

# REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



## Responsible Leadership: More than Being a Responsible Leader?

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*Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

*Everyone wants to be a leader in something, there are many courses in leadership one can take, and being a leader is sometimes taken to mean having abilities to accomplish great things and influence people. But there is an important part of leadership that is sometimes understated, and this is the sense of the leader's responsibility is becomes all the more important when referring to the most senior leader in the organization. Now, in previous episodes of this podcast, I addressed the idea of organizational commitment to its members, the specific benefits that an organization could or should bestow. But what about responsibility? In effect, what is the moral obligation that a leader of an organization has toward its members?*

*My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

Responsibility is quite a heavy word when we think about leadership, particularly when we're trying to convince people to become leaders or to pursue skills and knowledge of being a leader. The image tends to be of the person behind the podium or in front of to a large audience--leading through their communication, leading through their presence--as in trying to inspire. But responsibility adds a considerable moral dimension to it. What we're talking about here is in what way does the leader serve the membership, the moral dimension of how the organization behaves through the leader or as a result of the style of leadership?

My approach to responsibility here is definitely taken from the military and, naturally, responsibility has strong meaning in the professions. When I think about the Talking About Organizations podcast that we did, not too long ago, on Andrew Abbott's The System of Professions. And we talked about professional work, we talked about claims of jurisdiction, the way that we apply expert knowledge. A lot of that conversation talked about the application of the expert knowledge that the professionals develop, use, and sustain; less was talked about the the sense of responsibility that, say, a hospital hospital administrator has over the doctors and the nurses and the staff underneath them or the the law firm and the partners of law firm to the paralegals and all those on the staff beneath them.

The military, on the other hand, does, in fact, have a very, very explicit sense of responsibility. It's something that is worth exploring a bit, because the purpose behind responsibility isn't just about taking care of people, but leading people in such a way that the organization behaves responsibly, which to me is ultimately what command responsibility or any sort of responsible leadership, regardless of the type of organization, would be.

About not too long ago, I undertook a study to look into the the history and the meaning of "responsible command." It's a very specific term. I want to lay out what that means. First, the history of responsible command is its application against what is known as the laws of land warfare. It's a legal definition -- it's a legal term. Responsible command is the type of command, the type of leadership exercised by the officers over a military organization, a military unit that ensures that the organization and all of its members act lawfully during combat. And what I mean by acts lawfully is mindful and in accordance with the laws of land warfare, as would be established by the various Hague Conventions more recently, the Geneva Conventions that many of us are perhaps more familiar with because the Geneva Conventions in particular establish what is acceptable conduct and what is unacceptable conduct international humanitarian law as a basis that ensures to protect the dignity and respect of all humans, especially civilians, during the conduct of war, which is itself a very, very brutal and horrible event, that there has to be ways of ensuring that those who fight do not violate the dignity of the enemy. Under a responsible command, soldiers would act lawfully without responsible command, that is, with leadership that behaves or acts in ignorance or contravention to the Geneva Conventions, for example, would result in soldiers who commit atrocities. Soldiers who do things that are heinous could result in war crimes, etc..

So this sense of responsible command is something that's very near and dear to my heart as a as a former military officer. And it sure sort of shapes the difference of the idea of responsibility away from thinking about taking care of the members, but also instilling within the membership the sense of collective lawful behavior that ensures that the organization meets its mission with honor. But we don't talk about what responsible leadership is supposed to do for an organization. I mean, certainly in the private sector, that's the sense of responsibility isn't as much part of the ingrained vocabulary. It's talked about particular causes such as, you know, "social responsibility," which I recall from decade or two ago in which in some way, the private commercial organization did more than just serve its own clients, it was trying to enhance its brand by participating or supporting various social causes, et cetera.

But those sorts of things tend to be rather short lived, if the competition that ultimately drives how we weigh the success or failure of an organization or compare the success of various organizations through the markets. Whereas, you know, in the military sense, because it's part of the identity and it's built into the legal framework with which the organization works, it's you know, it's very, very different. And certainly at a minimum, see the same idea applying to any other professional organization, because obviously any other profession has to operate within a sense of strong trust with with both the public and with the clients. You know, you have a sense of where a law firm or a hospital or an accounting firm or others have to have some sense of responsible leadership over the organization to instill the sense of responsibility of the members to act, basically perform their professional work in a lawful fashion. And it can't be taken for granted because indeed, every time that there is a non-professional act or an unprofessional act, it reflects not just on those individuals who act unprofessionally, but also on the organizations.

So what I did, I reviewed a number of oral histories from the Army Heritage and Education Center, trying to figure out from these these these stories, these, you know, hundreds of pages of interviews that were conducted with very, very senior leaders, three and four star generals, senior civilians. And along with some interviews that I conducted myself trying to get at the difference between really good leadership -- leading the organization to get the mission accomplished -- versus what constitutes responsible command so that the organization acts lawfully. What instills the moral drive or the drive to succeed in an honorable fashion? Let me just run through these five themes very quickly for you and then future episodes of the podcast. I'm going to explore these themes in far, far greater depth.

So the first one has to do with the formal structures which the organization fits in. In the military sense, this is command and control. And it's not just the ability of the leader to command and control the organization, but to be able to shape the formal internal and external communication linkages. Those commanders who have the ability to shape those formal channels and be able to ensure a consistent and clear information flow so that information is passed clearly and consistently to members stand a better chance of being able to allow the members to act honorably, to act lawfully if the leader does not have that ability. There is a greater chance of contradictory or confusing messages being passed to the members, which therefore increases the risk of unlawful action.

Now, in the military sense, one of these mechanisms of communication is what we refer to as rules of engagement. And the rules of engagement are basically the formal legal direction of what is allowed conduct and what is disallowed, which can include things like, you know what how much force you're allowed to use, what types of means are allowed that ensure that the mission can be accomplished with minimal suffering, unnecessary suffering can be avoided. And and certainly the greatest challenge for a commander is when they don't have the ability to establish the rules of engagement because of political reasons or political caveats. And this is not just, you know, within the force itself, but it's also commanders who must lead multinational forces who are cobbled together to work as a coalition on an operation. Contradictions and lack of clarity are clearly risks.

The second theme has to do with paradoxical tensions. This is one of those things where when I talk about responsible leadership, this is about who ultimately arbitrates when things become. Contradictory or confusing, especially in the case of like a tension that is persistent, I have been frequently referring to Marianne Lewis's paradoxes of organizations. Well, you know, ultimately somebody has to decide what the answer is. What is the synthesis between the two sides of this tension? All of the readings that I did and the the studies of the interviews and interviews I conducted myself, it always falls directly on the number one leader of the organization to make the final decision. As far as given this tension, how do we navigate it, which is it is logical and sense and sensible, but not every organization, certainly not every non-military organization goes through that path. There's a lot more that's delegated to to others, apart from the number one in the organization. Now, for non-military organizations, I'm not saying that that's necessarily wrong. It you know, that probably or could serve a purpose. However, again, anything that introduces the potential for lack

of clarity, ambiguity, contradiction, can definitely make it difficult for the organization members to act consistently, lawfully or honorably.

The next has to do with staff line relationships. And this is one that harkens back to talking about organizations podcast episodes on Joan Woodward and Douglas MacGregor, both of which talked about healthy staff line relationships. Now, this is one that might be very specific to military culture because military culture really puts a very significant emphasis on the line organizations who perform the core mission of the organization.

I mean, we think about an infantry battalion. You know, it is infantry first and everything else is in support of the infantry. A different staff line relationship that those authors have covered is that there are occasions in which the staff or the non line elements have to become center, have to take center stage and run the show. When that does, then the mission tends to be at risk because it subverts in a military organization. It definitely subverts the authority and responsibility of command. That is not to say that it is always bad, but it carries risks of itself for any particular length of time. Military organizations, the line organization must take center stage and the commander must essentially be the supported element of the staff and not the other way around.

Now, the fourth theme has to do with the organization's climate, and that is to say the commitment of the members to the organization. Obviously an unhealthy climate is one that we don't want. And that's where the interpersonal relationships among members or as expressed by members to those outside the organization is not healthy, is is not in keeping with the organization's identity or its mission or whatever in order to instill a climate that encourages lawful behavior. I mean, a happy climate is not going to get it. I mean, paraphrasing from one of my interviews, we have to separate the happy climate from the productive climate, the proper sense of discipline and a consistent sense of discipline to ensure that members knew the expected behaviors under duress that would allow members to be able to make the right decision when they were under such duress, such as in combat. If an organization's climate is such that everybody likes to be there but doesn't feel obligated to support the mission and at the first sign of trouble starts to hunker down and protect themselves, then obviously that's not going to translate into organizational cohesion in times of crisis. So there's a very, very important element of responsibility that's bestowed on the leadership to ensure not just keeping everybody happy, but also ensuring that the commitment to the mission is proper and honorable so that crises can be overcome.

And the fifth and final theme is how the leaders should be the needle of the moral compass of the organization. This is a challenge because it's more than just the leaders simply having integrity and maintaining it. I mean, the character of the individual leader is important, but it's not sufficient in order to generate the sense of honor that's needed among the members so that when the members face moral dilemmas that they know what to do. I think that sometimes we try to reduce this down to trying to paint moral dilemmas as something black and white, that there's a clear right and a clear wrong. And you want members to naturally do the right well, while that's true, just about everything that we're talking about here with the moral ambiguity, the comparison of two

seemingly equally honorable solutions or the less or having to choose between the lesser of two evils.

Well, this is where the moral rules or the moral guidelines have to come from the top. It's similar to rules of engagement, but the rules of engagement are much more formal and they're legal. And what I'm talking about here is a bit more more normative and more getting into the shared understandings that members have so that they can ultimately make up the right or make the right call in the absence of clear guidance from above because they understand the commander's moral code. This is really, really hard to instill because especially in organizations where the the leader doesn't necessarily have consistent direct contact with the organization.

So those are the five themes. And like I said, I'm going to explore these more in future episodes. But I hope that this paints a picture. I mean, we're talking about an organization that's going to serve with honor. I think that these five themes have analogs for the senior leader of any organization and that an organization that adheres to these themes is more likely to be an organization that clients and society can trust.

And especially now, you know, in a time where professions are under fire because [of] not just the pandemic, but everything that has come up as a result of the pandemic, there is an attractiveness to try to look at what it takes to rebuild trust and to rebuild honor in our organizations and our institutions. And I think these five themes can at least be a good conversation starters for trying to get us to go in the right direction.

*... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.*

**ALL THE BEST!**  
**TOM GALVIN**