



Head, heart, gut

A personal, ethical decision-
making methodology

By Lt. Col. Seth Hall

“Ethics involves not only our thinking, but also our feeling.”

-Valdemar Setzer

Ethics and ethical behavior is not merely the intellectual determination of right and wrong. It goes much deeper. To fully understand and validate the ethical framework from which a person claims to live, one must understand the foundation on which that framework rests, the resulting decision-making process used by the individual and the manner in which one conducts his or her professional life. This paper explores three components as they relate to an ethical, decision-making philosophy; a philosophy that acknowledges moral absolutes, rejects relativism and maintains the flexibility to make decisions based on individual variables.

Each officer’s personal, ethical framework is unique to him or her. To best illustrate this decision-making process, I’ll share mine. Mine rests firmly on two supporting pillars. Each one embedded in me at an early age and, on which, I continue to build during adulthood. The first supporting pillar of my ethical foundation is my parents. My mom and dad have always been people of few words. The lessons they taught me were never overtly stated. Instead, they were modeled by how they lived their lives. They intentionally cultivated ideas in me such as a man’s word must be his bond, and honor is something for which to fight. To them, reputation is everything. These principles do not make them popular. Their circle of trusted friends is small, but to this day, they remain fiercely loyal to those they love and everyone with whom they interact respects them. Both traits I learned as a child and emulate today.

The second supporting pillar that influences my ethical perspective is my faith. Personally, I follow the teachings of the Bible. One example of the many verses by which I try to live my life is Proverbs 22:1, “A [good] name is to be chosen rather than great riches.”¹

I strive to allow God to guide my thoughts, words and interactions with others and doing so affects all areas of my life. According to Army Regulation 600-63,

“The regulation defines a spiritually fit person as someone who ‘recognizes there are multiple dimensions that make up a human being and seeks to develop the total person concept ... needed to sustain one during times of stress, hardship, and tragedy.’”²

An ethically actualized leader does not behave ethically because he or she fears the stick or seeks the carrot. Instead, his or her ethical behavior is an outward expression of an inner conviction that defines him or her as an adult, a person of integrity, and an Army officer. The countless lessons taught to me by my parents, in combination with the values instilled in me by childhood counselors, manifest themselves in the life I choose to live. I have distilled all the morality lessons and spiritual education into three, single-syllable words that espouse my ethical philosophy: head, heart, gut (HHG).

Throughout my adult life, especially during my years of service as an Army officer, I have come to understand that when these elements align, I am living honorably and leading ethically. Furthermore, using HHG, I can make difficult decisions and experience inner peace about them. Before offering this ethical decision-making philosophy to others, it is important to define each of these elements and explain how they relate to each another.

The first element is head. Head is the intellectual exercise of determining right from wrong and choosing right. Head removes emotion from the equation and simply applies logic to facts to make the best decision. The world is black and white. Head rejects a moral relativist point of view that claims truth is subjective. Head’s base of knowledge originates from scholarship, head values cold, hard facts. It receives and processes data on its face, without sentiment. It is essential to this philosophy because it demands that the standard be upheld. Without head, absolute right and wrong would not exist as a decision-making authority.

Heart opposes head. Heart cannot remove emotion from decision because heart is emotion. It is empathy and compassion. Rather than thinking of the world as black and white, heart feels only shades of grey. Heart forgives and redeems. Heart empathizes. Heart is essential to this philosophy because, without it, decisions would be cold and uncaring.

The final element is gut. Gut is instinct and intuition. It is the embodiment of years of experience and practice. Gut pays attention to head’s logical arguments and heart’s passionate pleas, equally weighing individual justice and mercy against justice and mercy for all. It informs every challenging decision one must make. Some researchers, such as Malcolm Gladwell, author of “Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking,” would classify gut as a cognitive response/feeling based on pattern recognition.³ Gladwell’s writing seems to reject the idea that the gut element is distinct from the head. Instead, he advocates that as one develops as a leader, one becomes more adept at recognizing patterns quickly and determining a course of action that leads to a successful outcome. Therefore, Gladwell would likely combine head and gut leaving only two elements, head and heart.

With all due respect to Gladwell, there is room in the model for head and gut. Think of head as an intentional process through which each piece of new information is systematically, meticulously and consciously evaluated to form the decision. Contrasted with gut, a process that one truncates, typically subconsciously, through pattern recognition.

Head, heart and gut are unique lenses through which one views the ambiguous decisions one must make as a leader. Through experience and practice, one can transform this decision-making process from the intentional to the subconscious. With practice, these individual elements only become conscious when they are in disagreement. It is during those times one must learn to intentionally slow down his or her decision-making process and seek trusted counsel, if possible. Conversely, the decision one is making is most likely legal, moral, ethical and “best” for the organization when all three elements align.

Although I believe very firmly in this ethical philosophy and trust it implicitly as my decision-making mechanism, I acknowledge a potential criticism. HHG emphasizes the spirit of the law over the letter of the law, a position that some could label moral relativism. In response, consider the following words, “The President of the United States has reposed special trust and confidence”⁴

Commissioned officers must take their oaths seriously and execute their respon-

1 Multiple Authors, “The Bible.” (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 1640.

2 US Department of the Army, Army Regulation 600-63, Army Health Promotion. April 1996.

3 Gladwell, Malcolm. “Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking.” Boston, MA: Little, Brown Company, 2005.

4 US Department of the Army, DA FORM 71, Oath of Office – Military Personnel. July 1999.

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sibilities with the utmost professionalism and care. Unlike the oath of enlistment taken by Soldiers and noncommissioned officers, commissioned officers do not swear to obey anyone. This omission of obedience was not an oversight. Instead, commissioned officers are charged with using their experience and judgment to make judgment calls. Leadership demands more than merely reading a regulation or manual and following a step-action-drill to administer reward or punishment. If it were that simple, computer programmers could write "leader algorithms" to generate stimulus and response leadership. Authentic leadership demands more and Soldiers deserve more. Thoughtlessly following the letter of the law obviates the responsibility of real leadership. When HHG align, a consistent, ethical standard is maintained, AND the uniqueness of every situation receives consideration, for the best decision to be reached.

The Army's expectations of officers changes from company-grade to field-grade. "Iron majors" are the engine that runs the Army's staffs, from battalion to corps. Field-grade officers must embrace a natural evolution in their primary leadership style from direct, which serves them well at the company-grade level, to organizational, which offers them a broader scope of influence over more Soldiers. Field-grade officers who embrace and master organizational-level leadership set themselves, and more importantly their units, up for success. Those field-grade officers who do not understand this necessary change in leadership style often work very hard, but do not succeed because the scope of their responsibilities outpaces what they can effectively influence, directly. Regardless of one's position, he or she must not change their ethics. They must remain resolute as one transitions from direct to organizational leadership. The two primary reasons that one's morals must remain constant through the direct to organizational tran-

sition is the increased responsibility placed on organizational-level leaders and the increased ability to influence more Soldiers. As a field-grade officer, one does not have the time to communicate a personal, ethical philosophy to each Soldier in the formation. Instead, field-grade officers must work with other senior leaders to develop an ethical climate. A climate in which Soldiers evaluate new, potentially ethically ambiguous situations and act ethically without direct supervision. As Edward Hennessy, WWII veteran and former Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, said, "Ethics must begin at the top of an organization. It is a leadership issue, and the chief executive must set the example."⁵

As an officer's decision-making responsibilities change from the company-grade level to field-grade level, so too should his or her ethical decision-making mechanism. As it relates to head, a field-grade officer should grow in two ways. First, a field grade officer's general knowledge base should be more significant than it was when he or she was a company-grade officer. For example, one's knowledge about warfighting functions and its role in combined arms operations must increase. Second, one's ability to process more information and at a greater speed should increase. Simply put, dots have to connect quicker.

As this transition relates to heart, a field-grade officer should exercise more empathy towards Soldiers. It may seem counterintuitive, the farther away one gets from direct-level leadership, the more empathetic one should become. While discussing a Soldier's explanation for failing to meet the standard during his Uniform Code of Military Justice hearing, a tired battery commander remarked, "The sad stories are not sad anymore."

Of course, all leaders tire of taking corrective action on Soldiers who fail to achieve the standard or live the Army values, but a field-grade officer cannot allow him or herself to become jaded or callus.

Finally, about gut, a field-grade officer's intuition may be challenged as the scope of his or her responsibility increases. The breadth and complexity field-grade officers face increases exponentially, allowing less pattern analysis to enable decision-making and potentially exposing gut's shortcomings. The good news is that in the model gut does not make decisions alone. Head and heart work in conjunction to inform each decision. The gravity of field-grade decisions, combined with the amount of new and dissimilar decisions, should cause the decision maker to intentionally slow down the process when the situation allows.

Words are cheap. The ideas mean nothing unless one's actions match them. Difficult, ethical decision-making must be intentional and systematic. When performed correctly, the ethical decision-making philosophy of head, heart, gut informs one's conscience and one's decision-making process. It rejects moral relativism and simultaneously retains the necessary flexibility to account for the individual variables unique to each situation, thereby creating and enforcing an objective organizational standard.

As one's rank and responsibility increases, the complexity of the professional decisions one must make also increases. Therefore, it is imperative that leaders intentionally select the manner in which they will make those difficult decisions. Head, heart, gut would serve them and their Soldiers well.

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5 Edward Hennessy, "Edward Hennessy Quotes, 2013" http://thinkexist.com/quotes/edward_hennessy/ (accessed 27 March 2018).