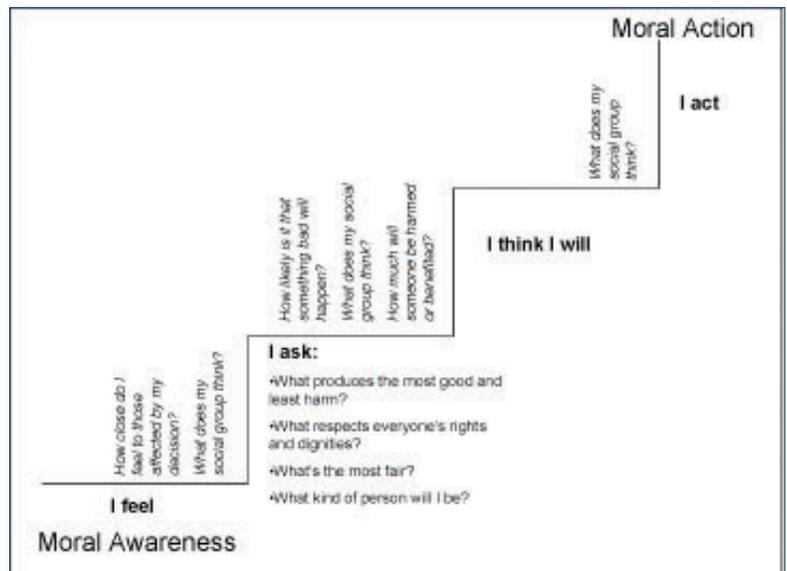
The model shown is a four-step approach based on James Rest’s model, which combined cognitive-development, social, behavioral, and psychoanalytic perspectives, along with Thomas Jones’ idea that moral intensity factors influence each of those components. These ideas were validated by research led by the author at the Naval Academy with populations of midshipmen and Navy chaplains.

To make an ethical decision, an officer works through the steps in the process, going from moral awareness to moral action. In the first step, there is gut-level recognition that the situation is morally charged. Anger,

fear, and/or empathy are aroused. The decision-maker’s gut is answering the question: “Is there something wrong here?” Is a person, community, or ideal at risk? Is there a dimension of right and wrong here, or are competing values at work?

Assuming that the situation raises an ethical issue, then the next step is to weigh various options. The aim is to distinguish right from wrong, better from worse, and between competing obligations. The decision-maker is also weighing possible actions. These kinds of questions may be asked: What action produces the most good and the least harm?

- What action respects everyone’s rights and dignities?
- What action treats everyone equally—or if not equally, then at least proportionately and fairly? How would I want to be treated?



•What kind of person will I be if I act or do not act in this situation?

The next step is to decide what to do or not do. Sometimes choosing not to act is a valid decision. Deciding what to do also means marshaling the courage to act or not act, sometimes in the face of great opposition.

Sometimes, people can recognize an ethical dilemma, decide “the right thing to do,” resolve to act, and yet do not. The power of other people present is the most common explanation used for failing to act morally. In this last step, a person carries out his

or her decision, despite opposition or possible consequences.

This fairly straightforward process is somewhat complicated by factors that may increase the moral intensity of the situation. For example, how much someone is harmed or benefited by the decision-maker’s actions may influence the decision, as well as how much the social group agrees that a given action is good or bad. How close the decision-maker feels to the people affected by the decision and the probability that something harmful will occur can also color decision mak-

ing. The questions in the model probe whether one of these factors is unduly affecting the decision making.

A model like this one will help military personnel make ethical decisions in a practical, step-by-step way. Going through these steps gets easier with practice, until the process is second nature, part of the officer’s moral “muscle memory.” 

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BUILDING A SEA-BASED MEDICAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

PART II: Expeditionary Sealift

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Implementation of joint expeditionary operations, including sea-basing, requires familiarity with those existing maritime assets dedicated to implementing and supporting these activities.

Forcible Entry Assets

Within the Navy are the vestigial remnants of the large World War II amphibious landing fleet designed to carry intact combat units—including their personnel, equipment, and cargo—and land them ashore in a ready-to-fight condition. The number of these amphibious ships, mostly developed during the Cold War, will ultimately number 31. (The exact number varies depending upon ship retirements and new vessel acquisitions.) At the close of 2006, they included:

•Eleven “big deck” amphibious ships including four remaining Tarawa class LHAs commissioned between 1976 and 1980. (These are to be serially retired and be replaced by LHA[R]s—incidentally, without well decks for surface access), and seven Wasp class LHDs. Located within these ships are medical casualty receiving and treatment facilities for immediate stabilizing treatment of the surviving wounded.

•Twelve relatively young Whidbey Island /Harpers Ferry dock landing ships (LSDs), and nine aging Austin Class LPD landing platform docks. (The latter two groups are to be sequentially replaced by nine new San Antonio Class LPD-17 ships.) Currently, one San Antonio class LPD is active.

The Navy organizes amphibious ships into expeditionary strike groups (ESGs). Each deployed ESG notionally includes one LHA or LHD, one LSD, and one LPD. The ships can carry a Marine expeditionary unit (MEU) consisting of 2,200 Marines, their aircraft, landing craft, combat equipment, and 15 days of supplies. Each ESG also notionally includes three surface combatants, a submarine, and a long range land-based maritime patrol aircraft. The ESG may deploy independently, or operate in conjunction with a carrier strike group.

Pre-Positioning Fleet

An additional component of joint maritime transportation assets for rapid reinforcement of forward based or deployed joint forces is a 36-ship pre-