

ESSAY

Spiraling Down to Perfection?

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Leaders who attempt to hold their subordinates to the standard of “perfection” as a performance norm plant the seed for significant ethical failures within their organizations. The 2013 cheating scandal among missile launch officers at Malmstrom Air Force Base is a case-in-point. Rather than elevating professional competency and proficiency, the unrealistic and unattainable performance expectations communicated to Malmstrom’s nuclear missile personnel resulted in widespread ethical improprieties and undermined unit effectiveness within a critical component of U.S. national security. The ethical lapses unearthed in the Malmstrom incident should encourage those responsible for educating, training, and leading airmen to reject the seemingly noble, yet counterproductive temptation to proclaim perfection as a performance “norm”. As the Malmstrom episode reinforces, perfection can easily and insidiously become the enemy of the good, and undermine possibilities to attain organizational excellence.

Significant cheating came to light during a 2013 Air Force Office of Special Investigations (OSI) investigation of illegal drug use among a number of junior officers, including two missile combat crew members at Malmstrom. Text-messaging data retrieved from the suspects’ phones in the drug investigation indicated widespread and unauthorized sharing of test material by nuclear missile officers. Following the OSI discovery, the Commander of the Air Force Global Strike Command, Lieutenant General Stephen Wilson, initiated a Commander’s Directed Investigation



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(CDI) to examine the depth of the cheating allegations and the underlying factors that contributed to it. The AFOSI investigation uncovered evidence that implicated 98 officers at Malmstrom, one-fifth of the entire nuclear launch officer force. The implicated officers allegedly distributed, received, or solicited compromised test material amongst themselves, primarily via a text-messaging network. The junior officers disseminated answers to multiple-choice questions, including classified answers for the mandatory periodic exams that purportedly measured their technical knowledge to carry out nuclear duties. In addition, ten other more senior officers eventually resigned voluntarily or were relieved of command at Malmstrom. These included the wing commander, operations group commander, and a squadron commander, although none of these more senior leaders were directly implicated in the cheating investigation (Everstine, 2014).

Discovery of cheating at Malmstrom followed on the heels of a host of other embarrassing ethical transgressions by military officers and prompted Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to admit that he was “deeply troubled” and “... generally concerned that there could be, at least at some level, a breakdown in ethical behavior and in the demonstration of moral courage.” (Tilghiman, 2014). Addressing such concerns, however, is a difficult matter. Attempts to isolate root causes for rashes of ethical breakdowns in organizations as large and as diverse as the Department of Defense typically yield inconclusive or ambiguous results. When such episodes occur in rapid succession, organizational leaders are understandably tempted to look for explanatory “nodes” or a single causal factor, one that can be “fixed” with the least possible disruption of the organization. The reality, of course, is that numerous organizational and leadership failures are usually involved. Ultimately, the breakdown lies in the choices made by individual human beings.

When examining ethical failures in organizations, one potential factor--the setting of unrealistic performance norms--typically does not garner appropriate consideration, particularly in military organizations. Institutional

culture or unit leaders that fixate on conveying a particular organizational self-image often impede rigorous analysis of this factor. In his post-CDI comments, however, Lieutenant General Wilson acknowledged that demands for “perfection” may indeed warrant closer scrutiny as a causal factor and noted, “[t]hese were all bright officers....[n]one of these officers needed the information to pass the test. They felt compelled to cheat to get a perfect score.” (Everstine, 2014). Wilson’s comments reflect a critical assessment of military supervisors within the nuclear hierarchy that had allowed disproportionate pressures to be placed on their subordinates to achieve perfect scores on the exams. Over time, norms evolved that led supervisors to perceive the exam results as defining indicators of unit readiness and the technical and procedural competence of their personnel (Holmes, 2014). Published guidance already established high standards for passing the periodic tests, i.e., 90%, but CDI interviews conducted after the cheating incident revealed that missile launch officers strongly perceived that anything less than 100% would likely carry career impacting consequences.

The CDI specifically highlighted the potential perils associated with organizational slogans that proclaim, “Perfection is the Standard” (Holmes, 2014, pp. D-13). The final report noted, “[T]his ideal [perfection] would require the complete elimination of human error in America’s nuclear enterprise...[S]ince human errors are unavoidable, even in the nuclear enterprise, the goal of the nuclear enterprise should be to construct a system that ensures human errors are mitigated and captured.” (Holmes, 2014, pp. D-13) The report continued, “[A]n unrealistic emphasis on perfection drives commanders at all levels to attempt to meet the zero-defect standard by personally monitoring and directing daily operations and imposing an unrelenting testing and evaluation regimen on wings, groups, squadrons, and missile crew members in an attempt to eliminate all human error.” (Holmes, 2014). In an interview with the *New York Times*, Secretary of the Air Force Deborah James shared similar concerns: “I heard

repeatedly from teammates that the need for perfection has created a climate of undue stress and fear. Fear about the future. Fear about promotions. Fear about what will happen to them in their careers. The irony is that they didn't cheat to pass, they cheated to get 100 percent. This is not a healthy environment." (Cooper, 2014).

The unhealthy environment noted by Secretary James results from a failure to delineate clearly between *aspirations* and *expectations* when setting performance standards. A lack of awareness of this vital distinction, or the conscious unwillingness to acknowledge it, nourishes a perception among unit personnel that a dichotomous

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choice must be made between unit "perfection" or the acceptance of a complacent mediocrity. The existence of such a false dichotomy impedes the thoughtful consideration of alternative and more realistic ways to frame unit and individual success and enhance long-term organizational effectiveness. A narrow focus on perfection actually distracts leaders from pursuing and inculcating a commitment to the virtue of excellence in their personnel and future leaders, a developmental process that inevitably and routinely will witness less than perfect performance. Pursuit of "perfection" is a manifestation of extremism, a characteristic incongruous with the effectiveness and professional demands of military leadership, whereas "excellence" acknowledges the innate fallibility in human nature. Developing the virtue of excellence rather than imposing a standard of perfection entails much more than a simple happy-to-glad linguistic distinction. It reflects a core difference in how we understand and accept human nature and develop ethical habits.

A leadership focus on perfection invites at least four main damaging consequences. First, expectations of perfection breed cynicism. Secondly, the focus on perfection distracts leaders from their responsibilities to develop their personnel. Third, such expectations impede a leader's ability to recognize and uncover the inevitable problems that percolate in any human organization. And finally, a narrow focus on perfection can lead to compartmentalized notions of integrity. In addressing each consequence in turn, it is important to keep in mind that it is their combination that produces the dysfunctional Environments that profess ideals of perfection incubate cynicism. Human beings innately recognize that perfection is impossible and therefore cast a cynical eye toward assertions of such claims. The implicated missile officers no doubt recognized that perfect test scores on routine exams correlated little with their actual level of professional competence or their overall mission readiness. Despite the tenuous connection with technical competency, they nevertheless clearly recognized the direct relationship between the tests and future career opportunities. Perhaps more significantly, the officers recognized that their own leaders viewed the same perfection standards as little more than a flimsy empirical measure that bolstered their perceived levels of operational readiness. In such an environment where leaders knowingly perpetuate an illusion of perfection, the relationship of reciprocal trust and loyalty between organizational leaders and subordinates evaporates.

The Malmstrom investigation clearly revealed a tacit acceptance of the perfection illusion. The CDI noted that "Senior leaders valued extremely high test scores as a measure of their units' preparedness for external inspections and applied significant pressure on units to achieve them, while tacitly condoning the actions of crew commanders and proctors who 'take care of' junior crew members." (Holmes, 2014, pp. D-17). Perfection fits with metaphysics, but insisting on it in a human organization necessarily drives a wedge of cynicism between those who expound

such notions and those who are ultimately responsible for attempting to realize them.

The second main consequence of a focus on perfection is that it insidiously creates an atmosphere that encourages leaders to excuse themselves from perhaps their most critical leadership responsibilities—developing their subordinates and future leaders. They also deprive themselves of information critical to addressing their responsibilities as leaders. Commanders that profess perfection as a benchmark for measuring subordinates' performance will inevitably perceive that developmental responsibilities rarely demand their immediate attention. This is because subordinates operating under the weight of perfection as the performance norm will consistently find a way to meet the narrow *technical* requirements of this binary standard. This is especially true when the consequences of not doing so are so high. Personnel development responsibilities appear less pressing when empirical data ostensibly demonstrates that subordinates are *objectively* performing at the highest level possible. Due to the competing demands placed upon them, unit commanders put their focus on those problems that appear as most acute. Since perfection by definition cannot be improved upon, the illusion of competency gleaned from perfect test scores propels commanders to place their attentions elsewhere.

The concern mentioned in the last paragraph leads directly to a third consequence that flows from expectations of perfection. When a unit's professed *aspirational* goals become synonymous with *descriptive* expectations, i.e., performance norms, underlying problems in an organization become increasingly difficult to detect. Unit deficiencies insidiously fester until they eventually explode into ethical quagmires like witnessed at Malmstrom. If leaders use such standards of perfection as an indicator of their unit's health and readiness, they essentially cede their ability to accurately monitor and detect problems in their infancy. The façade of perfection masks these problems.

Perhaps more importantly, the use of such

standards significantly hinders the commander's ability to differentiate the true top performers from the "bottom feeders" in their organization. To the degree all personnel invariably achieve "perfection" on the objective standards, like test scores, organizational leaders increasingly find themselves in a position where they must rely on other, more subjective and less tangible measures for distinguishing top officers from their peers. Admittedly, leaders must rely in part on *subjective* measures for evaluating officer potential. In an environment where standards of perfection receive undue focus and influence, however, the increased need to rely on subjective measures increases the possibility that subordinates will perceive favoritism in performance comparisons, promotions, and developmental opportunities. An individual that achieves the same objective standard of perfection as his fellow officers will likely find it difficult to perceive a commander's advancement of one subordinate over another as anything other than favoritism.

A final consequence that flows from setting perfection as a standard is that such standards insidiously promote situational or "compartmentalized" notions of integrity. Certain unethical behaviors become tolerable and accepted when individuals view them as necessary to achieve the advertised, and ostensibly "higher" aim of perfection. The interview data collected in the Malmstrom case provided strong support for the existence of compartmentalized integrity. Missile officers acknowledged that they viewed collaborating on the tests as cheating, but they concomitantly professed that "there are different levels of cheating," and "integrity is subject to the environment created by leadership." (Holmes, 2014, pp. G-24). The officers perceived that their ethical obligations with respect

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to test taking were conditional and had to be viewed in context with other aims such as unit prestige, mission ready status, inspection requirements, and their own performance evaluations and career aspirations. The interviews also revealed a cultural norm among the missile officers where stronger performing test takers felt obligated to help weaker members improve their scores. The interviewees claimed that this cultural norm weighed heavily on organizational members. According to the respondents, “[t]his cultural emphasis on helping weaker teammates improve their scores blurred the line between acceptable help and unacceptable cheating.” (Holmes, 2014, pp. D-16). In essence, the notion of integrity lost its status as something intertwined and absorbed into every part of one’s moral fiber, but instead became viewed as “compartmentalized” and conditional based on other unit goals, aspirations, and leadership priorities.

The leaders of any organization, but especially an organization entrusted with tools of unimaginable destruction, must foster a culture that vehemently resists any such notion of a “compartmentalized” integrity. Leaders that

needs.

The human attraction to standards of perfection is understandable and this attraction is arguably even more powerful in military organizations. In a profession where defeat in battle may mean destruction of the nation, or where errors in the management of the particular tools of war can produce catastrophic consequences for the life and treasure of the many, aiming at anything less than perfection easily excites allegations of defeatism and/or immoral complacency. Stepping back from professing perfection as the standard can also incite fears that such a move represents the initial slide toward a destructive ethical relativism. The fundamental assumption that underlies such concerns, however, falsely implies that human actors can meet standards of perfection and that such standards can motivate personnel toward ethical behavior over the long-term. In truth, as the Malmstrom incident shows, demanding performance standards of perfection actually *encourages* individuals to accept relativistic behavior and impedes the development of a deeper understanding of honorable behavior.

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In short, perfection impedes true “excellence,” a more reasonable and sustainable aim for human actors and one that acknowledges the central importance of ethical development.

profess and demand adherence to standards of perfection create an environment where compartmentalizing integrity provides the only means to reconcile the contradictions produced between descriptive expectations and unachievable performance standards. When conceptions of ethical behavior become compartmentalized or viewed as situational, personnel do not develop the tools for ethical decision making in the vast space that resides *between* compartments. As a result, supervisors may inadvertently suppress the development and expression of the more encompassing and interconnected conceptions of integrity, honor, and ethical standards that our Air Force desperately

The Air Forces adoption of “Excellence in All We Do” as a core value suggests that upper-echelon leaders acknowledge the important distinction between excellence and perfection. Unfortunately, however, the distinction often seems to get murky at the operational level, especially in those operational areas like nuclear weapons where errors can produce catastrophic results.

How then do we reconcile the abandonment of perfection with the potentially grave consequences associated with some kinds of military error? First, commanders at all levels must acknowledge the unrealistic nature of such standards and recognize that, despite some potentially short-term boosts in effectiveness, notions of perfection

actually undermine unit effectiveness in the long term. Second, when organizations dismiss notions of perfection as the expected *individual* performance standard, they begin to develop a healthy humility that allows them to recognize and accept the necessary redundancies that should accompany all human endeavors and which can result in practically perfect *group* performance. For example, two-man missile crews, “no-lone” zones, Personnel Reliability Programs, multiple layers of launch authorization, extensive training, redundant mechanical and computer systems, professional pre-screening, etc., all acknowledge the infrequent, yet inevitable failures of human operators. Leaders must resist pressures that tempt them to accept that their rigid insistence on perfection can justify a reduction in redundancies in the name of improved efficiency. Finally, and arguably most importantly, deposing the tyrannical myth of perfection will enable leaders at all levels to instill a more meaningful understanding of integrity among their personnel. In the place of stove-piped and situational understandings of integrity, which leaves unaddressed the broad swath of ethical territory that exists between respective “compartments”, a more encompassing understanding of honorable behavior can develop.

Organizational leaders, and particularly those in command of military units, routinely profess that their human capital represents the most important asset of their organization. Human beings, however, are inherently imperfect and therefore setting descriptive expectations of perfection only serves to ensure failure. Leaders that sincerely view human actors as their organization’s most critical component must accept their all-too-human characteristics, as well as their noble ones, and must be diligent in factoring both into institutional structures and practices.



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