CANDOR: CAN THE ARMY HANDLE THE TRUTH?

A provocative paper recently published by the U.S. Army War College raises the question of whether the Army can handle the truth. Called "Closing the Candor Chasm: The Missing Element of Army Professionalism" and written by Col. Paul Paolozzi, the paper says speaking the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is a way of building professional relationships and a stronger Army. Candor can be intimidating and unwanted in some circumstances, but it should be a key part of professional communication, Paolozzi says.

By Rick Maze
Editor in Chief

Paolozzi cites performance evaluations, training, education and counseling as areas in which complete honesty is missing. Candor, he says in the report, "is messy, hard, creates discomfort, and its presence is most often inversely proportional to rank and organizational size."

He wrote the report while a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and has since become chief of the Under Secretary of the Army's Strategic Initiatives Group. Reaction to the report has been "100 percent very positive," he says.

"My concern, and the primary purpose of why I wrote, is founded on the problem that candor isn't a part of our professional discourse, which makes it nearly impossible to get better," he says.

His report is part of the Professional Military Ethics Monograph Series and is available for downloading at www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil.

Some leaders want to hear the truth. Others want honesty but not too much. "Welcoming candor is

Col. Paul Paolozzi, then-commander of 18th Engineer Brigade, 21st Theater Sustainment Command, speaks at the unit's 2011 deployment ceremony in Germany.

Dee Crawford

not a license to be brash, angry, or habitually wrong," Paolozzi writes. "It is the constructive contribution to communication that builds transparency." Conversely, "a dearth of candor impedes the flow and accuracy of information and ultimately erodes trust between parties. The net effect of its absence goes beyond ineffective communication; it degrades confidence in institutions, leaders and organizations."

The stereotypical NCO is viewed as someone with candor, Paolozzi writes. "They speak plainly and often create healthy professional discomfort due to their straightforward approach," which does not necessarily sound like a good trait until put into context. "Their role is to steadfastly guide and advise regardless of whether their opinion is solicited."

Candor also comes into play when senior officers counsel and evaluate their subordinates, when peers assess each other, and in self-assessment, what Paolozzi calls "self-candor" and describes as "the leader's ability to have self-understanding through introspective 'discussions' of their own position that makes the candor they provide to others valued."

Self-assessment has long been both a formal and informal tool of the Army, though there are doubts about whether it is accurate. Research has found that officers tend to inflate their worth in self-assessments when compared with assessments from superiors. Research shows, however, that those with the most accurate self-rating also are those most likely to be promoted. A 2007 Army Research Institute study found self-assessments were more accurate than evaluations by superiors, peers and subordinates when compared against an objective standard of leadership skills, ability and values.

Paolozzi provides an example of why self-assessment isn't strong: So-called toxic leaders tend to inflate their self-assessments while "humble leaders tend to underestimate their leadership attributes."

The Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback 360 performance evaluation system, or MSAF, could provide a better assessment if the 7-year-old program continues to work as planned. The 360-degree assessment results from a leader being evaluated by subordinates, peers and superiors, as well as a self-evaluation. "It requires candid and honest assessment by those asked to participate in the process," according to the MSAF program website.

Apart from after-action reports measuring performance against requirements and missions, most personal performance evaluations in a career come from the top down, Paolozzi says. "I applaud the Army's move to keep the first step in multidimensional assessment private between the rated leader and the rater," he says in response to questions. "Private results allow for anonymous candor that doesn't exist in our formal evaluations."

He remains skeptical, however, of the fairness and accuracy of the 360-degree evaluation. "I'm concerned that when the results shift from a private environment to one that produces an impact on a leader's career, the results can become inflated," Paolozzi says. Another risk, he says, is that assessments from subordinates and peers could be overly harsh when everyone realizes the results will be part of the leader's evaluation.

The ability of using multisource assessment to pick who rates you creates the possibility of "diminished value" for the evaluation, he says. It requires a "healthy level of self-candor" for an officer to choose someone who will provide objective feedback. "Most leaders know which subordinates laugh at their jokes, always agree and placate them. Similarly, most leaders won't choose an NCO recently reduced in rank as one of their feedback providers."

Paolozzi says he personally likes the "unvarnished" written comments from senior officers that he received on his full-spectrum review. "Why didn't I ever read or hear those comments before? Was I unreceptive, was the sender unwilling to exercise courage, or both?" he asks.

Jack Marshall, president and founder of ProEthics, said candor is a core ethical value that should be developed in an organization even if there is a downside. A professional ethicist, consultant and trainer, Marshall helps organizations and businesses encourage ethical conduct and change culture. In large organizations, such as the Army, this would require development of leaders who do not regard reasoned dissent as a threat. One way to do this, he says, is rewarding rather than punishing the messenger carrying bad news. "The worse the news, the greater the reward," Marshall suggests. "Tell staff members that you expect them to stop you from making mistakes, and that if you err and someone knew that you were making a mistake but refrained from telling you, then heads will roll."

Army culture can make candor more difficult, Paolozzi writes in his paper, for the following reasons:

- Conformity is hammered into soldiers from their initial training, and rigid doctrine discourages speaking freely.
- The "can-do" Army culture could also be a factor. The Soldier's Creed includes the line, "I will never accept defeat." That describes a "duty-driven Army" in which flaws such as potential operational shortcomings are overlooked or left unmentioned.

■ The Army's "myopic focus" on the seven core values—loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage—may have "created an institutionalized blindness to other virtues."

The Army can and should do something to improve internal criticism and competing ideas, Paolozzi writes, starting at the top. "First, tone and culture are set within the Army by the most senior leaders—the three- and four-star generals and the Sergeant Major of the Army," he says, suggesting this could start with how conferences and routine meetings are conducted. He points out that if bluntness is encouraged and rewarded, this could be the start of a culture change.

The next step is slightly more risky, with mid-level commanders feeling free to have "authentic communication" with their superiors.

"Human nature will shape the environment in each individual unit across the Army, but after a campaign of reinforcement, candor should be an active expectation," he says.

Success at this point will depend on how those blunt and potentially negative assessments from subordinates are accepted by higher-ranking Army officers who may not like having their leadership and decision making questioned.

Paolozzi says "caustic candor," or someone's notion of the truth delivered in a brutally honest and negative way, "may be the sender's inability to understand how to speak with candor effectively." He adds, "Not every engagement needs caustic candor, negativity, or an environment that leaves people bruised and most likely looking for opportunities to avoid future negative engagements."

Marshall, the ethicist, wasn't terribly worried about too much honesty. "I say to cherish bluntness. It is the surest way to get to the whole truth," he says. "Misanthropes are damaging, but learning to criticize without being obnoxious is a teachable skill."

Some Army leaders may not want to hear the truth, Paolozzi acknowledges. Some leaders do not "value candor

THE SHINSEKI LESSON: TRUTH HURTS

Honesty isn't always rewarded in the military or in life. A prime example is what happened in 2003 to then-Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki when asked for his views about an imminent U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Testifying along with the other service chiefs on February 25, 2003, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Shinseki was asked a direct question by Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, the panel's ranking Democrat. Levin asked for Shinseki's estimate of the "force requirement for an occupation of Iraq following a successful completion of the war."

Shinseki did not answer right away. He paused and said he did not have specific numbers without consulting combatant commanders but "something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers. … We are talking [about] post-hostility control over a piece of geography that is fairly significant, with the kinds of ethnic tensions that could lead to other problems. So it takes a significant ground force presence to maintain a safe and secure environment, to ensure people are fed, water is distributed, all of the normal responsibilities that go along with [such a] situation."

U.S. Army

34th Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric K. Shinseki

Levin, who is now the committee chairman, called Shinseki's estimate "very sobering" because the general was talking about keeping the ground contingent almost as large as the invasion force.

In reaction to Shinseki's estimate, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz said the general was incorrect. Testifying before the House Budget Committee two days after Shinseki spoke, Wolfowitz rejected the chief of staff's estimates for postwar ground forces. "There has been a good deal of comment—some of it quite outlandish—about what our postwar requirements might be in Iraq," said Wolfowitz, who, along with then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, had planned the Iraq invasion to be a swift in-and-out proposition. "Some of the higher-end predictions we have been hearing recently, such as the notion that it will take several hundred thousand U.S. troops to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq, are wildly off the mark," he said. "It is hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his army—hard to imagine."

Thom Shanker, Pentagon correspondent for *The New York Times*, summarized Shinseki's candor in a 2007 news report. "General Shinseki was not fired for his comments, but his influence as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff certainly was never the same. He retired as scheduled."

—Rick Maze

LIES, OUTRIGHT LIES AND RATIONALIZATION

Ethicist Jack Marshall of ProEthics describes four kinds of lying:

- **Dishonesty: an outright lie.**
- **Misrepresentation: leaving out vital facts or presenting facts in a distorted or misleading way.**
- **Fraud: making promises you don't intend to keep to induce someone to do something they otherwise wouldn't.**
- **Deceit: using facts to mislead.**

In ethical terms, all four are lying, he says.

Marshall has a list of 37 types of rationalization, which he describes as slightly different but "do arguably more damage." These are "the lies we tell ourselves to justify unethical conduct":

ProEthics

Ethicist Jack Marshall

- **"Everybody Does It" is the "golden rationalization" based on the assumption that if, for example, someone cheats on a test it is OK for you to do it, too. "If someone really is making the argument that an action is no longer unethical because so many people do it, then that person is either in dire need of ethical instruction or an idiot," he says.**
- **"It Worked Out for the Best" is another way of making it seem that bad conduct is OK. "Snooping into the contents of your host's medicine cabinet is wrong, and the fact that you discovered a mislabeled pill bottle with rat poison in it doesn't make your violation of her privacy ethical, even though it allows you to tell her and save her life," he says.**
- **"If You Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em" excuses bad behavior using the fight-fire-with-fire logic. "Although maxims and aphorisms cause a lot of confusion in ethical arguments, this one is still valid in its simple logic: 'Two wrongs don't make a right,'" he says.**
- **What Marshall calls the "King's Pass" is the excuse that someone is so important that his or her unethical behavior should be ignored. It could be called the "Commander's Pass" in the military. "This is a terribly dangerous mind-set, because celebrities and powerful public figures come to depend on it," Marshall says. "This pass for bad behavior is as insidious as it is pervasive, and should be recognized and rejected whenever it raises its slimy head."**

For more information, visit: http://ethicsalarms.com/rule-book/unethical-rationalizations-and-misconceptions.

and simply want compliance," he says. "No need for disagreement, recommendations or anyone to reveal concerns—simply comply."

"This leadership environment isn't limited to inexperienced lower-level engagements," Paolozzi says. "It is just as common in the power hallways of the Pentagon. That can only be changed when the behavior is challenged, corrected and replaced with a new behavior."

Retired Army Sgt. 1st Class Jonn Lilyea, a Desert Storm veteran and founder of a popular military blog that unmasks fake veterans and includes commentary on current military issues, says he's doubtful about significant progress being possible on honesty in communication. "I don't think they're able to be honest with people outside of their units," says Lilyea, whose blog is called This Ain't Hell But You Can See It from Here, words taken from an iconic Vietnam War T-shirt slogan.

Combat veterans, especially retirement-eligible ones, are the most likely to speak their minds, Lilyea says. "Experience gives the speaker some authority on a given subject and probably makes it more likely that they'll let their opinion be known, just like in any profession, especially if they are in the twilight years of their career."

An example, he says, is reports he heard last year from troops in Afghanistan complaining that their commanders would not allow them to be armed in some circumstances while working with Afghan allies during a period of so-called "green-on-blue" incidents with Afghan soldiers and civilians attacking U.S. troops. "They were telling me that for every incident that we read about, there were three others happening.

"It was just a few weeks after I started reporting it that the commanders announced that the troops would start arming themselves and the green-on-blue attacks have almost stopped; at least they're happening less often," Lilyea says. "The whole episode proved to me that the troops know what they're talking about and senior Army leadership not so much."

Candor among NCOs is a key part of the Army, Paolozzi says. "They understand they are not placed in senior enlisted advisor's positions to be liked, make friends, or be popular." ★