

Creating Climates of Ethical Behavior

Col. Art Athens (USMC, Ret.)



It isn't sufficient for leaders - particularly Christian leaders – to act ethically themselves while ignoring their responsibility to create a climate of ethical conduct and integrity among the people who serve under their leadership. The individual ethics of a leader is an important starting place, but ethical leaders have to set a climate that encourages others to accomplish their mission in an ethical way.

I came to Christ at the age of 13. Before that, my parents required me to go to church with them, even though they weren't believers at the time. I attended a communicants class which was, unfortunately, more about memorizing the books of the Bible than about the Gospel. But by God's grace one night my instructor presented the Gospel clearly and I went home, reflected on what he'd said, and confessed that night that Jesus is Lord and believed in my heart that God raised Him from the dead.

Just two years later, at the age of 15, one of my two sisters was killed in an auto accident by a drunk driver. Her death put me at a crossroads in my faith – I had to ask myself, "Was God a God I could trust, or would I reject a God who would allow something like that to happen?" By God's grace I continued following Him.

After high school I attended the U.S. Naval Academy and, while there, started meeting with mature Christians who mentored me and provided me with a vision for being a godly officer, marked by professional excellence and integrity. Some of the verses in the Bible that became foundational for my understanding of ethical conduct included: The Ten Commandments, Colossians 3:23, verses from Galatians about the flesh vs. the fruits of the Holy Spirit, Micah 6:8, and Proverbs 22:1.

After graduation from the Academy, when I was responsible for a Marine Corps platoon, I hadn't thought deeply enough about my responsibility to not only be an ethical officer, but also create a climate of integrity for those under my command. I emphasized to my Marines to not use profanity, but I was more concerned with making sure I was doing things ethically myself than providing others with guidance on ethical conduct. I'm not sure I invested in the troops in the way I could have to assist them in their lives.

But an event that occurred on 28 January 1986 would awaken me to my responsibilities to always create an ethical climate as a leader. On that day, at Cape Kennedy in Florida, the space shuttle Challenger exploded, killing seven astronauts. The space shuttle had exploded because of a problem with O-rings **on the solid rocket boosters**. Some people had known about the problem beforehand, but NASA ignored their warnings and pushed ahead with the disastrous flight. After that tragedy, as a Marine captain, I was assigned to NASA to assist the newly appointed head of NASA and his deputies. Dr. Fletcher had been the NASA administrator during the Apollo era and the President of the United States asked him to return because Fletcher was noted for his personal integrity and creating climates of integrity. I accompanied Dr. Fletcher to numerous NASA installations as he worked to create a new culture in a large workforce. I learned from Dr. Fletcher there were four keys to creating a climate of integrity:

1. He consistently communicated the importance of integrity.
2. He personally modeled integrity to those around him.
3. He circulated throughout NASA to find out what was happening on the "front lines," asking people where they were tempted to cut corners, what they needed to make the job better, etc.

4. He acted swiftly to confront ethical issues.

NASA would safely and successfully return the Space Shuttle to flight, principally because of the leadership provided by Dr. Fletcher.

In the book of Nehemiah, I found these same principles applied in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall. Nehemiah clearly saw the ethical component of this project, and like Dr. Fletcher, he communicated, modeled, circulated and acted to ensure the wall's completion in obedience to God's design.

1. Nehemiah often communicated that building the wall was a mission beyond just the physical construction of a wall. Nehemiah prayed and acknowledged his and the nation's sin -- he knew the job of rebuilding the wall had a spiritual and ethical side to it.

"Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.'" (Nehemiah 2:17) God's name wasn't being honored, and Nehemiah communicated the importance of integrity here and in other interactions with the people.

2. Nehemiah set an example, and modeled, integrity. Chapter 5:14 says, "...when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor." Nehemiah didn't just talk about integrity, he showed how integrity could be demonstrated in action by selfless and right behaviors.

3. Nehemiah circulated among the people and workers, staying with and among them. Chapter 4:14 states, "After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, 'Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.'" Nehemiah was an active leader who didn't sit at home hoping everyone was doing their job and acting properly . . . he went to the front lines to observe those he led.

4. Nehemiah acted. Chapter 5: 6-7 shows how he took immediate action when he uncovered injustice: "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, 'You are charging your own people interest!' So I called together a large meeting to deal with them."

One other professional example might be helpful when considering how to create a climate of integrity. While serving as a Marine, I had the privilege of meeting Admiral Jim Stockdale, a Naval Academy graduate who led the first bombing runs into Vietnam. On his second tour in Vietnam, he launched off an aircraft carrier, took rounds from the enemy, ejected from his aircraft, and became a prisoner of war in what was later referred to as the "Hanoi Hilton." Admiral Stockdale was the senior naval officer in the prison camp and provided leadership for the Americans imprisoned. He knew the importance of establishing a climate of integrity and established the acronym BACK-US to help guide his fellow POWs. Each letter in the acronym had a meaning. "B" stood for "don't bow before the enemy in public." "A" stood for "don't go on the air and provide propaganda for the North Vietnamese." "C" meant "don't admit war crimes." "K" stood for "don't kiss the enemy good-bye" (meaning, don't receive favors from the captors) and "US" reminded the POWs of "unity above self."

When Admiral Stockdale was in the Hanoi Hilton, he communicated to his fellow POWs that their mission was to "return with honor," meaning the aim was to be released together and return to the United States with their integrity intact. The POWs also learned how important community was in holding each other accountable.

They understood the importance of caring about each other, forgiving each other, and ensuring that the climate of integrity and ethical conduct held. I placed a “Return with Honor” sign above the door that leads out of our house so the last thought our family has as we leave the house is the importance of honorable and ethical conduct throughout the day.

With the lessons learned from Dr. Fletcher, Admiral Stockdale, and Nehemiah, I approached my future leadership positions ready to apply their principles for creating a climate of integrity. For example, for a Marine Corps Squadron I commanded I knew I had to communicate ethical priorities, set an example, circulate, and take action. The ethical priorities for that squadron were:

1. Demonstrate excellence without arrogance.
2. Exhibit professionalism at all times, including when on liberty or deployed.
3. Treat everyone with dignity and respect.
4. Give honest reports.
5. Take care of our families.

The Bible gives us a wonderful foundation of how to be ethically sound. Leaders such as King David, Paul, Daniel, and Timothy model this for us. In our professional careers, we need to help young officers and senior enlisted leaders to think beyond themselves so that they, too, can set a climate of integrity in their units and among the people they’re responsible for.

Recommended Reading: “Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death,” which shows what happens when leaders don’t set a climate of integrity. This book details the story of a platoon that was in south Baghdad, a dangerous location nicknamed “the triangle of death.” This platoon had no guidelines or principles given to them, and their actions degraded over the course of their time in Iraq, until it ended in tragedy.

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you create a climate of integrity among those you lead? Spend some time prayerfully thinking about what is important for integrity, and write out those things in a clear, concise way that can be shared quickly with others (perhaps as a list or an acronym, like Admiral Stockdale used.)
2. How would you define “Do the right thing?”
3. Have you seen examples of military units run without a solid core of ethical leadership? What were the results?
4. Have you seen leaders who exhibited ethical behavior and encouraged it in those they lead? How specifically did they do so?

Prayer: Lord, in every area of my life let me create a culture of integrity. Help me model right actions and thinking, and let me go and out return with honor, for the glory of Your name. Help me strive toward excellence with humility and honesty in all things.

Conversational Prayer: Spend time in conversational prayer, using your own words and speaking to Christ as not only as your Redeemer, but your friend. Ask Him which lessons from this devotional you most need to learn and apply in your own life.