IMPROVING SOF ETHICS EDUCATION

SOF ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING ENVIRONMENT

Positive (+) Outcome

High Moral Drift / + Outcomes
"Busted" — Makes the news and makes SOF look bad

THE REAL PROBLEM

Q-IV

Low Moral Drift /+ Outcomes

"Just doing your job..."

BEST CASE

Q-I

High Moral Drift

Low Moral Drift

Q-III

Q-II

High Moral Drift / – Outcomes
"Busted" — Makes the news and makes SOF look bad

WORST CASE

Low Moral Drift / – Outcomes
"Unfortunate, but it happens..."
"The cost of doing business"

RE-TRAIN!

Negative (–) Outcome

Kari A. Thyne | **Joseph E. Long** | **Wojciech (John) Labuz** | **Mike W. Clark**
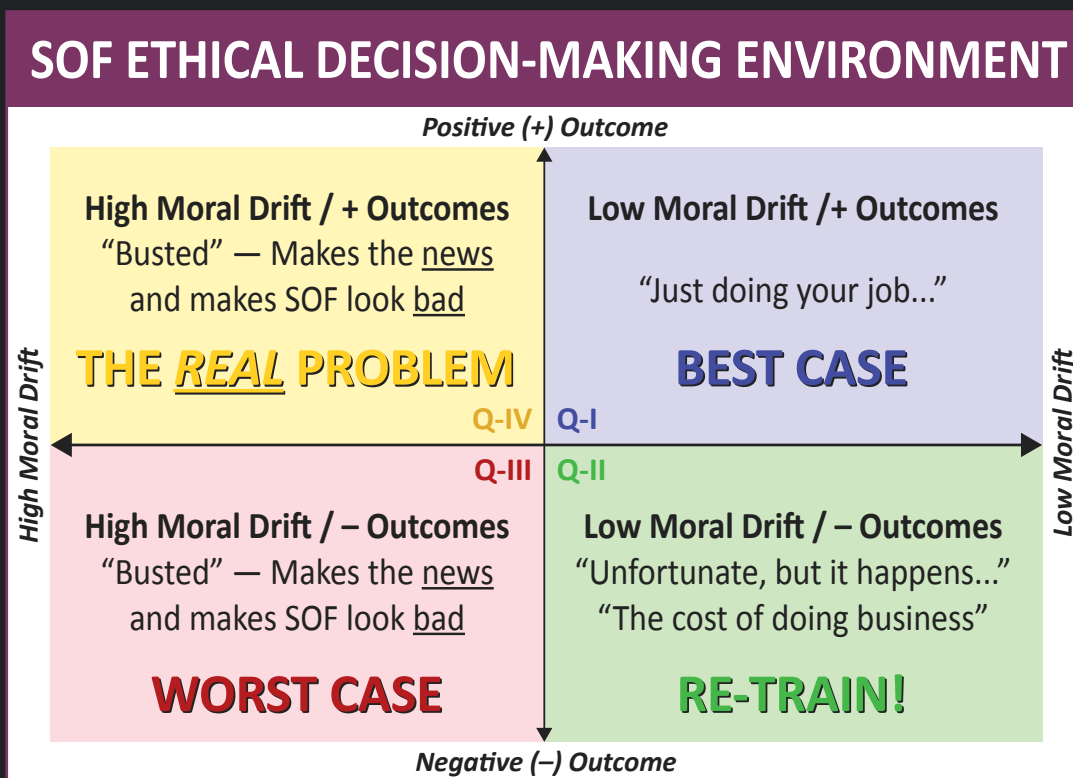
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JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY

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Kari A. Thyne, Joseph E. Long, Wojciech (John) Labuz, Mike W. Clark

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY

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About the Authors *continued*

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Founding SOF Ethics Education on the Western Philosophical Tradition

By Kari A. Thyne

In the wake of a string of high-profile ethical incidents, the United States Congress called for "a comprehensive review of professionalism and ethics programs for special operations forces (SOF)" in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2019 (U.S. House 2018, S 5717). These ethical incidents were costly to SOF in terms of money and time, and additionally, in terms of damage to SOF's reputation and loss of trust from U.S. allies and partners, military and civilian leadership, and the American people. In response to Congress, the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) conducted and published a comprehensive review (CR) of culture and ethics in January 2020 (USSOCOM 2020). It highlighted a need for leaders with a "balance of character and competence" (USSOCOM 2020, 7). To contribute to meeting this need, faculty from the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) began to develop an ethics curriculum tailored for SOF operators and those who support them.

Recognizing the imperative to address the unique ethical challenges faced by SOF, the SOF Ethics Team emerged at JSOU from an initial community of interest comprised of experienced SOF practitioners, academic experts, and passionate educators. This specialized team continues to develop ethics lessons and to teach them regularly in courses offered
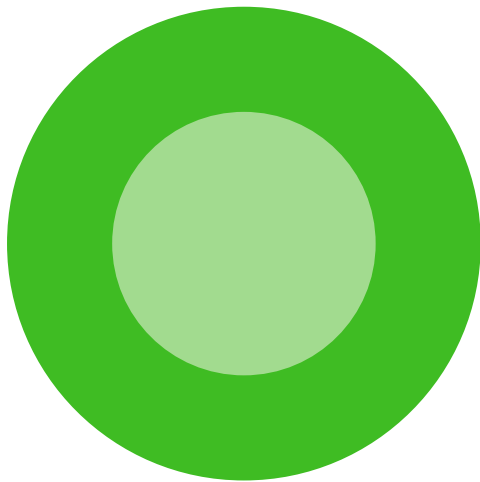
■ Ethical challenges of America's cultural environment
■ Ethical challenges of SOF's operating environment

FIGURE 1. *Ethical challenges of America's cultural environment and the SOF operating environment.*

by JSOU. These essays detail the early development of these ethics lessons. While the ethical concepts upon which the lessons are based are thousands of years old, the application of these lessons to the SOF environment by the SOF Ethics Team is unique.

These essays record the enduring foundational elements that remain central to our ongoing focus. We use the term "SOF ethics" as shorthand for the ethics curriculum developed at JSOU, which is focused specifically on the ethical demands of the SOF operating environment, however, these are ethical principles that would apply to anyone similarly situated. Start with the assumption in Figure 1 that the ethical demands faced by any and all Americans over a lifetime fall in a circle. Generally speaking, Americans teach their children not only to survive in this environment but to thrive in it. They do this through compulsory education, practicing formal religions, youth sports, social activities such as scouting, and regular conversations around the dinner table. For SOF, there is another circle that surrounds this circle. It includes the ethical demands of the SOF operating environment. These are separate and distinct challenges. Most Americans will never know of these challenges and will never have to reason ethically in the face of them.

Much like the tactical skills of which students at JSOU train to expert proficiency, the authors see ethical decision-making as a skill—something that gets better with practice. Conversely, this skill will atrophy if underutilized or ignored altogether. The one-hour, annual, computer-based ethics training required by regulation for all Department of Defense personnel is necessary but not sufficient. It does not convey the complexity of ethical decision-making in SOF environments. Thus, students may conclude that these decisions are straightforward, lulling them into the false belief that there is no need to spend much time thinking about them or preparing in advance. JSOU ethics lessons encourage students to continue engaging in ethics education and to systematically converse about the ethical challenges that permeate SOF operating environments. The authors of these essays advocate for multiple touchpoints in ethics education over a career in SOF.

There are two related benefits to ethics education delivered over a career in SOF, which are emphasized to students. The first one is to arm them against the timeless allure of cultural relativism. SOF professionals routinely work in cultures outside of America or Western culture more broadly. If ill-prepared, SOF can find themselves reasoning in the following way when they contact other cultures: different cultures have different moral codes, therefore, right and wrong are matters of opinion. JSOU teaches that differences in cultural beliefs are not always a difference in ethical values. For example, suppose a SOF team is working in a country where people believe it is wrong to eat cows— even a poor culture in which there is not enough food, the cows are not to be touched. This culture appears to be very different from American culture.

Suppose the people of this culture do not eat cows because they believe that after death the souls of humans inhabit the bodies of animals, especially cows. To them, that cow might be someone's grandmother. If this were the case, one would not want to say that their values are different from ours; the difference,

rather, is in beliefs. Americans value our elders and therefore agree we should not eat Grandma; we do not share the belief that the cow is (or could be) anyone's Grandma. A conservative estimate is that there are over 3,500 cultures in the world (Price 2004, 7). There is much American SOF do not know about other cultures, so learning more is preparatory work SOF can do before deploying. There is a good chance SOF will eventually find themselves face to face with a culture they know next to nothing about, so JSOU ethics training underscores the importance of looking for shared values.

The second related benefit to career-long touchpoints in ethics education is that the binary ethical codes (i.e., good or bad, right or wrong) SOF are familiar with may not provide sufficient guidance in SOF environments. Binary ethical codes are more effective in environments that hew closer to the rule of law than the law of nature. The unique and peculiar ethical challenges of SOF operating environments hew closer to the law of nature. In environments where SOF often operate, environments replete with diversity in culture, ethics, morals, etc., strict adherence to black-and-white ethical codes can be harmful since they can encourage oversimplification of analysis and viewpoint. JSOU is careful to ensure that students understand that ethical considerations are still important in these situations. This is where we begin to teach ethical decision-making in SOF.

The starting point for JSOU's ethics curriculum is classical ethics education in the Western philosophical tradition. It is important for students to understand that the ideas they will engage with are thousands of years old. The finest human minds, and untold lesser minds, have considered, questioned, and refined ideas from Plato and Aristotle. Far from being "dead white males," their thinking has infused and energized Western culture for millennia and their influence is still reflected in activities and institutions including today's universities and governments (Herman 2014, ix). It is important for our students to know that we

are building on a learned tradition, not pulling rabbits out of hats or scratching ideas on the back of a bar napkin. Grounding our program of study in the work of Plato and Aristotle is also important for two additional reasons. First, considering how one ought to live is something JSOU wants all of its students to eventually think about routinely. In most cases, this is a process that has to be introduced and nurtured before it will become habit. Second, these ethics lessons build on ancient Greek concepts and ideas to propose a model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment. It is valuable for students to understand that the model's foundational principles have endured for millennia.

With few objections, students embrace an intellectual trip to Ancient Greece where many encounter rich Platonic and Aristotelian ideas for the first time. For example, Plato and Aristotle agreed that everything is created with a primary function, and fulfillment of this primary function is called eudaimonia.[1] We do not have an English equivalent, but conceptually, "to flourish" comes closest. Things that are created do not get to decide what constitutes eudaimonia; it is discovered not decided. There are many, many possibilities for how a created life can unfold and much is affected by chance. Consider the acorn as an example. It could be squirrel food or ammo for a slingshot; it could fall on inhospitable ground and fail to thrive. But we know what eudaimonia is for every acorn: it is to become a mighty oak tree dripping with acorns.

Curiosity prompts students to wonder what constitutes eudaimonia for human beings. Instructors answer that Plato and Aristotle thought that the human soul had three parts. The vegetative part we share with plants: that we are born and we die; we have the ability to reproduce. The appetitive part we share with animals: our appetites drive us; we can will ourselves to move from place to place. But what differentiates human beings from plants and animals is the rational

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[1] Discussion of this concept can be found in the classic texts, Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics.*

part of our souls: human beings are unique because of our higher-level reasoning capabilities. Through the ancient Greek consideration of the tripartite soul, we invite students to consider a "life of action governed by reason" as eudaimonia for human beings, that is, the best possible life for us. There has been a lot of ink spilled over the millennia as to what constitutes such a life but founding it on the concept of a tripartite soul as unique to humankind has endured.

U.S. military students are often familiarized with the foundational ideas of the Eastern philosophical tradition during professional military education, Sun Tzu in particular. They will pore over ancient military tactics, but the JSOU ethics team encourages them to also consider what these teachers have to say about the development of character. Instructors acknowledge and mindfully address the preeminence of the Eastern philosophical tradition and its continuing influence in cultures around the world where SOF will find themselves working closely with populations and partner forces. We emphasize that though America's philosophical lineage is through the Western tradition, the theories the two traditions have considered and continue to develop tend to center on universal values. Therefore, there is often meaningful overlap between the two and it is often possible to find values in common wherever SOF goes in the world. For example, nurturing children and respecting elders are universal values, though cultural practices can vary widely.

To underscore the overlap between Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, we remind students that Sun Tzu lists five fundamental factors of war at the very beginning of The Art of War. These are the essential factors that determine who wins and who loses wars in service to the nation. He wrote, "The first is the way; the second, heaven; the third, earth; the fourth, command; and the fifth, rules and regulations" (Sunzi 2001, 3). Though we know of no contact between Plato, Aristotle, and Sun Tzu, we argue that Sun Tzu's concept of "the way" is acutely similar to Plato and Aristotle's "life of action governed by reason." Each

suggests that in a given situation where a decision is made, there is a best alternative, which human beings can discern and choose. A second acute similarity is Sun Tzu's concept of "command," meaning "wisdom, trustworthiness, benevolence, courage, and firmness of the commander" (Sunzi 2001, 5). These are martial characteristics by which military leaders through the ages have been judged worthy or not. To embody these characteristics constitutes eudaimonia, flourishing, for a warrior in any age, to include today's SOF.

After introducing ideas from both the western and eastern philosophical traditions and exploring the overlap, we fast-forward to fifteenth-century Florence, Italy. There we encounter Niccolò Machiavelli, who has something to say to us today about moral fitness. Machiavelli, a man of his times, was influenced by the Renaissance and its key deliberations. He and his contemporaries regarded fortuna, life's unexpected changes, as the most powerful force behind human affairs (Skinner 2000, 28). It was variable, unpredictable at least some of the time, and capable of being unstoppable by human intervention once set in motion. But humankind could reject being governed solely by chance, by fortuna, by developing virtù. Today, we call this personal character.

Machiavelli saw the allure of a resignation to chance, an allure that also has appeal for SOF today. He underscored it with an example of fortuna as a river (Machiavelli 1998b, 98). Standing in the face of the raw power of a violent river, humankind was a seemingly diminutive match whose only option was to yield and be overwhelmed by its violence. But to resign oneself to the vicissitudes of fortuna was to assign it power and dominance that he did not think it always had. We use Machiavelli's example to emphasize to our students the responsibility they bear to develop their ethical reasoning skills. Machiavelli thought the example of a violent river illustrated the relationship between virtù and fortuna. Just as dams, locks, dikes, canals, and the like could be fashioned to confront a violent river, a person's virtù, personal character, could be developed

to confront the situations and experiences of fortuna. One way to develop personal character was through education. Education was the means to moral fitness in the same way exercise is the means to physical fitness. Those in a professional military would no more ignore their moral fitness than they would their physical fitness.

In addition to moral fitness, JSOU ethics lessons extract insights into the essence of human nature from Machiavelli. We find his clarity and consistency helpful. While human beings are complex and complicated, not everything about us is a mystery. For his part, Machiavelli did not think that humankind could alter its essence and denied that it had. He thought that any changes in humankind over long periods of time were of the same kind as could also be observed in stars and the sun and could also be observed in mineral elements and their chemical properties (Machiavelli 1998a, 6). That is to say that none of these things changed in any essential way over time. A human today is essentially the same as those who lived in ancient Greece and ancient Rome. What changed was the situations humans found themselves in. Ancient Greece and ancient Rome would be all but incomprehensible to us, were we to find ourselves in either. The same could be said if the ancients were to find themselves in the twenty-first century. Relatedly, just as a tiger in captivity is still a wild animal, human nature does not change. Humans can change their behaviors, voluntarily or involuntarily, but one cannot change the essence of human nature.

The nature of humankind's unchanging essence was grim according to Machiavelli. JSOU focuses its students on negative human characteristics initially since it is the impact of these that they are preparing to confront. Human beings are an unstable mix of animal drives, yet we have the capacity to discipline those animal drives in ourselves and in others. We are self-interested and often selfish on the one hand; on the other, we have the capacity to limit ourselves out of regard for others. We can modify our behaviors if we are motivated to do so. We often find that

motivation in our respect for others. Machiavelli thought it reasonable to conclude "...all men are bad, and they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it," (1998a, 15) once the historical record had been thoughtfully considered. He meant that people would do wrong whenever they wanted as long as they also think they have a reasonable chance of not being held to account for their actions.

To reinforce humankind's propensity to do wrong whenever they want as long as they have a reasonable chance of skirting accountability, we invite students to consider what they would do with an invisibility cloak—similar in concept to the Ring of Gyges in Plato's Republic. Initially, students think of practical jokes they might pull on one another: tying someone's shoelaces together, shooting spit balls, glitter bombing. This is followed by initiatives that balance the scales of justice much like Robin Hood: taking from the rich and giving to the poor. It does not take long before the darker side of human nature beckons and vengeful acts come to mind: damaging personal property or physically punishing others whose actions warrant retribution. Amidst the fun in these kinds of thought experiments, there comes the realization that Machiavelli's insight is still relevant. Instructors finish by asking students to consider whether the nature of SOF deployments, where teams are operationally detached from command hierarchy, can encourage SOF professionals to think of themselves as operating with an invisibility cloak and can encourage SOF teams to do wrong whenever they want.

Students and instructors continue thinking critically about the essence of human nature when they fast forward again to seventeenth-century Britain to encounter John Locke. Locke was a famous philosopher, even in his lifetime. His ideas were read, studied, and argued about by America's founders—Washington, Franklin, Adams, Hamilton Jefferson, Madison, and the list goes on. Like the ancient Greeks, Locke's thinking permeates the Western way of thinking.

His ideas on how human character comes to be is particularly relevant for SOF. Like Aristotle, Locke was an empiricist. This means he thought we learned about the world through our senses as we experienced the world. We learn what we live. What this means for us is that moral character is the result of experience and education. This means everyone in SOF bears a responsibility for shaping the moral characters of those they lead, those they support, and everyone who is influenced by the example they set.

Upon the foundation of Plato and Aristotle's eudaimonia, Machiavelli's moral fitness and unchanging human nature, and Locke's ideas on how moral character is shaped, we transition to examining more systematically how these ideas come together in SOF today. We introduce moral drift by pointing out its similarity to mission creep, a concept familiar to SOF professionals and the wider military community writ large. No one is exempt from moral drift, so an awareness of what it is increases the likelihood that students will recognize it when they experience it or see its effects in their teammates. Moral drift is the gradual ebbing of standards that occurs in individuals and within groups (Sternberg 2012, 43). Because inattention often goes hand in hand with moral drift, people and organizations only realize it after the long-term effects are evident (Sternberg 2012, 43). In many cases, the person or organization will have lost all original bearings and resort to rationalization and negating behavior. JSOU ethics lessons emphasize that no person nor organization drifts its way to excellence. Finally, we introduce a causal chain of moral drift left unchecked, which typically leads to misconduct that could lead to moral injury.

JSOU contacted The Shay Moral Injury Center to learn more about moral injury and how to accurately teach its basic facts to our students. As we learned, "Moral injury is the suffering people experience when we are in high stakes situations, things go wrong, and harm results that challenges our deepest moral codes and ability to trust in others or ourselves.

The harm may be something we did, something we witnessed, or something that was done to us" (The Shay Moral Injury Center 2023). Because this is not only an academic exercise but a topic that may be immediately relevant to our students, ethic instructors also convey that moral injury results in moral emotions such as shame, guilt, self-condemnation, outrage, and sorrow (The Shay Moral Injury Center 2023). It is possible that our students may have experienced the effects of moral injury and have been dealing with the associated emotions but did not know the cause or have a name for it. Those of us teaching JSOU's ethics curriculum are working to change this.

We take the additional educational step of connecting moral injury with behavior patterns human beings use to suppress its emergence in our consciousness (i.e., overwork, overexercise, or overuse of alcohol or drugs). These behaviors are visible and therefore more readily identifiable than moral injury, an invisible wound. We ask students not to overlook these behaviors in themselves and in those they know, particularly those whose SOF experiences they share. It is important for students to know that moral injury can remain dormant for decades, but it is unlikely to remain dormant forever. Research done by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the wider medical community connects moral injury and suicidal thoughts. As such, addressing moral drift is a key SOF leader responsibility. Maintaining a better understanding of moral drift and its connection to moral injury will benefit everyone in the SOF enterprise.

Plato's commentators are legion, but one speaks directly to what JSOU aspires to do with ethics education. He characterizes Plato's legacy to the West, in part, as this point: "Knowledge is always the key to virtue" (Herman 2014, 23). This implies that ethical decision-making requires education. Through education, students learn and thereby come to know. Some of what they come to know is normative, that

is, knowing what they should do. Knowing informs doing and habitually knowing and doing what one should builds a virtuous character. A foundational and deliberate education underwritten by a thorough understanding of human nature and the realities of the complex challenges of SOF operating environments is critical to building the individual character of the professionals who compose SOF teams. It helps address the cultural and ethical concerns of USSOCOM, the U.S. Congress, and the Nation SOF serves.

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Ethics is Leader Business: Understanding Six SOF Ethical Truths

By Joseph E. Long

To better understand the distinct nature of SOF ethics, ethical research from the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) distills the philosophical and operational aspects of ethical decision-making into what are proposed as six SOF Ethical Truths designed to mirror the five SOF Truths (Thyne and Long 2020, 3; Labuz et al., 2021; Long and Thyne 2022, 12-15). See Figure 2. The first SOF Ethical Truth recognizes the realities of human nature and states, "Individual moral character is neither inherent nor fixed. Ethical decision-making requires continuing education for even the most experienced SOF operators. Members of SOF units who cannot be shaped by education and experience must be removed from SOF formations" (Thyne and Long 2020, 3). Despite the debate as to whether humans are born with moral character or create it in themselves, the first SOF Ethical Truth is a reminder that people can nonetheless develop and shape moral character over the course of a career and a lifetime. In short, individual moral character, like any other combat skill, will both improve with practice but decline with neglect.

One way to develop and shape moral character is through education. Education is a means to moral fitness in the same way exercise is a means to physical fitness. Since military leaders remain responsible for ensuring the physical, technical, and moral fitness of their

subordinates, the first SOF Ethical Truth underscores the reality that ethics is "leader business." SOF leaders have an obligation to provide effective, SOF-specific, ethical education to their units and to remove SOF members who cannot be shaped by education and experience. As with other respected professions that deal with highly complex environments, SOF environments invite moral drift, particularly when Special Operators are not prepared ahead of time. Unchecked moral drift, emerging as the natural tendency for ethical boundaries to become blurred, leads to many undesirable outcomes and often contributes to operational ineffectiveness.

Supporting the imperative to provide ethical education ahead of time, the second SOF Ethical Truth recognizes that "SOF operators will be morally challenged when they are least prepared to deal with it" (Thyne and Long 2020, 3). Although SOF does a great job of selecting and training Special Operators through rigorous assessment and training programs, ethical reasoning is a skill that often remains underdeveloped. Like other important SOF skills, ethical reasoning is strengthened by "slow thinking" as a function of education, conversation, and introspection (Kahneman 2011, 13). Slow thinking helps Special Operators avoid cognitive biases and improve logical consciousness, which helps build the "cognitive reserve" necessary for making better combat decisions when Special Operators are caught in the moment and there is only time for fast thinking (Harvard Medical School, 2023).

Building on how SOF operators must think, the third SOF Ethical Truth reinforces that "SOF ethical decision-making must be developed for the harsh realities of SOF environments and operational requirements. SOF units must see the world for the way it is, not for how they might want it to be" (Thyne and Long 2020, 3). SOF practitioners exercise expertise or influence across all aspects of multidomain warfare, and SOF's unique, cross-cutting capability is expertise in building and sustaining relationships across the human domain. The deeper this understanding of the human domain, i.e., human nature, other cultures, and what is unique and peculiar about SOF environments, will ensure SOF practitioners see their own strengths and weaknesses more clearly.

A deeper understanding of the essential characteristics of human nature will also help to ensure SOF practitioners see the complexity inherent in the ethical challenges they face. Even the strongest moral characters can be paralyzed by confusion when there are multiple standards of what is right and what is wrong, or the difference between what is more right or less wrong is hard to sort. Different religions, cultural customs, and societal norms lead to multiple standards
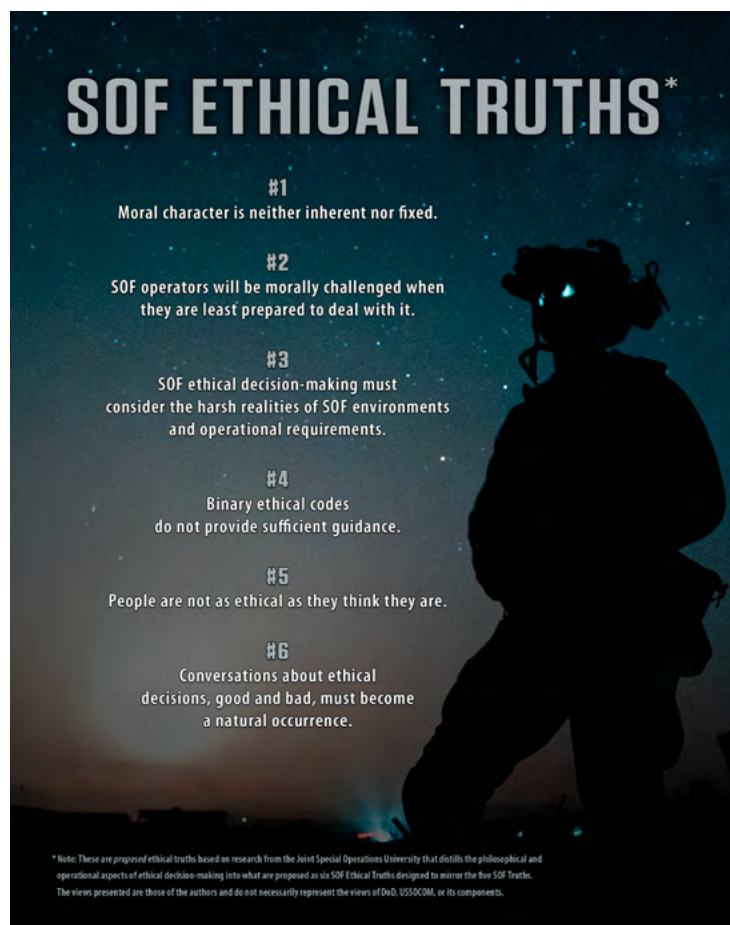

FIGURE 2. *Six SOF ethical truths. Source: Special Warfare Magazine, January - March 2022, Vol 35(1)*

of right and wrong, and Special Operators must operate and lead when no rules exist.

The fourth SOF Ethical Truth recognizes the complexity of the SOF environment and emphasizes that "traditional" ethical education is largely unsuitable for SOF formations engaged in areas where ethical decisions are rarely black and white. It states, "Binary ethical codes do not provide sufficient guidance in SOF environments. In fact, strict adherence to binary ethical codes can even be harmful in some SOF environments" (Thyne and Long 2020, 3). Why harmful? Because binary ethical codes are characteristically either-or; they encourage oversimplifying complex situations, leaving out too many relevant details, and eliminating necessary and pragmatic operational options. When Special Operators are exposed to these conditions, moral confusion can hamper operational effectiveness and leave ethical reasoning to randomness and luck.

Adding to the distinctiveness of the SOF profession, the fifth SOF Ethical Truth recognizes that SOF leaders at all levels have a professional obligation to recognize the distinct nature of SOF ethics. Therefore, "SOF leaders should not be naïve or insensitive to human behavior and must recognize that people are not as ethical as they think they are. SOF operators require specific training to close the gap between the expectation and reality of what they must do" (Thyne and Long 2020, 3). This ethical truth is emphatic that leaders at all levels retain a professional responsibility to be mindful of the complex nature of the SOF profession. Importantly, leaders should not expect others to follow standards or ethical principles that they themselves are either unable or unwilling to uphold. This underscores the importance of integrity and consistency in leadership within the SOF profession. Further, this reminds leaders at all levels that ethical behavior is never one-size-fits-all. Some SOF professionals will make decisions that are exceedingly rare and difficult to understand for those not present. As such, SOF leaders must hold SOF practitioners accountable while also recognizing that a reasonable person in a complex situation might make decisions that stymie others. No one is exempt from both recognizing the harsh realities of what Special Operators must do, nor from the obligation to ensure they are prepared.

Lastly, the sixth SOF Ethical Truth accounts for the realities of the SOF culture as a function of the SOF profession. As such, "SOF culture must be an environment where conversations about ethical decisions, good and bad, are a natural occurrence" (Thyne and Long 2020, 3). We know conversation is a critical part of education; we learn from others formally and informally. Asking one another questions, sharing experiences, and developing possible solutions to case studies strengthens individual and team moral fitness. Making conversations about ethics part of SOF culture is wholly appropriate since moral fitness and ethical reasoning skills are key to how SOF practitioners navigate, operate, and dominate relationships across the human domain.

Team Dynamics: The Realities of SOF Team Building

If we look at the logic behind ethical decisions in a SOF team environment, we will find that even the best-intentioned and most morally correct operator is likely to experience moral drift when becoming part of a team. Ethical training provided only during qualification is largely insufficient for preparing a new Special Operator for the realities of the SOF profession. Exploring the complexity of SOF team dynamics highlights why this is so. Consider the strategic choices facing even the most dedicated and morally correct SOF operator's initial arrival to his or her operational SOF unit. Accepting that moral drift is a part of human nature, the new member will encounter a pre-existing team culture that exhibits some level of moral drift. All teams are realistic representations of human nature and the reality of the SOF operational environment.

Following the logic of rational behavior in Figure 3, when the new member joins a SOF team, he or she has an opening strategic choice. This eager new

Special Operator, straight from the qualification course, will either go along with the status quo of the team (cooperate, or C) or refuse to participate in behavior indicative of moral drift (defect, or D). This choice will be reflected by the new member's behavior and will be recognized by his or her teammates. In response to the new member's strategic choice (cooperate or defect), the team responds with a similar choice between accepting the new member's discomfort with team culture (accept, or A) or expressing displeasure with the new member through social or professional exclusion (reject, or R).

The team dynamics model affords four strategic conditions: a new member will cooperate and be accepted (CA), cooperate and be rejected (CR), defect from the team and still be accepted (DA), or defect from the team and be rejected (DR). When looking through the eyes of the new member, one can rationally prioritize his or her likely preferences: most likely, the new member's first preference will be to cooperate with the hopes of being accepted (CA), with the worst result being for the new member

to cooperate and still be rejected (CR). This reflects the reality that limiting SOF education to the training pipeline will not change the way team dynamics shape individual behavior and SOF culture. In fact, the realities of the SOF operational environment suggest that being rejected by a team could be life-threatening. Again, SOF leaders cannot afford to be naïve or insensitive to this reality.

Now What? Making Better Decisions

The model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment in Figure 4 is a useful tool for examining two key components of SOF operations. The model recognizes roughly 2,500 years of Western philosophy as well as the realities of how human nature affects the SOF profession. Likewise, the model accepts that SOF practitioners are exposed to moral drift and provides a common language that facilitates communication between practitioners and leaders across the joint SOF enterprise. The model respects the SOF Ethical Truths and creates more room for SOF operators and leaders to trust how each respond
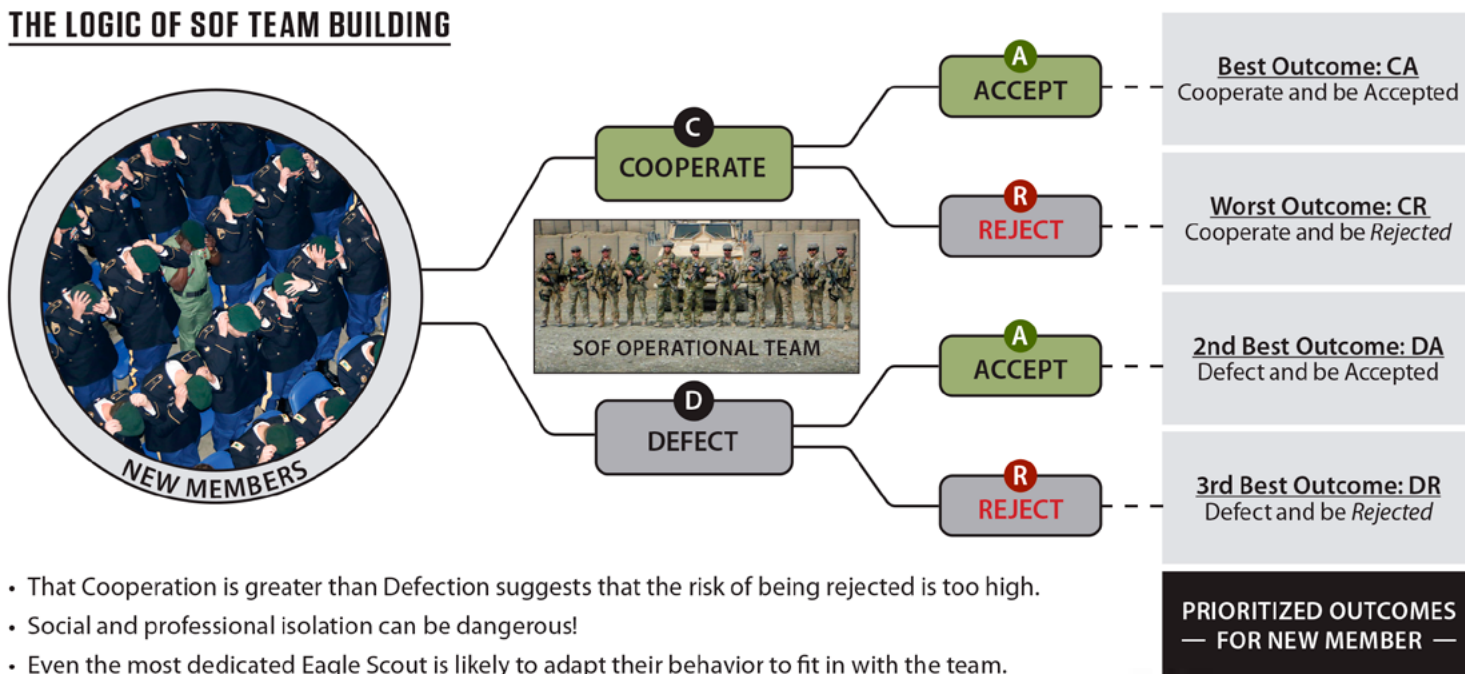

THE LOGIC OF SOF TEAM BUILDING

NEW MEMBERS

C COOPERATE

SOF OPERATIONAL TEAM

D DEFECT

A ACCEPT — **Best Outcome: CA** Cooperate and be Accepted

R REJECT — **Worst Outcome: CR** Cooperate and be *Rejected*

A ACCEPT — **2nd Best Outcome: DA** Defect and be Accepted

R REJECT — **3rd Best Outcome: DR** Defect and be *Rejected*

PRIORITIZED OUTCOMES — FOR NEW MEMBER —

- That Cooperation is greater than Defection suggests that the risk of being rejected is too high.
- Social and professional isolation can be dangerous!
- Even the most dedicated Eagle Scout is likely to adapt their behavior to fit in with the team.

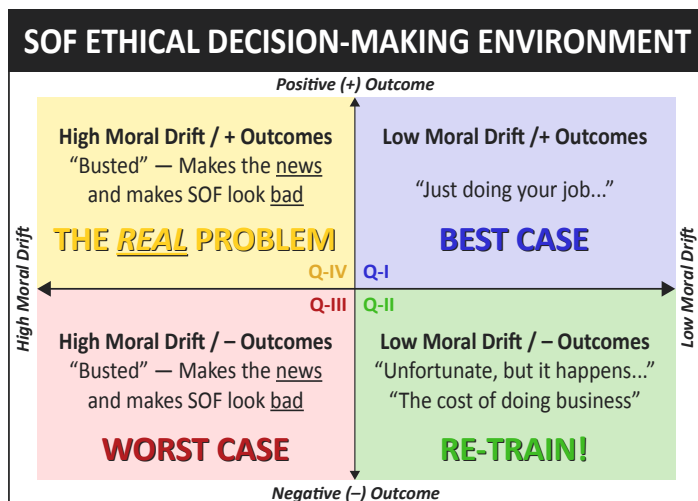**FIGURE 3.** *The logic of SOF team building. Source: Special Warfare Magazine, January - March 2022, Vol 35(1)*

SOF ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING ENVIRONMENT

Positive (+) Outcome

High Moral Drift / + Outcomes
"Busted" — Makes the <u>news</u> and makes SOF look <u>bad</u>

THE *REAL* PROBLEM

Q-IV

Low Moral Drift /+ Outcomes

"Just doing your job..."

BEST CASE

Q-I

Q-III   Q-II

High Moral Drift / − Outcomes
"Busted" — Makes the <u>news</u> and makes SOF look <u>bad</u>

WORST CASE

Low Moral Drift / − Outcomes
"Unfortunate, but it happens..."
"The cost of doing business"

RE-TRAIN!

High Moral Drift (left vertical label) — *Low Moral Drift* (right vertical label)

Negative (−) Outcome

FIGURE 4. *Model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment. Source: Special Warfare Magazine, January - March 2022, Vol 35(1)*

to ethical choices in operational environments. All SOF professionals share a responsibility for ensuring ethical conduct and for holding ourselves accountable. Understanding ethical complexity is not the same as tolerating bad ethical behavior.

The model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment builds on two axes: the horizontal x-axis measures moral drift as the degree to which an ethical choice is made with professional or self-serving intention. This axis recognizes that behavior that might be wrong in most cases *could* very well be absolutely necessary under some operational conditions. Within the language of the model, decisions made for operational reasons reflect low moral drift (L), while decisions made for personal or self-serving reasons reflect high-moral drift (H). Despite all operational conditions, low moral drift is always preferred.

The vertical y-axis measures the outcome of the ethical behavior and assumes that results will either be positive or negative. This model recognizes that negative outcomes may be a function of whether or not the behavior was detected. In most cases, a negative outcome is the result of the behavior being exposed, whereas a positive outcome occurs when no one is caught. Again, this model acknowledges the realities of the proposed SOF Ethical Truths and that operational

success is often a reflection of whether or not a person gets caught. Therefore, the model recognizes that positive outcomes are better than negative outcomes. When the horizontal axis (moral drift) is combined with the vertical axis (operational outcome), four distinct categories of ethical outcomes emerge, and all have an impact on SOF culture and how the SOF profession manages ethical decision-making.

The blue quadrant represents the best case for any SOF operational outcome as low moral drift combines with positive operational outcomes. Unfortunately, not all behavior stays in the blue quadrant. Sometimes, despite best intentions, SOF operations fall into the green quadrant. For such operations, the SOF practitioner acted out of professional necessity, but the mission was unsuccessful in some way. Such cases are unfortunate and can be thought of as the "cost of doing business." In the highly complex world of Special Operations, success is never guaranteed. In such cases, retraining, as opposed to punishment, is often the remedy.

Representing the worst case, the red quadrant is where headlines emerge when the self-serving behavior reflective of high moral drift combines with the low operational outcomes as a result of getting caught in less than moral behavior. In most cases, SOF practitioners recognize that red-quadrant activity usually results in being removed from the profession. That said, sometimes red-quadrant examples become topics of contention in SOF units as Special Operators often disagree as to the operational necessity of the behavior as described by the third SOF Ethical Truth about "honest and frank consideration for the harsh realities of SOF environments and operational requirements" (Thyne and Long 2020, 3). Such cases tend to reflect the other harsh reality that distrust between tactical and strategic echelons underscores the fifth SOF Ethical Truth and perceptions of a "gap between the expectation and reality" of what SOF must do (Thyne and Long 2020, 3).

Unfortunately, the real problem with ethical decision-making in SOF lies outside of the red quadrant.

In fact, red-quadrant behavior might seem trivial as over 70,000 people assigned to Special Operations units across the SOF profession produce only a handful of newsworthy ethical problems. From this lens, the ethical failure rate of SOF is statistically indistinct from zero. It is also where arguments that SOF has no "systemic ethics problem" emerge (USSOCOM 2020, 4). However, the dual-axis nature of the model uncovers another quadrant where real problems with ethics often go undetected in SOF. The yellow quadrant represents the biggest blight on SOF behavior through a "culture of getting away with it" as the self-centered nature of behavior driven by moral drift remains hidden by positive outcomes and not getting caught.

If the yellow quadrant is accurate, then claims that SOF does not have an ethics problem may be misrepresenting reality. It is worth considering whether the yellow quadrant is a better mirror for SOF than a handful of cases in the red quadrant. Furthermore, the yellow quadrant also reflects the reality that operational outcomes often outweigh ethical intention—statements such as, "no need to worry about ethical misbehavior unless it affects the mission," suggest a tendency to value competence over character. This tendency is cleverly hidden and widely unrecognized by Special Operators who echo common tongue-in-cheek phrases such as, "If you ain't cheatin', you ain't tryin'!" The SOF Ethical Decision-making Environment Model frames the yellow quadrant clearly so that operators and leaders at all levels recognize that failing to talk about the yellow quadrant signals approval of "getting away with it" culture.

Conclusion: Recognizing the Depth of the Problem

With respect for human nature in mind, the model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment recognizes that humans have the capacity to limit or modify behavior when motivated to do so or when they think there is a reasonable chance they will be held accountable. However, Figure 5 underscores why SOF can no longer afford to ignore the yellow quadrant

ethical behavior. Since ethical behavior is a function of two independent axes, the yellow quadrant can only exist when members of SOF demonstrate high moral drift. This means that the yellow quadrant, not the green, is the ultimate path to, and source of, all high-profile ethical failures in SOF.

The SOF profession retains an obligation for continuing self-improvement and remains subject to many of the ethical challenges faced in other professions. The model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment helps illuminate the dangers of becoming fixated on red-quadrant behavior and ignoring the red-quadrant path. The SOF Ethical Truths, deliberately modeled after the SOF Truths, are intended to provide a guide that unites the SOF profession from the team level to the nation's strategic-level leadership.
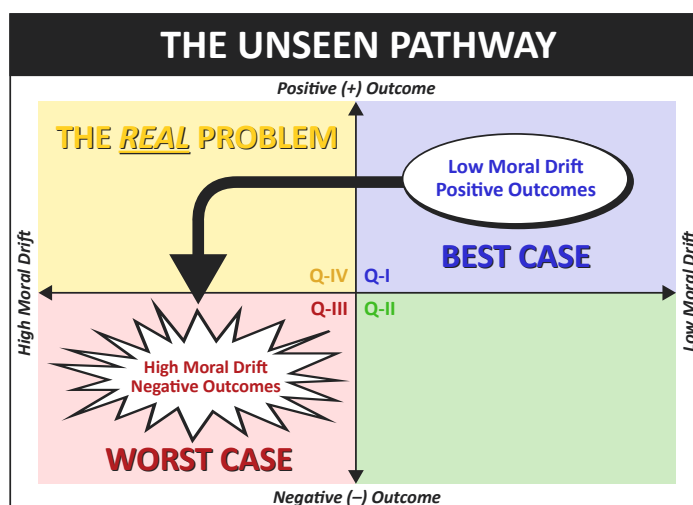
FIGURE 5. *The unseen pathway. Source: Special Warfare Magazine, January - March 2022, Vol 35(1)*

The SOF Truths hold the profession together while simultaneously recognizing Special Operators are engaged in highly complex, strategically important, and extremely dangerous missions. Likewise, the SOF Ethical Truths and the models emphasize the needs of the nation over self and provide a much-needed, SOF-centric approach to improving the SOF profession by promoting an environment of trust and respect.

Lastly, the model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment provides a tool to facilitate

education, training, and leadership at all levels of the SOF profession. In distinguishing the difference between education and training, General Clarke, former Commanding General, USSOCOM, provided the necessary distinction: "We train staffs for what they need to know, now ... we educate leaders for what they need to know and how they need to think, for the future" (2021, ix).

The model does both: it informs Special Operators on what drives ethical decision-making now, and it builds on over 2,500 years of critical thinking about the realities of human nature, moral drift, and moral injury to educate our forces on how to make better ethical decisions in the future.

Furthermore, the model provides a meaningful leadership tool for SOF professionals at all levels to develop subordinates on how to make their own ethical decisions better, while also providing a necessary vocabulary for stimulating trust throughout the inherently joint nature of the SOF profession. Yellow quadrant behaviors and red quadrant outcomes are a problem common to us all and understanding the SOF ethical decision-making environment helps to get everyone on the same map.

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SOF Leaders' Responsibilities in Recognizing the Gradual Moral Drift Process

By Wojciech (John) Labuz

Throughout its history, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has adapted to accomplish the most challenging missions. These adaptations, supported by SOF core values, the SOF Truths, SOF Vision and Strategy, and the practical application of effective military leadership, led to many exceptional results over the last four decades. Since its inception, USSOCOM has prided itself on selecting and training the "best people" to create the most elite units. Leaders in these organizations are highly trained and specially educated to deal with our nation's most complex problems. Yet, SOF culture has more recently been flooded with high-level incidents of wrongdoing and unethical behavior. Some may argue that these incidents are simply part of human nature and the small number of them is statistically zero in a population of 70,000 joint SOF forces. As part of the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) professorate, we suggest that every transgression matters because they undermine the values that underpin the SOF profession as well as erode the American people's trust. Our work proposes that recent misconduct is the result of an underdeveloped character education program coupled with high levels of moral drift in SOF organizational culture. Our research claims that "Ethics is Leader Business." That means that to minimize the effects of moral drift practical ethics education must be preemptive in nature and present in every aspect of military development from pre-mission training to formal military education.

No Organization Ever Drifts Its Way Toward Excellence

The U.S. Armed Forces' ethical principle, "Take care of your people," is written into our laws. The statutory "Requirement for Exemplary Conduct" is explicitly called for by three identical passages of Title 10 U.S. Code: Sections 3583 (Army), 5947 (Marine Corps and Navy), and 85831 (Air Force) (U.S. House 2023). In the simplest terms, the organizational culture is "the way things are done around here" (Deal and Kennedy 2000). Those in formal leadership positions play a critical role in developing organizational climates and the larger SOF culture by influencing organizational systems, functions, performance, and members. Therefore, military leaders have the sacred responsibility to set organizational tone by providing direction, motivation, and inspiration to those around them. Their aim should be to become committed professionals of character who embody, in spirit and action, military values and beliefs.

The research in industrial-organizational psychology validates the role and impact of effective leadership on organizational culture and climate by calling leaders the "principal architects of culture" (Schein 2010). Moreover, the research also tells us that "the culture of any organization is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate" (Basik 2021). Thus, conclude that leaders are responsible for developing, monitoring, and constantly calibrating the organizational culture. By doing so, they can prevent their organizations' moral drift. Consequently, research must examine the responsibility of SOF leaders to recognize the gradual moral drift process by analyzing the impact of their actions and behaviors on the drift process.

The model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment introduced above, appears to have clear lines separating the quadrants. However, we must remind ourselves that moral drift is a gradual ebbing of standards and is a dynamic process propelled by the power of social situations and their impacts on human behavior. In most cases, moral drift is cultivated in an organization's culture and often accepted, approved, or deliberately ignored by the leaders and others within it (Labuz et al., 2020). A report from the medical profession entitled "Silence Kills" documents an example of moral drift that advanced a "culture of getting away with it" (AACN and VitalSmarts 2006). This report shows that 84 percent of physicians have seen coworkers taking shortcuts that could be dangerous to patients. Furthermore, while 88 percent of physicians say they work with people who show poor clinical judgment, fewer than 10 percent of physicians, nurses, and other clinical staff directly confront their colleagues about their concerns. These staggering numbers speak to moral drift within the culture and show how the lack of psychological safety and fear of retribution impact those statistics. No organization or its people ever drift toward excellence (Labuz et al., 2020) and this example illustrates how the normalization of moral drift, good intentions, leader implicit endorsement, and neutralizing behaviors negatively impact organizations and their members.

Leader Actions to Calibrate Organizational Culture

Since its inception in 1952, SOF have selected, trained, and educated the best that this nation has to offer, however, we must recognize that even the best of the best—the good people who care about morality—sometimes engage in unethical behavior and that today's SOF professionals are certainly not exempt from doing so. Frankly, the complexity of SOF operating environments requires that the moral character of individuals and organizations must both be strong—now more than ever. Logically then, it follows that leaders shoulder a critical role in developing and preventing unethical behavior.

Marksmanship is a concept known well to all military members. Therefore, an effective way to analyze leader actions and organizational behaviors according to the model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment

(Long and Thyne 2022, 17-18) is to visualize the quadrants as a target on the range and the actions and behaviors as the shot patterns. See Figure 6.

From historical examples, we know that in most cases, SOF behaviors and actions, fall ideally in the blue quadrant of the model—indicating low levels of organizational moral drift and positive outcomes. The reasons for this vary from the high quality of SOF personnel to the effective governance by its leaders. The center-mass organizational "shot group," the model's best-case scenario, is the ultimate goal of all organizational leaders. However, in organizational leadership, like in marksmanship, shots can, and likely will, land in the green quadrant every so often. This signifies that leaders must apply the fundamentals of leadership to get the shot group back to center mass. While green quadrant cases negatively impact organizational outcomes, the JSOU Ethics Team tends to view them from the leadership perspective, as an incident or a mishap, rather than a deliberate violation of ethics, values, or laws. Leadership must intervene and provide education, training, time, or money to get the organization back to operating in the blue quadrant, the best-case scenario.

Military doctrine underscores the leader's role in creating an effective organizational climate and culture. For example, the 2019 Army doctrine publication 6-22, Army Leadership and the Profession, states that "leaders are responsible for shaping culture by ensuring their directives, policies, programs, and systems are ethical, effective, and efficient" (1-23). In addition to those guidelines, SOF leaders must be hyperaware and understand how moral drift can influence individual attitudes, values, and behavior. This is particularly so because of SOF's peculiar missions and the decentralized execution of their operations. Therefore, SOF leaders must study their formations to learn and understand their organizational cultures. This depth of understanding provides the context necessary to understand individual behaviors

. There is another significant benefit to SOF when its leaders have a deep understanding of individual
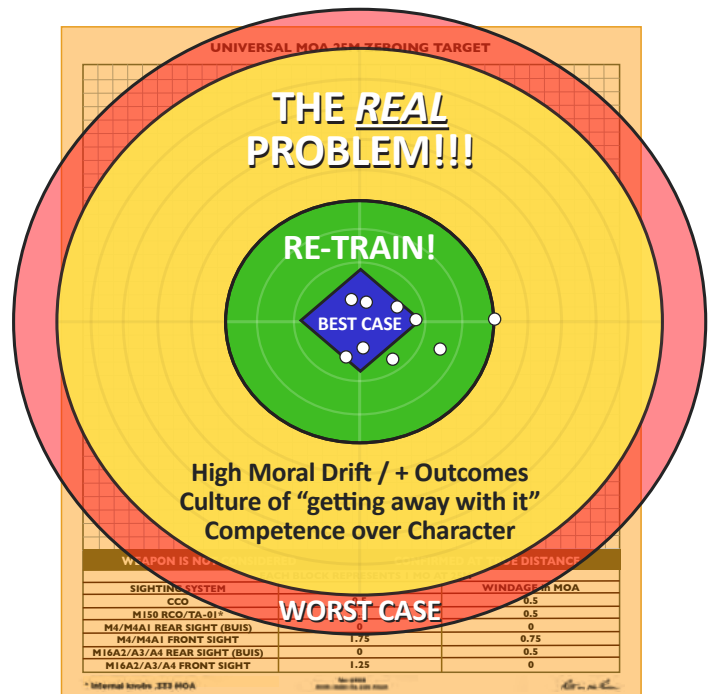

FIGURE 6. *SOF ethical decision-making as a target on the range.*

behaviors; namely, it helps them recognize when a behavior or action lands in the yellow quadrant of the model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment. When that happens, leaders must make the necessary corrections in the form of adjudication. This means either speaking against a behavior or action, or rendering punishment based on the level of drift. Doing so swiftly before this behavior becomes the new organizational norm will prevent the entire organizational shot group from shifting to the yellow quadrant where high moral drift is endemic. In combination with positive outcomes, high moral drift creates a culture that shifts away from SOF's values, standards, and personal accountability, as well as accountability to each other, to partner forces and their populations, and most significantly, to the American people. While the concepts here are relatively straightforward, our argument aims to nudge SOF leaders to understand and acknowledge that they must recognize moral drift in the earliest possible stages and intervene to prevent the shot group from walking away from the best-case scenario.

The actual leadership challenge for SOF leaders lies in understanding how organizational leaders should intervene to adjust the shot group and return it to center mass in the blue quadrant. Leaders must develop a strong sense of self by reflecting on their actions and behaviors. One effective way to begin this self-analysis is for the leader to ask a series of direct questions about the organizational effects and impact of their leadership. For example, *what organizational culture am I creating? Do my decisions or actions demonstrate or enforce a zero-default mentality? Do I punish those who innovate and fail? Do my decisions and actions support or encourage mission accomplishment at all costs? What other leadership actions do I take or endorse that may propel the organization or people toward the yellow quadrant?* With an honest self-assessment in hand, SOF leaders can then carefully balance their intent versus their approach and anticipate the impact on the organizational climate and culture. They are more keenly aware of how their examples affect organizations and people. Without an honest self-assessment, they may lead their organizations into the yellow quadrant through their behaviors, actions, and decisions.

In addition to recognizing that what SOF leaders are doing can lead or push their organizations and people into the yellow quadrant, what leaders are not saying and not doing can have the same result. SOF leaders should think of this in terms of perception and acknowledge and consider how others interpret their actions and behaviors. In short, SOF leaders must fully understand implicit endorsement, perceived or actual. Accordingly, group members have implicit expectations and assumptions about a leader's characteristics, traits, and qualities. Therefore, the leader's actions, reactions, or perceptions can be interpreted as endorsement or acceptance and push people toward unethical actions. For example, leaders must consider what conditions or perceptions they establish by assigning unattainable workloads. Likewise, when questions arise, do they provide an answer or do they say something like, "Well, you are a smart guy, go

figure it out?" It may also be apathy when a leader hides behind responses like, "Just get it done—I do not want to know, nor do I care, how it happens."

Research in behavioral psychology suggests that these types of leadership actions and behaviors lead others to faulty perceptions, resulting in biased conclusions and responses. The perception of a leader's implicit endorsement may lead to implicit bias, a systematic error in one's thinking. Implicit bias "is a result of the brain's tendency to try to simplify the world" (Cherry 2023). Because we as people are almost constantly inundated with more information than we can process, we use shortcuts like implicit bias to be more efficient as we sort information and determine our actions. "Implicit bias is an unconscious association, belief, or attitude toward any social group" (Cherry 2023). The JSOU Ethics Team associates ethical direction with the social group comprised of SOF leaders. A common shortcut is doing what leaders direct. The Ethics Team assumes a leader's orders are moral, legal, and ethical and trusts that if they were not, they would not pass these orders along.

Trust in our leaders can have additional significant implications. For example, others may perceive that leaders are on board and accept unethical or immoral behaviors because they have not spoken against them. Therefore, when yellow quadrant behavior happens without any negative feedback or adverse consequences, those watching might reasonably conclude that these behaviors are acceptable or encouraged. It is also important to acknowledge that these perceptions are often found in the organizational culture of "getting away with it," where leaders value competence over character by focusing on mission accomplishment instead of doing the right things right. The enemy of a healthy culture "sneaks in through the side windows, not the front door. It's in the small rationalizations, the easy excuses, justifications, the casual corner-cutting language, the unnoticed habits of slack and disrespect, the little deviations from the value" (Basik 2022). All these seemingly innocuous

actions, when accepted, modeled, rewarded, or deliberately ignored by leadership, invite damage to the organization and its mission, and violate the basic principles of psychological safety.

JSOU's educational lines of effort are focused on teaching students, who are SOF leaders, that the perception of no accountability, leader action, or reaction in response to yellow quadrant behaviors is detrimental to the overall organizational climate and culture because it undermines the set of shared assumptions that guide what happens in organizations (Ravasi and Schultz 2006, 450-451). It redefines appropriate behavior for various situations. It is known from examining relationships between leadership and organizational culture that leaders set the organizational tone. People follow the example leaders set, encourage, and reward. Therefore, it must be recognized that the leader's actions, inaction, or perceptions can contribute to overall moral drift and push others towards the yellow or red quadrants. Frankly, when leaders act this way, they may already be in the yellow quadrant. Ultimately, the point is not to push the blame for wrongdoing on leaders instead of the led but to underscore the degree to which the leader's position strongly influences actions and behaviors.

Creating an Organizational Culture of Shared Responsibility by Improving Psychological Safety

The final idea that ethics students consider when examining the model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment is the decision-action gap. See Figure 7. This gap is a space where leaders are tested, to prove they are who they claim to be. It is an imaginary space between what people intend to happen and what actually happens.

It is where they face all kinds of pressures and employ neutralizing techniques to protect ourselves when they yield to them.

According to research published by the U.S. Air Force Academy, the decision-action gap occurs when an individual succumbs to the "pressure of an ethical dilemma or when an individual lacks the necessary character strengths, does not receive the proper training, or is concerned about how they are perceived by others" (Basik 2022). The Ethics Team discusses these pressures with our students to help them understand that these pressures can be internal (ego-driven, cognitive, or motivational). Internal pressures often focus on how we want to be perceived by others—our status, our position, or what we want others to think of us. These pressures can also be external and driven by mission, personal situations, or organizational culture.

Researchers and scholars have long been examining what it means to be human, and they try to understand the complexity and reasons behind people's actions. Research over the last two millennia has revealed much about human behavior. For instance, when most people do something that makes them psychologically uncomfortable, it is likely because the actions or behaviors are misaligned with their personal and professional
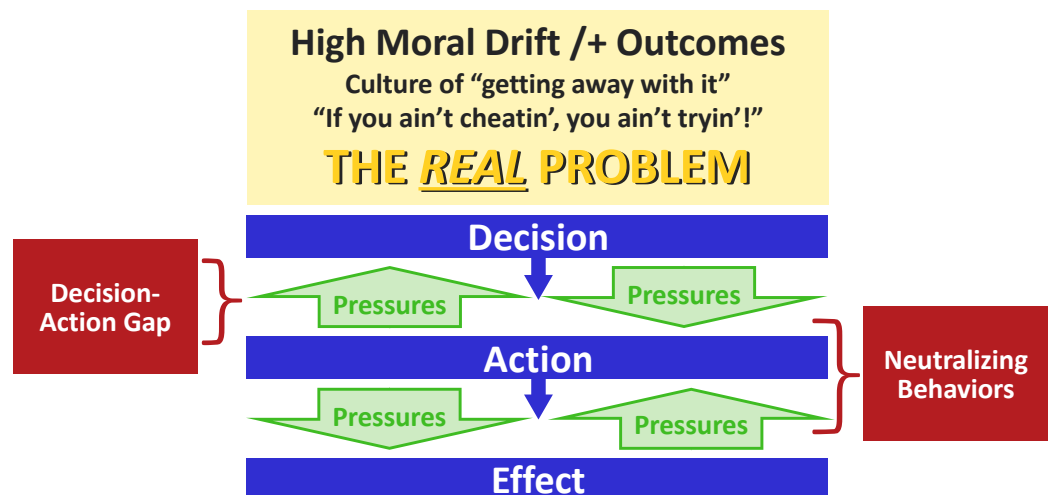

FIGURE 7. *Decision-Action gap.*

values or beliefs. Or, if the actions are illegal or immoral, they may not want to accept responsibility for them. When that happens, most of us employ neutralization techniques to justify our actions and ease our psychological discomfort. Neutralization techniques are best explained as a rationalization that serves as a defense mechanism to protect our egos by developing common-sense reasons to justify behavior motivated by our biases and unconscious instinctual impulses (Basik 2022). Minimization theory further explains that neutralization techniques are a deception involving denial of situations where complete denial is implausible (Psychology Dictionary, 2023). They typically help us deny the deviant behavior, deny personal responsibility for the deviant behavior, or both.

We teach SOF leaders about neutralization techniques and discuss ways to "tune in" to who is using them and why. Neutralization techniques are usually verbalized or represented in statements such as "I/We had to do it," or, "I did what I what was expected of me," "What happens TDY, stays TDY," "If you ain't cheatin', you ain't tryin'," and "Maybe I didn't do anything unusual since everyone does that here." When our actions have negative consequences, we say, "My heart was in the right place. I didn't mean for that to happen." SOF leaders at every level must pay close attention to these verbalizations because they are likely indicators of moral drift in the organizational culture. Therefore, to minimize moral drift SOF leaders should understand neutralization techniques, know how to identify them, and address them when they are used.

There is another phenomenon that occurs in the decision-action gap. The internal and external pressures there undermine psychological safety. As mentioned, SOF leaders have an obligation to create an organizational culture of shared responsibility by developing psychological safety. Therefore, influential organizational leaders must pay particular attention and be acutely aware of psychological pressures,

particularly those caused by the SOF operating environment, because they are likely indicators of moral drift. It is even more critical when SOF formations are geographically separated from other formations. They may experience the timeless allure of the "invisibility cloak." These pressures also nudge or shove people toward the yellow quadrant. The reasons for this vary. They may be in an environment where it is not safe to speak up or are in fear of retribution from their partner forces, teammates, or chain of command. They may fear being ostracized from any of these and left alone. Regardless of rank, they may feel less than powerful as "the new guy." SOF leaders must understand their formations and be aware of how their troops are feeling because the leader can do something about it in advance! They can build an organizational culture of shared responsibility rooted in trust and supported by principles of mission command. Furthermore, they can encourage ethical education and experiential training in ethical dilemmas. Ultimately, SOF leaders should recognize that these pressures exist and nurture an environment that allows SOF members to share these pressures, seek advice, collaborate, or signal alarm.

USSOCOM has prided itself on selecting and training the "best people" to create the most elite units. However, even the best people are prone to moral drift, and no organization drifts its way toward excellence. Therefore, leaders at all levels of SOF are responsible for setting the organizational tone by providing direction while motivating and inspiring those around them to become committed professionals of character who embody military values and beliefs in spirit and action. Without a doubt, ethics is leader business, and SOF leaders must master three specific actions and behaviors to decrease moral drift. See Figure 8.

First and foremost, leaders must identify moral drift in the earliest possible stages and intervene by either providing resources, training, and education, or by adjudicating—that is, speaking against it or

1 Identify moral drift in the earliest possible stage and intervene.

2 Be on the sharp lookout for an organizational culture of "getting away with it" and neutralizing behaviors.

3 Carefully align your intentions with your decisions and understand the impact they have on the organizational culture because you, the leader, may be pushing people toward the Yellow Quadrant.

FIGURE 8. *Three specific actions and behaviors to decrease moral drift.*

rendering punishment. Second, influential leaders must look for the organizational culture of "getting away with it" and pay close attention to neutralizing behaviors because they are likely indicators of moral drift. Third, SOF leaders must carefully balance their intentions and actions and understand their impact on the organizational culture, since it can push people into the yellow quadrant.

The SOF Ethics Team at JSOU is a proponent of multiple character education touchpoints over the course of a SOF career to moderate moral drift and ethical lapses and to prevent the embedding of misconduct in SOF's organizational culture. Ethical leadership has a crucial role in mitigating moral drift and strengthening the resilience of the organizational culture primarily by identifying and addressing moral drift in its early stages. Considering the decision-action gap shines light on the various pressures inherent but often unrecognized in difficult ethical decisions. A better understanding of the pressures illuminates the imperative for leaders to foster a culture of shared responsibility supported by psychological safety. Our summary point of emphasis is that ethics is leader business! SOF leaders should actively decrease moral drift through example and education as they shape SOF's organizational culture and increase SOF's operational effectiveness.

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Resonating in Team Rooms

By Mike W. Clark

Effective ethics education must resonate in SOF team rooms. The nation entrusts SOF professionals with the most difficult and sensitive missions to achieve its objectives in support of our national interests. The men and women who navigate the complexities of the SOF environment execute operations in highly complex and hazardous ethical environments. JSOU is connecting what joint SOF professionals are learning in our classrooms to the team rooms by underscoring the relationship between ethical conduct and mission effectiveness in gray zone spaces. I offer my perspective as a retired SOF team sergeant to address the fundamental realities of SOF team culture across the joint SOF force. Peter Blaber's trilateral understanding of "the mission, the men, and me" (2008) helps to explain how SOF teams can conceptualize how to remain operationally successful while recognizing and minimizing unnecessary moral drift.

Team Culture

The comprehensive review (CR) (USSOCOM 2020) focused on SOF culture at the USSOCOM enterprise level. The reality of Special Operations is that SOF culture is fundamentally derived from the SOF team regardless of the service component from which they originate. The reality is that SOF teams composed of Green Berets, Navy SEALs,

Marine Raiders, or Air Commandos will reflect a culture that is more alike than the individual cultures of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force cultures. This reality thus underscores that understanding SOF team culture is essential to understanding how SOF ethics connects with SOF teams.

Team culture can be understood and defined, in broad terms, as a reflection of the SOF team room. Culture revolves around the intersection between the SOF team room, the SOF non-commissioned leadership, and the SOF team members. See Figure 9.

Each of these aspects of team culture forms a balancing act where team culture emerges with independent agency removed from formal military structures and macro-level military cultures.

The first step in understanding team culture is in understanding the foundational reality of SOF, that team rooms are the sacred centers of gravity where SOF culture is formed and propagated across the joint SOF profession. The team room is much more than a place where the team works or stores its gear. It is the essential safe space where the team develops relationships, learns to communicate and work with each other, and forms a tightly knit and cohesive unit. Team rooms are so sacred that it is commonly held that non-team members, regardless of rank, must be invited into team rooms. Furthermore, it is not unheard of for people to be physically removed from a team room for violating its sacred sovereignty.

This rudimentary attitude is reminiscent of tribal boundaries and remains crucial to the formation of pack-like personalities where strong leadership is required to maintain order. Furthermore, the team culture that emerges from a SOF team room becomes an informal and unwritten, yet observable, manifestation of instructions that guide the team's actions, expressed values, expectations, and practices. These guide and inform the behavior of all team members. Team room culture is sufficiently powerful to shape the identity and behavior of team members from various backgrounds and skill sets into a purpose and identity that is greater than the identity of the individual.

Despite tribalism as a potential downside to team room culture, respect among team members in a team room is essential. Even when team members do not get along personally, they must nonetheless respect each other for the greater good of the team. In good team room culture, the members build cohesive relationships to where they know they have each other's back and that there is a general concern for each other. Making this all happen requires effective team leadership capable of fostering such strong relationships and solidifying a culture and identity that is often considered unbreakable.

The second step in understanding team culture is found in understanding the role of the senior SOF non-commissioned officer (NCO) on the team. Although the formal titles for these team-level leaders vary across joint SOF formations, they are the center of gravity of any SOF team, as depicted in Figure 10. The team's senior NCO is often the all-powerful linchpin and bedrock of the team. Although most SOF teams incorporate commissioned officer leadership on teams (some do not), the team's senior NCO typically remains the more influential leader.
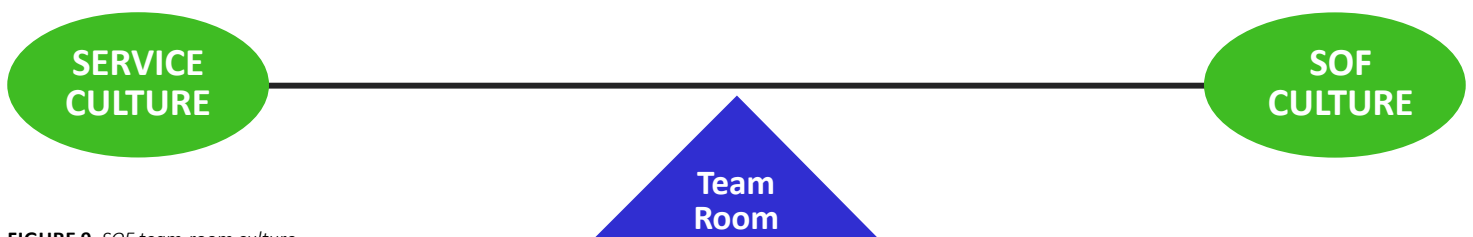
SERVICE CULTURE — Team Room — SOF CULTURE

FIGURE 9. *SOF team-room culture.*

It is often thought that although a team commander is in *command*, the senior NCO *runs* the team, is directly in charge of the team members, directs team training and operational execution, and manages resources. As such, team members take their cues from the team senior NCO and form a team culture around the senior NCO's leadership style and preferences. Even strong officers tend to follow the influence of the team's senior NCO as they are often handpicked by the unit's senior leadership and represent years of SOF experience and operational expertise.
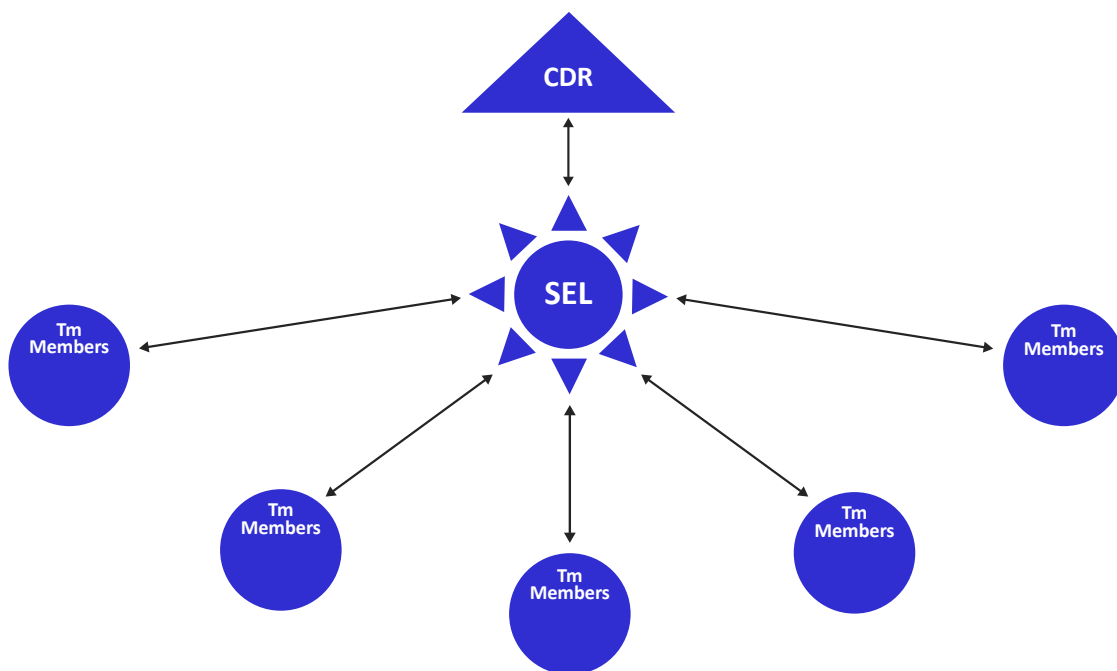

FIGURE 10. *Team sergeant is the center of gravity for the team.*

The Mission, the Men, and Me

Former Special Operator Pete Blaber provides a useful framework of guiding principles for helping fellow SOF professionals conceptualize decision-making in highly complex SOF operational environments (2008). His titular verbiage lays out what Blaber learned from his first Battalion Commander in Korea in 1985: focus on the priorities of the mission, the men, and me (3Ms) as the ultimate shorthand for remembering these priorities that represent "the keys to being successful in life" (Blaber 2008, 11). See Figure 11. His mentor further explained, "Whether in your personal or professional life, make sure you understand it (the 3Ms), and that it (the 3Ms) makes legal, moral, and ethical sense, and then use it (the 3Ms) to guide all your decisions" (Blaber 2008, 11).

In keeping with Blaber's experiences in Special Operations and in alignment with my Special

Minimizing self-serving behavior is key for minimizing moral drift.

FIGURE 11. *3M framework.*

Operations experience as a SOF team member and SOF senior NCO in a team room, I use the 3M framework to help junior SOF professionals understand how to achieve positive operational outcomes in highly complex environments where strict adherence to binary ethical codes, as highlighted by SOF Ethical Truth 4, could cause harm (Long and Thyne 2022, 14). The 3M frame helps SOF professionals find not only operational success but also avoid many of the pitfalls of poor ethical decision-making that result from the influence of moral drift and unnecessary time spent in the yellow quadrant, discussed above, of the

model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment (Long and Thyne 2022, 17).

The application of the 3M concept reflects the essence of military simplicity and, like the model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment, provides a common language that SOF operators can use to add context to complex ethical choices. In short, the principles of the 3M concept provide an order of priorities that adds structure to situations that lack structure. The first priority is to focus on what is best for the mission or "the purpose for which you're doing what you're doing" and ensure that all ethical decision-making that aimed at attaining positive outcomes involves such a purpose.

The mission part of the 3M concept becomes a helpful starting point for connecting the model of the SOF ethical decision-making environment to the team by reminding us that there is always some greater purpose behind any special operation. Although most SOF missions are developed from the bottom-up rather than top-down, the SOF team will nonetheless layout and seek approval of a mission statement. This emphasis on mission first, even when the SOF operator is determining the mission, ensures that all actions are conducted with purpose in mind. Thus, Blaber's 3M concept reminds us that although SOF operators operate in extremely complex, fluid, and hazardous conditions and tend to have extreme agency over what they do, they must always translate their desired operational outcomes into a clear and achievable mission statement.

Furthermore, the priority of mission first also ensures that SOF teams restrict their operational impact to their specific mission. For enduring missions that occur over long periods of time, like Unconventional Warfare or Foreign Internal Defense, a clear mission statement ensures that SOF teams remain relevant and supportable to higher echelon leadership and across similar operational units (Joint Staff 2014, II-8 – II-11). This means that ethical decision-making that begins with the top priority of the 3M concept

will naturally minimize unnecessary yellow quadrant behavior. Teams with a clear purpose will encounter fewer situations that require nonbinary ethical decision-making and thus reduce their overall exposure to moral drift. See Figure 12.

The men part of the 3M concept is not a gendered term, but a reminder that SOF leadership is always about taking care of other people before taking care of oneself. For SOF units, this emphasis on people often means thinking of all those who the mission requires the team to influence. In most situations, a SOF team is not acting entirely independently and will remain responsible for small SOF units, other American friendly forces, allied forces, indigenous partner forces, and even indigenous populations. This collection of actors forms a network that SOF operators must influence through direct and indirect leadership in order to achieve positive operational outcomes.

Even when complex and nonbinary, rooted in the welfare of others before self, ethical decision-making is fundamentally more likely to yield positive outcomes and minimize corrective measures to overcome moral drift. The less time individuals or teams spend drifting, the easier the corrective action is to return to the blue quadrant. Also, any actions that a team must take that are outside of typical binary ethical choices are less likely to be permanently harmful if they are rooted first in an operational need to achieve a stated mission and then only to benefit others. In SOF ethical decision-
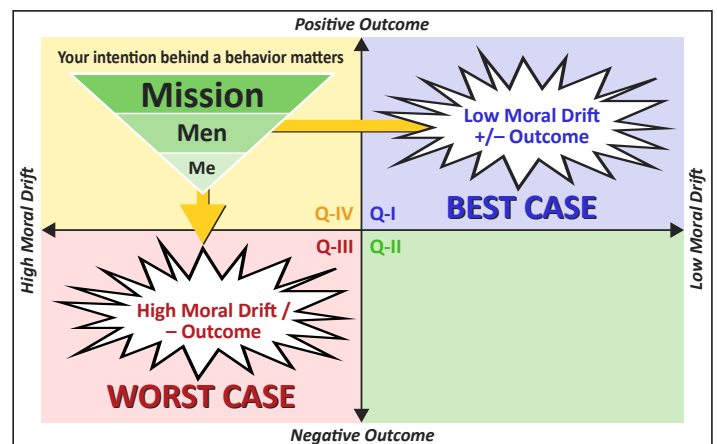

FIGURE 12. *Using the 3M framework to minimize time spent in the yellow quadrant.*

making, selfless thinking is the biggest indicator of being under the harmful influence of moral drift.

Although the idea of "selfless service" resonates as much with the wider profession of arms as it does the SOF profession, the nature of SOF operations and the degree to which the individual operator demonstrates agency can increase the tendency for operators to lose sight of their mission and people. Many SOF personnel are employed as individual operators in what is typically thought of as "alone and unafraid." In these circumstances, the tendency to think about mission and then self might seem like a natural adaptation to the 3M concept, given the operator has no team. However, the 3M concept and associated priorities are not to provide a pathway to self-centered decision-making but rather to postpone concern for the self altogether.

Likewise, the lone operator must remember that concern for the men extends beyond the operator's immediate teammates and extends to the wider network of all that the operator must influence and lead in order to accomplish the mission. Thus, an individual still follows the 3M concept, whether operating as a single operator on a clandestine mission or as a member of an operational detachment. Blaber's reminder that the self comes last remains critical to navigating the complexities and ethical decision-making considerations for any special operation.

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Conclusion

As stated in the SOF ethical truths, "SOF leaders should not be naïve or insensitive to human behavior" (Long and Thyne 2022, 14). This SOF truth illustrates that leadership within the SOF profession is inherently as complex as the SOF operational environment is hazardous, and SOF leaders must truly understand the realities of human nature and "see the world for the way it is, not for how they might want it to be" (Long and Thyne 2022, 14). In addition to this understanding of moral drift as a function of human nature, Deckers (2018) reflects on Maslow's hierarchy of needs in recognizing the human need for status, recognition, fame, prestige, and attention. Leaders must therefore recognize that the people within their networked sphere of influence are driven by their human needs for self-respect, self-confidence, independence, and freedom.

Adding to the complexities of SOF leadership and ethical decision-making, SOF leaders must lead across generational boundaries. Even within a homogenous SOF team environment with the nuances of SOF team room culture, generational differences can create roadblocks for SOF leaders as distinct generations develop independent collective identities with unique relational needs. SOF leaders must understand how generational identities interact within the SOF team and within the SOF ethical decision-making environment.

In the end, the realities of human nature combined with the realities of SOF culture and the SOF operational environment create frequent opportunities for SOF professionals to become numb to moral drift and the ethical dilemmas that follow from a culture where "if you ain't cheatin,' you ain't tryin'" takes on an institution-wide leadership problem for SOF professionals across the joint force and across the operational spectrum. This reality requires SOF leaders who recognize the reality that the SOF profession offers its own peculiar professional and ethical challenges and leaders who are professionally ready to lead in such highly complex ethical decision-making environments.

Furthermore, SOF ethical decision-making is not likely to be improved by remaining restricted by an existing SOF culture that fails to recognize the severity of its problems. After the CR identified multiple structural challenges that exacerbated the ethics problem in the SOF profession, the JSOU ethics team added to the understanding of the SOF environment by introducing the SOF ethical truths and the model of the SOF ethical decision-making model.

The recognition that ethical behavior is impacted by varying levels of behavior influenced by both moral drift and the natural desire for SOF operators to achieve the highest levels of operational success provides a significant educational foundation for SOF institutions, like JSOU, to provide SOF-unique and SOF-peculiar educational opportunities that are not available in other professional military institutions. SOF education, in addition to the responsible implementation of the CR, is essential to reshaping SOF's ethical culture.

Blaber's 3M concept provides an effective and efficient way for SOF team members and emerging SOF leaders to connect the paradox of yellow quadrant behavior with the Special Operators who are entrusted to achieve the near impossible in very complex and hazardous conditions. A consistent recognition by the SOF profession that all operations should be balanced by a prioritized concern for forgoing self-centered behavior in favor of a deliberate focus on the unit's mission and purpose and then the people who are to be influenced.

Although moral drift is often hard to detect, the inclusion of the 3M concept helps SOF professionals understand the nuances of SOF culture and the effect that team rooms, team leadership, and teammates have on how SOF professionals behave. The JSOU ethics team remains confident that these tools add significant structure to an emerging educational experience that better prepares SOF operators to thrive in an increasingly difficult operational environment. The language of the SOF ethical truths, the SOF decision-making environment, and the 3M framework provide the much-needed common vocabulary that empowers leaders, peers, and subordinates alike to seek out and make better ethical decisions by helping to get the entire SOF profession on the same map. ♠

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