

A QUESTION OF LOYALTY

Situation: Dean and I were newly-minted lieutenants assigned to separate battalions in the same brigade. We went to college together, graduated airborne school and the officer basic course together, and he was a frequent guest at my dinner table. Following our platoon leader time, Dean and I became the battalion motor pool officers for our respective battalions. Dean was a hard charging officer who always maxed his PT test, excelled in the field, and was well liked by his Soldiers. Unfortunately, Dean sometimes got a little too close to his Soldiers and NCOs by going out with them and thinking they would respect him more if they liked him. He wanted to do well and was anxious to prove himself to his incoming commander.

Weeks before his commander was to take command, Dean came to my office a nervous wreck. He closed the door and took a seat. After talking about how close we were and how much he valued our relationship, Dean got to the point. "Rick, I need your help. I've started my preliminary inventory for the upcoming change of command and am short a couple of items." A "couple of items" turned into more than just a three dollar screw driver. Dean was missing what amounted to whole tool kits and equipment for vehicles. In addition, few of his Soldiers had accountability for all of their field kit. Finally, he had not laid out his tentage following the last field problem and they were in horrible condition. Dean's accountability for Army equipment was a mess. There was no one to blame but himself. Now he wanted my help in bailing him out. His plan was to temporarily swap my non-serial itemed tents and provide him with tools for the inventory and then return them after he cruised through the inventory. The brigade's standard operating procedure (SOP) clearly explained all officers and NCOs were to conduct quarterly inventories of all equipment. While the rest of us were cleaning and checking equipment, Dean and his Soldiers blew it off and cut out early to go out; he had not even sub-hand receipted everything for which he was signed and had pencil-whipped all of the inspections.

While sitting in my office, I told Dean I would help him get his paperwork in order and try to help him get his equipment in order. I added that I would have to think about giving him some of my items so he could pass the inspection. I would get back to him in a week. During the next week, I avoided Dean while thinking about what he had asked me to do. I was angry he had put me in such a predicament and disappointed in him that he had allowed this situation to develop. Finally, I thought of how he had failed his Soldiers, fellow officers, and himself. What should I do?

REFLECTION...

On Friday, I went up to Dean and explained I could not lend him my equipment but reiterated I would help in any other way possible. I think he understood, because he did not explode but merely shrugged his shoulders and asked for any help I could provide him. In the remaining weeks leading up to the inspection, Dean and I managed to find some of the missing items, for the small dollar items we couldn't locate he paid for them out of his pocket. He and his Soldiers worked every weekend and the place started to shape up. Still, there were big gaps in his inventory list. When the time for the change-of-command inventory came around, it was obvious Dean had not been on top of things. As a result of his failure to oversee and protect Army items, coupled with the amount of TA-50 his Soldiers were missing, Dean was soon out of his job as a motor officer. Thankfully, the commander was not a disciple of the "zero-defect" Army and did not give Dean a relief-for-cause officer evaluation report. Instead, Dean received a "center-of-mass" rating and was placed in the Battalion S3 office where he was given the opportunity to excel. Dean did well in his new job and re-earned the respect of his peers, superiors, and Soldiers. I'm glad he straightened himself out.

Ethical dilemma at the time of the incident: I knew Dean's plan would probably work. Still, I knew our careers would be over if we were caught; word travels fast in the Army, and it's hard to keep secrets. I also knew I had a responsibility to my Soldiers and that Dean and his Soldiers needed to learn a lesson before our upcoming deployment. If they went out unprepared and cutting corners, I realized the line companies would be hurting when they needed maintenance help in combat.

At what point did you say "Enough Is Enough"? When and how did you take action? When Dean placed me in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between our friendship and my loyalty to the Army was the breaking point.

Conflict or tension of the 7 Army Values? How did you resolve those conflicts? Looking back, the Army value I struggled with was loyalty between my friend and the Army. I only struggled with it briefly. I also saw I would be disloyal to Dean had I allowed him to cut corners because he emerged as a better officer and person.

Consideration of Other COAs and the 2nd and 3rd order effects: Had I agreed with Dean's plan, I really would not have helped him. What's more, if I had helped him other Soldiers would have really suffered. He came out of it better, his Soldiers came out of it better, and his unit was better prepared to fight our nation's wars. Everybody learned something from this experience.

How did you recognize unethical behavior? There was nothing to delve into. Dean knew he was asking me to be a participant in unethical behavior.

How do you process or judge this as an ethical dilemma? An officer had knowingly shirked his duties in accounting for Army equipment and his Soldiers' personal equipment. The hardest part was figuring out how to tell Dean I would not help him.

How did you get the courage to take the "harder right"? Just prior to this incident, I had been asked to re-enlist a Soldier. In reading the oath this Soldier was taking, it became apparent that I was beholden to the same oath. It was a refreshing reminder.