

Captain BS Forethought writes : There is an apocryphal story of General MacArthur interviewing for a new Aide-de-Camp. The candidates lined up outside his office and the first candidate entered, after an hour he and the General emerged. Smiling broadly the General proclaimed "this is the best officer in the whole US Army, I don't need to interview anyone else." As the General walked off the other candidates asked him what he had said.

"Well as soon as I sat down, I asked 'General, what is your opinion of the use of the US Army in the Pacific theatre'. From then I furrowed my brow, nodded a lot, and injected one of the words 'yes', 'sir' and 'brilliant' whenever I could."

Sound familiar? I know serving officers witness this sort of behaviour all too often.

Often such sycophancy is harmless, such the adjutant who after Christmas leave keeps a straight face as he exclaims 'My god Colonel, have you lost weight?', but sometimes less so, 'up the middle with bags of smoke, General, I believe you are the modern day Rommel.' For many this sort of behaviour is one of those distasteful elements of professional advancement, like sitting the Protecting Information training, no-one enjoys it, but you aren't getting promoted if you don't.

What I want to set out in the article is how this behaviour isn't just distasteful, it is dangerous. It is at the heart of one of the biggest lies at the heart of British Defence, that it is staffed by professionals.

That the British Army is the most professional in the world is now something of a cliché. It fills the rhetoric from the Prime Minister down, via the Values and Standards, to the mouths of Commanding Officers. However, little thought seems to be given at any level as to what the word 'Professional' actually means. It is used as a sloppy synonym for diligent, or industrious, or 'detail-orientated', when to be a 'Professional' is nothing of the sort. The very root of the term comes from the verb 'to profess', as in 'to profess one's learning and judgement'. The entire point of a professional is they lend their opinion, arrived at through learning and experience, without favour or bias.

For professionalism isn't a thing one does, it is an incentive structure to which one is subject.

For an activity to be a profession there must be a split between those who employ a professional and those who regulate them. For example, the NHS employs doctors, the BMA regulates them; defendants employ lawyers, the Bar regulates them; the Lawn Tennis Association employs professional tennis players to compete at Wimbledon, the International Tennis Federation regulates them. The point being that there is no conflict of interest between those that authorise someone to practice a profession and those who employ professionals to undertake work.

The reason this split is important is that it ensures professionals are incentivised to act ethically. For example, if a defendant were to attempt to bribe a lawyer to falsify evidence, if the lawyer is caught he will be struck off, thus losing his livelihood, so any bribe that a defendant must pay would be prohibitively large. This is not to say that lawyers won't lie, doctors won't break the Hippocratic Oath, or tennis players throw matches. The point is that unless the bribes (or threats) involved are so vast that the professional will never have to work again, it is in a professional's interest to act ethically. A lawyer, doctor, or tennis player can always dump any given employer (client, patient or tournament) and lose only a small proportion of their income, whereas, if they are complicit in illegal activity, they can lose all of it for life.

Does such an incentive structure exist inside the British military? Emphatically not. For inside the military one's employer and one's regulator are one and the same person. To understand what I mean let us first understand how remuneration works within the military. As there is a pay structure based on seniority not performance there are two incentives on any officer: one, stay in the game long enough to pass the various boards to get to a regular commission, and secondly, generate the best report 'book' possible so that you can rise to the highest rank

possible, which sets your pension rights. Officers are literally paid in the patronage value of their annual appraisal. Which means what a Reporting Officer (RO ♦ the person who writes someone's report) thinks about a given officer is the single most important thing when it comes to that officer's long term financial security.

So if an officer's RO is the 'client' of an officers services, who is the regulator? Well there are two, one is the courts for if an officer does something obviously illegal, but what about in matters of professional judgement? In this case it is again the RO, it is the RO who decides the validity or not of some piece of work, or action, they are the teacher who marks their own class's exams. For with a single line in an appraisal, or a phone call, an RO can kill a career. If you are sacked by this Army, it is not as though one can walk down the road and join another. The power a commander wields does not come from their legal authority, but from their patronage value. As the career managers everywhere say, who writes a report is just as important as what that report says.

This leads to a perverse incentive structure on the staff in headquarters, who ultimately exist to help commanders make decisions. It is fundamentally in the interests of the staff in any headquarters not to challenge their commanders thinking. Given the choice of challenging a commanders opinion, and definitely ruining ones career, or silently acquiescing to it, and maybe, possibly, in a few years, having to justify why you didn't stand up to it, the vast majority will take the latter option. After all, unless people are going to die, what does professing your actual opinion without favour or bias get you apart from the risk of a P45?

Unlike the days of the Purchase, where Officers were wealthy enough to resign as their honour demanded it, the vast majority of officers today do not have that option just to dump their commander if they disagree. Today's officers are so dependent on the good will of their ROs that they self-censor and will repress subconsciously any misgivings they have about their judgement, in the words of Tacitus, 'Slaves are Slavish'. This psychology has now permeated though the military to such a degree that it has infected the very highest levels of the Ministry of Defence, as was reported in 'High Command' by General Elliot, senior officers routinely hide original thinking from ministers as 'the market won't bear it'.

As we are seeing in FIFA and the IAAF, when the boundaries between employer and regulator get blurred, we create perverse incentives on people to act in unethical ways. Banging on about 'Moral Courage' is all very well, but both of the aforementioned organisations had mountains of literature espousing their 'values', but when confronted the choice between one's conscious and the feeding of one's children, people behave in line with the first law of economics; they respond to incentives.

How then do we break this system? The answer I suggest is not in the rhetoric, but in the incentive structure. Instead of posting people to staffs and their reports returning to career management centres. I suggest commanders should be given a budget with who they can man their headquarters. They can use that money however they see fit: hire lots of second rate officers, or a few exceptional ones; they could offer any bonus scheme they like to incentivise hard work and diligence; but most importantly of all, the staff are all hired anonymously with respect to their career management system. This will mean that they can give their opinion freely and candidly, and should they and their 'client' have a difference of opinion, then the commander can sack them, or they resign, without significant fear for their future earnings. This will create a secondary market where those who help our commanders make decisions stand out by thinking innovatively and honestly, rather than sycophantically and obsequiously.

Staff officers should be like priests, there to advise and help their parishioners to the best of their ability, but always to remember they answer to a higher power.

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