

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

---

Volume 52  
Number 4 *Volume 52, Number 4 Winter Issue*

Article 15

---

11-18-2022

## Why Do Senior Officers Sometimes Fail in Character? The Leaky Character Reservoir

Everett S.P. Spain

Katie E. Matthew

Andrew L. Hagemaster

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), [National Security Law Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Everett S. Spain, Katie E. Matthew & Andrew L. Hagemaster, "Why Do Senior Officers Sometimes Fail in Character? The Leaky Character Reservoir," *Parameters* 52, no. 4 (2022), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3190.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

# Why Do Senior Officers Sometimes Fail in Character? The Leaky Character Reservoir

Everett S. P. Spain, Katie E. Matthew, and Andrew L. Hagemaster

**ABSTRACT:** This article argues senior officers may fail in character because their rate of character development throughout their careers typically decreases as environmental stressors rise. It conceptualizes character as an open system with both gains and leaks over time and integrates existing scholarship on personality and ethical development to create the Leaky Character Reservoir framework, which it then applies to Army officers' careers. Military leaders will gain a new understanding of character and find specific actions leaders, units, and the US Army can undertake to strengthen the character of its senior officers.

**Keywords:** character, ethics, personality, conditioning history, adult development, moral development

**G**ulf War hero General Norman Schwarzkopf argued that in addition to competence, effective leaders must also have character.<sup>1</sup> Appropriately, character is one of three competencies of the US Army's Leadership Requirement Model and one of three lanes for the US Navy's Leader Development Framework, though both stop short of defining *character*.<sup>2</sup> Some define character as “[doing] the right thing when no one is watching,” “choosing the harder right over the easier wrong,” or “having a priority concern for executing one's duties and responsibilities while conforming to moral codes of behavior.”<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of understanding senior officers' ethical (or unethical) decision making, we define character as, “the propensity to take ethical and selfless actions when facing temptation to act unethically or selfishly.” Character-based leadership suggests character serves as a mooring for leaders, tethering the

---

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the reviewers, officers, and leaders who have contributed their valuable expertise and experience to this article. We are grateful for the collective suggestions across several organizations that improved our work overall. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katie Matthew, Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, Thayer Hall, West Point, NY 10996, or by e-mail to [katie.matthew@westpoint.edu](mailto:katie.matthew@westpoint.edu).

1. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, “Address to the Corps of Cadets, United States Military Academy” (West Point, NY, May 1, 1991), YouTube video, 25:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGfrMzqNZqc>.

2. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2019) and US Navy Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), *Navy Leader Development Framework: Version 3.0* (Washington, DC: CNO, May 2019).

3. Miguel Alzola, “Even When No One Is Watching: The Moral Psychology of Corporate Reputation,” *Business & Society* 58, no. 6 (2019): 1277; Robert L. Caslen Jr. and Michael D. Matthews, *The Character Edge: Leading and Winning with Integrity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020), 208; and Walter Ulmer, personal communication (e-mail) with author, March 8, 2021.

criteria for leader decisions to something unmoving, such as an organization's espoused values.

Although the Army requires its leaders to have competence and character, the relative importance of these virtues to the Army may have changed over time. For example, in just six months during World War II, the US Army's 90th Infantry Division had 20 battalion commanders and senior officers relieved, primarily for incompetent battlefield leadership.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this crisis of competence was not isolated to the 90th division. At least 16 US World War II-era division commanders and five corps commanders were similarly removed for battlefield ineffectiveness.<sup>5</sup> Yet, this stands in stark contrast to the causes of today's reliefs. In one year in Iraq (2010–11), Major General Robert Caslen, then commander of the 25th Infantry Division, adjudicated the alleged misconduct of 78 officers and senior enlisted personnel (master sergeant/first sergeant and above) for character failures (such as improper relationships, inappropriate use of government resources, larceny, toxicity, making false statements, alcohol abuse, and drug abuse). In 2021's first five months, at least three US Army brigade commanders were relieved: one for personal misconduct, one after allegations of misconduct, and one after allegations of counterproductive leadership behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Notably, we are unaware of any active-duty US Army battalion commander, brigade commander, or general officer being formally relieved for tactical, operational, or strategic incompetence since 2001. Instead, perceived character failures have been the leading factor in most modern-day officer reliefs.

Historically, commentators have considered competence and character independently, but this may prove a false distinction since they influence the same outcome: organizational effectiveness. Professor Don Snider observes a leader's character sets, or fails to set, "the culture/climate of trust that facilitates cohesive teams, and thus military effectiveness."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Caslen acknowledged the negative organizational ripple effects generated by his subordinate leaders' aforementioned misconduct.<sup>8</sup> Former US Army Chief of Staff General H. K. Johnson summarized how leaders' personal character failures can hurt organizational effectiveness when he lamented, "If you will cheat on your wife, you will cheat on me!"<sup>9</sup> Additionally, senior

---

4. Henry G. Gole, *General William E. DePuy: Preparing the Army for Modern War* (Lexington University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

5. Thomas E. Ricks, "General Failure," *Atlantic* (website), November 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/11/general-failure/309148/>.

6. Davis Winkie and Kyle Rempfer, multiple articles published from April–May 2021, *Army Times* (website).

7. Don Snider, "Will Army 2025 Be a Military Profession?" *Parameters* 45, no.4, (Winter 2015–16), <https://www.press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol45/iss4/6/>.

8. Robert L. Caslen Jr., personal communication (e-mail) with author, November 6, 2020.

9. Walter Ulmer, personal communication (e-mail) with author, March 28, 2021.

leaders' public failures can consume significant organizational energy by diverting focus and resources from the primary mission.<sup>10</sup> When leaders fail, employees might be less proud to belong to the military and less likely to remain voluntarily in the service.<sup>11</sup> If a platoon leader makes a significant character mistake that becomes known, the 35 soldiers in the platoon are negatively affected. If a battalion commander makes a character mistake that becomes known, the 500 soldiers in the battalion are negatively affected. Thus, the more senior leaders are, the more their character failures adversely affect others.

Concerned about these implications, we wanted to better understand what is driving poor decision making and what the Army can do about it. A review of the literature shows character is a function of one's personality, conditioning history, and positive and negative environmental influences. Integrating these functions with the concepts of less visible ethical fading and erosion, we conceptualize an Army officer's ability to do the right thing in the face of temptation is the result of an open system that experiences both character gains and losses over time. We illustrate this idea with the leaky character reservoir (LCR) framework, which models an officer's available character as a dynamic quantity of liquid "potential character" stored in a reservoir inside each officer.

We hypothesize the rate of character education and development typically decreases over an Army officer's career, while character-related environmental stressors increase over the same period, placing senior officers at an increased risk to experience a character gap, or shortage of character needed to meet the demand for ethical behavior, and subsequent character failure. Alternatively, the leaky character reservoir predicts that if the Army increases mid-grade and senior officers' deliberate character development and education while mitigating character-related environmental stressors, more senior officers will do the right thing when faced with temptation, providing Army units with the leadership they deserve while reducing senior-leader reliefs.

To build a shared understanding of the issue, we first present two vignettes of character failures by hypothetical senior US Army officers. Next, we look to theory to understand what factors determine the level of potential character available in any officer's reservoir. Subsequently,

---

10. Caslen and Matthews, *Character Edge*, 245.

11. Arto Lindblom, Sam Kajalo, and Lasse Mitronen, "Exploring the Links between Ethical Leadership, Customer Orientation and Employee Outcomes in the Context of Retailing," *Management Decision* 53, no. 7 (July 2015): 1642–58, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MD-04-2015-0126>; and Jonathan Doh, Stephen Stumpf, and Walter G. Tymon Jr., "Responsible Leadership Helps Retain Talent in India," *Journal of Business Ethics* 98 (2011): 85–100.

we graphically illustrate the LCR framework to predict how senior officers may end up with a character gap that can lead to character failure and use the character reservoir to explain poor decision making by two senior officers described in the earlier case studies. Finally, we suggest actions individuals, units, and the Army can take to turn the senior officer character gap into a senior officer character surplus.

## **Cases of Failed Character**

### **Colonel A. A. and Personal Temptation**

Although Colonel A. A. was a battle-hardened officer who had successfully commanded a battalion task force in Syria, he was less familiar with the nuances of commanding a separate brigade. As he prepared to deploy the brigade to Korea, he augmented the traditional brigade staff with a handful of additional officers from across the brigade's battalions. One of these officers was a junior lieutenant, initially assigned for a two-month period to assist with key leader engagements. After two months, the colonel extended the lieutenant's temporary assignment and started spending time alone with her off duty. They began a sexual affair that would last throughout the deployment and beyond.

After redeployment, during a skit at a social gathering with family members present, active-duty actors jokingly portrayed a junior officer and colonel engaging in a sexual relationship. Even after the skit, no one strongly intervened into the situation, and the relationship continued over a three-year period until the junior officer—then a captain—formally reported the situation. During the following court-martial, the former brigade commander pled guilty to adultery.

### **Colonel B. B. and Professional Ambition**

Shortly after assuming command, Colonel B. B. was excited to learn his separate brigade combat team would be able to prove itself in an upcoming rotation to the National Training Center (NTC). He believed his unit's success at NTC would be influential on his future upward mobility in the Army. He described his leadership style as deliberate and passionate, but he told his battalion commanders, in the stress of his brigade's NTC train-up, he would take a pencil and jam it into their eyes if they were not loyal. He had public, disrespectful confrontations with his command sergeant major and expected the spouses of his subordinate leaders to attend all events his wife attended. Many of his subordinates felt he disregarded any voices

other than his own or those of his few favorite officers. These behaviors soon created five isolated battalions that shared the same unit patch but with different priorities and cultures.

Many soldiers did not want to follow B. B. in battle, and several battalion commanders and command sergeants major said he produced a negative command climate and routinely threatened the future of subordinate commanders and staff. After a formal investigation, B. B. was relieved of command.

## Four Drivers of Potential Character

To understand what led these otherwise successful senior Army officers to make poor character choices, we must consider what influences potential character levels and the likelihood of making an ethically sound decision(s) in the face of strong temptation(s). Drawing on Professor Kurt Lewin's seminal theory that posits human behavior is a function of personality and environment, we examine how officers' personalities and environments drive their ethical choices before and after joining the Army.<sup>12</sup>

### Driver 1: Heredity and Experiences Growing Up

Research shows approximately 40–60 percent of personality is innate, likely derived from heredity.<sup>13</sup> Examples of personality traits include the “Big Five” categories of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness.<sup>14</sup> When considering character, a multitude of additional personality traits come into play (such as resilience, judgment, integrity, and perseverance).<sup>15</sup> Various studies using the Big Five categories and character strengths as antecedents for ethical decision making illustrate how personality influences behaviors, and thus ethical decision making.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to heredity, much of the balance of officer candidates' character levels at entry into their pre-commissioning programs can

---

12. Kurt Lewin, *A Dynamic Theory of Personality: Selected Papers*, trans. Donald Adams and Karl Zener (London: Read Books Ltd., 2013).

13. Kerry Jang, John Livesley, and Philip Vernon, “Heritability of the Big Five Personality Dimensions and Their Facets: A Twin Study,” *Journal of Personality* 64 (1996): 577–91.

14. Christopher Soto, “Big Five Personality Traits,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development*, ed. Mark H. Bornstein (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 240–41.

15. Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

16. Virginia Bratton and Connie Strittmatter, “To Cheat or Not to Cheat: The Role of Personality in Academic and Business Ethics,” *Ethics & Behavior* 23 (2013): 427–44; Mary Crossan, Daina Mazutis, and Gerard Seijts, “In Search of Virtue: The Role of Virtues, Values and Character Strengths in Ethical Decision Making,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 113, no. 4 (April 2013): 567–81, doi:113. 10.1007/s10551-013-1680-88; and Tamara L. Giluk and Bennett E. Postlethwaite, “Big Five Personality and Academic Dishonesty: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 72 (2015): 59–67.

be attributed to their conditioning histories.<sup>17</sup> For example, families, coaches, peers, education, socioeconomic situations, and communities all potentially influence character. These influences and experiences affect young peoples' personalities until young adulthood, when most scholars argue personality becomes relatively fixed, though a minority of scholars argue personality remains malleable longer.<sup>18</sup> The conditioning history while growing up likely influences the future officer candidates' character by providing thousands of experiences that serve as lenses for how to view, interpret, and behave in future similar situations. These ethical experiences move the future officers into successive stages of adult or moral development. Robert Kegan's adult development theory and Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory imply that the ethically-sound conditioning from life's lessons will likely enable future officers to progress to a more advantaged stage of adult identity and a higher stage of moral development, respectively. It follows that Army officers who have reached more advanced stages of adult or moral development should be more likely to make ethical decisions.<sup>19</sup>

Since heredity and conditioning history influence character, Army officer candidates will have different levels of character upon starting pre-commissioning programs. To ensure these candidates have a minimal level of character prior to joining their programs, the Army typically requires all candidates to pass baseline character assessments, including criminal background checks, letters of recommendation, and face-to-face interviews.

## Driver 2: Army's Deliberate Character Development

Deliberate conditioning includes formal interventions designed to develop character positively.<sup>20</sup> For Army officers, this conditioning incorporates mandatory institutional character curricula, which is part of pre-commissioning programs, officer education schools (OES),

---

17. Thomas Bouchard Jr. and Matt McGue, "Genetic and Environmental Influences on Human Psychological Differences," *Journal of Neurobiology* 54 (2003): 4–45.

18. Avshalom Caspi and Brent W. Roberts, "Personality Development across the Life Course: The Argument for Change and Continuity," *Psychological Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (2001): 49–66; and Deborah A. Cobb-Clark and Stefanie Schurer, "The Stability of Big-Five Personality Traits," *Economics Letters* 115, no. 1 (2012): 11–15; and Carol S. Dweck, "Can Personality Be Changed? The Role of Beliefs in Personality and Change," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17, no. 6 (2008): 391–94.

19. Robert Kegan, *In Over our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development: The Philosophy of Moral Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

20. Matthew Erickson, Kevin Cooper, and Anthony Miccolis, "On Becoming Virtuous," *Journal of Management Education* 43, no. 6 (December 2019): 630–50, doi: 10.1177/1052562919866885.

pre-command courses (PCC), unit-level development (LPDs/OPDs), and self-development.

Each of the Army's pre-commissioning programs includes deliberate institutional curricula in character-related topics. We define *deliberate institutional character development* as hours of education where character is the primary learning objective and the curriculum is testable (papers, exams, and exercises). Examples include teaching the Army Ethic, the Seven Army Core Values (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage), and the character component of the Army Leadership Requirements Model. Practical exercises that require students to apply these character models and frameworks to various ethical challenges are often part of the curriculum. As of 2021, the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) two- to four-year program includes 32 hours of deliberate institutional character development, the United States Military Academy (USMA) four-year program includes 72 hours, and the Officer Candidate School (OCS) 12-week program includes 18 hours.

After commissioning, officers receive six hours of character education at the Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC) and three-and-a-half hours at the Captain's Career Course (CCC). Notably, deliberate institutional character development does not occur again until intermediate-level education (ILE), typically the Command and General Staff College (CGSC), at approximately the 11th year of service, where students receive 16 hours of development.<sup>21</sup> Officers also receive three hours of character development at the lieutenant colonel-level pre-command course and three hours at the colonel-level pre-command course. Most officers selected for the rank of colonel attend the Army War College (AWC) or an equivalent school, where they receive 27 hours of direct character development. Lastly, brigadier generals attend a short capstone course that includes an hour of deliberate character instruction. Table 1 shows how the Army provides most brigadier generals with approximately 100 cumulative hours of deliberate institutional character development during their careers.

---

21. TRADOC program of instruction based on *Army Leadership*, ADP 6-22.



**Table 1. Army's deliberate institutional character development**

	<b>Pre-Commissioning Program<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Second Lieutenant Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC)</b>	<b>Captain Captain's Career Course (CCC)</b>	<b>Major Intermediate-Level Education (ILE)<sup>b</sup></b>
Year Officer Service Development Is Received	-4 to 0	1	5	12
Hours of Direct Character/Ethics Education <sup>c</sup>	40 (weighted average) USMA = 72 ROTC = 32 OCS = 18	6	3.5	16
Cumulative Hours	40	46	49.5	65.5
	<b>Lieutenant Colonel Pre-Command Course (PCC)</b>	<b>Lieutenant Colonel (P) Army War College<sup>b</sup> (AWC)</b>	<b>Colonel Pre-Command Course (PCC)</b>	<b>Brigadier General Capstone</b>
Year Officer Service Development Is Received	17	21	22	26
Hours of Direct Character/Ethics Education <sup>c</sup>	3	27	3	1
Cumulative Hours	68.5	95.5	98.5	99.5
<p>Source: The authors received each of these statistics via a personal communication from an instructor/professor who either taught or oversaw the character/ethics curriculum at that organization. For ROTC and USMA, personal communication received December 23, 2020; for OCS, personal communication received, January 4, 2021; for BOLC, CCC, and ILE, personal communication received August 11, 2020; for PCC, personal communication received January 25, 2022; for AWC, personal communications received April 1 and 2, 2021; and for Capstone, personal communication received May 11, 2021.</p> <p>a. The weighted average for pre-commissioning is based on the number of officers from each source per year. For example, while USMA cadets receive a greater number of hours, USMA commissions about 21 percent of officers (~1,000) in a given year.</p> <p>b. This does not include the 40-hour culminating exercises that include a dimension of ethical decision making because ethics is not the primary focus of the exercises.</p> <p>c. Data for all OES directly collected from course directors and instructors responsible for curricula from 2020–21 at USMA, ROTC, OCS, Maneuver OES for BOLC/CCC, CGSC (ILE), and PCC at Fort Leavenworth, and AWC/Capstone at Carlisle Barracks.</p>				

Yet, when we consider deliberate character development as a rate rather than a total quantity, an interesting trend emerges. Although the rate (hours/year) of the Army's deliberate character development starts high early in officers' careers, it decreases significantly over time.<sup>22</sup> In sum, the Army currently provides junior officers a higher rate of deliberate character development per year of service (in both pre-commissioning programs and as an officer) than it provides senior officers, as illustrated in figure 1.

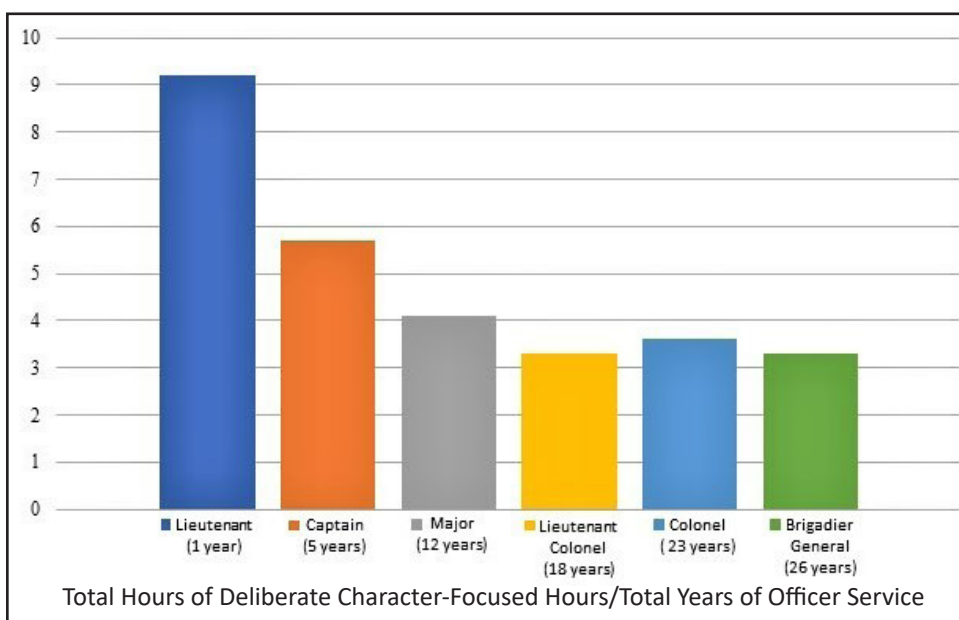


Figure 1. Rate of deliberate character development for US Army officers over a career

(Note: The rate is calculated by dividing the cumulative hours of deliberate development by the total years of officer service, including pre-commissioning programs. For example, new captains have an average of 49.5 hours of deliberate character development over the four years of their pre-commissioning program and five years as an officer, resulting in a deliberate institutional character development rate of  $(49.5 \text{ hours}/9 \text{ years}) = 5.5 \text{ hours/year}$ .)

In addition to formal character development through the officer education schools (OES) and pre-command course (PCC) curricula, many brigade, battalion, and company commanders institute unit-level character development sessions and programs for subordinate officers, including leader/officer professional development events (such as leader/officer professional development sessions [LPDs/OPDs] and character-focused guest speakers, book clubs, and formal mentorship programs). Additionally, some unit leaders assign unit members who are character exemplars to onboard new officers instead of letting the sponsor-newcomer

22. Paul Robinson, "Ethics Training and Development in the Military," *Parameters* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 23–36, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol37/iss1/8/>.

matching process happen by chance. Finally, motivated officers can embark on deliberate character self-development by studying character-related theory and ideas; reading about leaders who displayed strong character; spending time with virtuous institutions, mentors, and friends while off duty; and regularly and deeply reflecting on their own character and values.

### Driver 3: Army Life's Environmental Influences

In addition to an officer's personality and deliberate character development, Lewin's theory notes that officers' environments can significantly influence their character-related behaviors. The components of Army life's environmental influences include checks and balances from supervisors; virtuous (or unvirtuous) climates set by one's institution, boss(es), peers, and subordinates; and life's lessons while off duty.

The Toxic Triangle framework posits that leaders need adequate checks and balances from bosses and peers to ensure they maintain their character. Yet, as officers gain seniority, their bosses also have more responsibility and correspondingly less time to check subordinates.<sup>23</sup> As leaders increase in rank, their supervisory role often necessitates travel to cover a larger footprint and reduces face-to-face interactions with individual subordinate leaders. Concurrently, the emphasis on peer support and accountability from the Army's "battle buddy" system during the summer training portion of pre-commissioning programs is not facilitated during officers' subsequent careers. As leaders advance in the Army, they have fewer interactions with boss(es) who would notice if something character-related were offtrack and with peers who can help prevent them from making poor character decisions. This two-pronged lack of relational accountability over time may become a major contributor to the ethical shortcomings of our senior leaders.

The ethical climate created by bosses, peers, subordinates, and the Army influences character. Supervisors set, through personal example and official/unofficial policies, a command culture (the accepted and unaccepted character behaviors for leaders in their organization) that influences subordinates' behavior. Colleagues also shape the work environment by exerting peer pressure—both intended and implied. Typically viewed as responsive to their leader's character, subordinates can also influence a leader's character. People often act like those they spend the most time

---

23. Art Padilla, Robert Hogan, and Robert Kaiser, "The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers, and Conducive Environments," *Leadership Quarterly* 18 (2007): 176–94.

with, and subordinates far outnumber leaders in hierarchical organizations.<sup>24</sup> Finally, when leaders perceive the institution does not enact the values it espouses, they may feel less loyal to the institution and be less likely to make difficult character-based decisions aligned with those values.

Just as an officer's behavior may conform to the character level of the work environment over time, the off-duty environment can also impact the officer's behavior. These off-duty influences can be positive or negative, and will likely change over time as the officer develops relationships through hobbies, recreation, and family. In summary, each environmental factor may lead to stronger character, conceptualized as a character gain, or weaker character, conceptualized as a character leak.

#### Driver 4: Ethical Fading/Erosion

The psychological concept of ethical fading states that ethical standards may deteriorate over time, implying character gains are not permanent.<sup>25</sup> This fading, also known as *ethical erosion*, may include factors such as *ethical drift*, an incremental deviation from ethical practice that goes unnoticed by individuals who justify the deviations as acceptable and who believe themselves to be maintaining their ethical boundaries and *ethical fatigue*, the lessening of one's ethical standards due to the fatigue of having to fight ethical battles regularly.<sup>26</sup> There is a strong likelihood many senior Army leaders also have less visible and persistent leaks of potential character.

This ethical fatigue is related to stress, and while a moderate level of stress is known to increase performance, increased span of control and seniority can raise Army officers' stress and lead to unhealthy conditions. The diathesis-stress model posits when a preexisting vulnerability undergoes prolonged stress, the individual is far more likely to develop a disorder.<sup>27</sup> On average, battalion commanders experience five times the responsibility of company commanders, and brigade commanders experience five times the responsibility of battalion commanders. The increased stress is likely exacerbated during periods of extended or repeated

---

24. Jing Qian et al., "Ethical Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange and Feedback Seeking: A Double-Moderated Mediation Model of Emotional Intelligence and Work-Unit Structure." *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 1174, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01174.

25. Ann Tenbrunsel and David Messick, "Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-deception in Unethical Behavior," *Social Justice Research* 17, no. 2 (2004): 223–36.

26. Carole Kleinman, "Ethical Drift: When Good People Do Bad Things," *JONA's HealthCare Law, Ethics and Regulations* 8, no. 3 (2006): 72–76; and Cannon et. al., "Ethical Erosion: How Far from Center Are You? You May Be Further Than You Think," *Journal of Health Care Compliance* 17, no. 5 (2015): 11–64.

27. "APA Dictionary of Psychology – Diathesis-Stress Model," American Psychological Association (website), n.d., accessed October 31, 2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/diathesis-stress-model>.

collective training cycles and deployments. Over time, these stressful events can lead to physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, burnout, and an increased likelihood of developing post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>28</sup> Senior officers may also compensate for increased responsibilities (both emotional and operational) by reducing sleep time, which further affects stress levels, resulting in the propensity to engage in unethical conduct.<sup>29</sup> Finally, senior officers often change duty stations more frequently than junior officers, and moving is one of the largest stressors on individuals and families.<sup>30</sup> Author Wade Goodall notes that “many leaders [who] have become involved in an adulterous encounter have been overtired, stressed out, and/or have a feeling of emptiness.”<sup>31</sup> A senior officer’s likelihood of acting in an irrational way increases with the presence of stress.

Along with the probable increase in unhealthy stress comes an increase in external temptation. As a leader’s seniority and power increase, some individuals seek to develop access to those leaders for less-than-honorable purposes. Additionally, increasing seniority gives leaders more control over personnel decisions, organizational budgets, and strategic direction, often without a parallel increase in oversight; therefore the level of temptation typically increases with seniority.

Yet, these same Army leaders are likely overconfident in their ability to manage this increased stress and temptation. A facilitator of senior officer education recently shared that most “[senior officers] know right from wrong. What stuns me is the number who think they are the ones that won’t get caught.”<sup>32</sup> Since senior officers have been successful for so long (without being found with a major character failure), they are at risk of developing a perception of invulnerability, which could lead to decision making that further stresses their character, making the officer even more vulnerable.<sup>33</sup> When this perceived invulnerability parallels the rise

---

28. Christopher M. Barnes et al., “Leader Sleep Devaluation, Employee Sleep, and Unethical Behavior,” *Sleep Health* 6, no. 3 (2020): 411–17; and Oronzo Parlangeli et al., “Perceptions of Work-Related Stress and Ethical Misconduct amongst Non-Tenured Researchers in Italy,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2019): 159–81.

29. Christopher M. Barnes, John Schaubroeck, Megan Huth, and Sonia Ghumman, “Lack of Sleep and Unethical Conduct,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 115, no. 2 (2011): 169–80, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2011.01.009>.

30. Sarah Kershaw, “The Psychology of Moving,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2010.

31. Wayde Goodall, *Why Great Men Fall: 15 Winning Strategies to Rise Above It All* (New York: New Leaf Press, 2005), 56.

32. Personal communication with author, May 11, 2021.

33. Dean Ludwig and Clinton Longenecker, “The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 12, no. 4 (1993): 265–73.

in the senior leader's influence, larger organizations can experience immense negative consequences if their leader fails in character.<sup>34</sup>

### **Integrating the Four Drivers of Character: The Leaky Character Reservoir**

To integrate and illustrate the four drivers of character, we present character as an open system called the Leaky Character Reservoir (LCR). Imagine each person has a hypothetical internal reservoir that stores potential character in liquid form. Every time the officer exhibits a positive character influence from the drivers, the amount of potential character in the reservoir increases by at least a drop. Alternatively, every instance of unethical character-related influence from the drivers causes the reservoir to leak. The potential for ethical fading and erosion is always present, resulting in persistent, but less-noticeable leaks.

The reservoir stores potential character. When a character challenge (temptation) appears, we posit an officer with the necessary levels of potential character in his or her reservoir will have the strength to choose the harder right over the easier wrong and take the more ethical action. Conversely, if the officer does not have the requisite amount of potential character to meet the ethical challenges, the officer is unlikely to make ethically sound decisions, and character failure may result.

---

34. Jim Detert, *Choosing Courage: The Everyday Guide to Being Brave at Work* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2021).

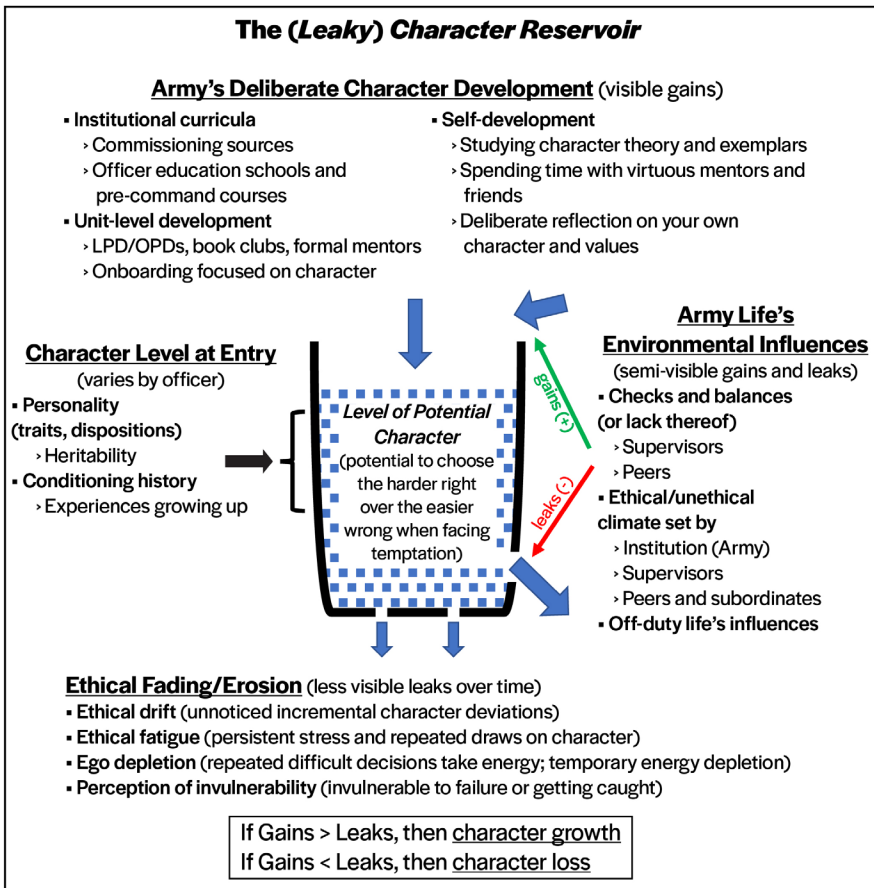


Figure 2. Leaky Character Reservoir

## Modeling the LCR over Time: Senior Officer Character Gap

By examining how the drivers of character change over a typical officer's career, it becomes clear that seniority brings more temptation, often through stress and privileged access to objects, information, and people.<sup>35</sup> Yet, over the same period, senior officers experience a lower rate of deliberate character development, deal with increased stress, and are less likely to receive adequate checks and balances from their peers and bosses. Since other influences vary widely across people and time (unit-level development, self-development, character of those around the leader, and off-duty life's curriculum), the net result is the senior officer character gap. Simply put, some senior officers

35. Ludwig and Longenecker, "Bathsheba Syndrome."

may not have enough potential character in their reservoir to confront the increasing temptations to be selfish.

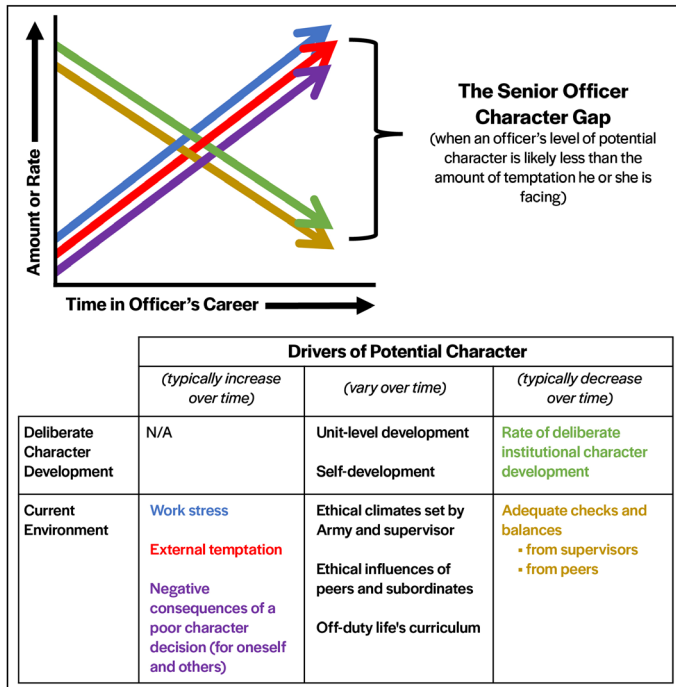


Figure 3. Current senior officer character gap

### Leaky Character Reservoir Applied to Colonels A. A. and B. B.

Colonels A. A. and B. B. passed the character screening to enter pre-commissioning sources, where they received a baseline level of deliberate character education. They then attended officer basic courses, where they received additional deliberate character instruction. At that point, the rate of deliberate character education began to decrease over their remaining careers.

Colonels A. A. and B. B. led geographically separate brigade combat teams; therefore, neither had a co-located peer with whom they interacted frequently. Consequently, there was no one to notice and initiate the difficult conversation with A. A. about his potential inappropriate relationship or B. B. about his increasing perceived toxicity with subordinates. The geographically isolated environment led to both receiving less than adequate checks and balances from their bosses. Both experienced ethical fading and erosion, as they had participated in multiple deployments prior to their brigade commands. As they were leading a unit approximately five times larger than before, each likely dealt with a proportional increase



in serious problems and were under the heightened stress of preparing units for deployment to combat or to a major training center rotation. Both may have felt an inaccurate perception of invulnerability, as their poor choices were not isolated incidents but a continuation of choices without being held responsible over years (A. A.) or months (B. B.). At the critical moment, neither had the potential character available to match the temptations they faced. Judging from the number of reliefs for character across today's senior officer corps, other senior officers likely suffer from a similar character gap.

## **Moving from a Character Gap to a Character Surplus**

Collectively, the US Army's current character development programs assume character gains are permanent. Unlike the one hour of daily physical fitness training required by most Army units, few units have regular character training, and while the Army tests everyone's fitness level twice a year, it rarely conducts character assessments. This character training and testing may not be needed if leaders' character gains are permanent. Yet, the LCR framework argues that an Army officer's level of potential character is conceptually similar to his or her level of physical fitness. Both are likely to atrophy if neglected over time.

The Army should address the problem by acknowledging that character gains are not permanent. While the Army can do little to increase the rate of character at entry or eliminate ethical erosion, military leadership can increase deliberate character development and mitigate environmental influences, with the intent of closing the senior officer character gap and creating a character surplus.

## **Mechanisms to Increase Deliberate Character Conditioning**

The Army can increase the quantity (rate) of deliberate character conditioning across the officer education schools (OES). Since the rate of character education decreases significantly as seniority increases, the Army can increase and/or tailor the amount of character education in mid- and senior-level education programs (intermediate level education [ILE], Army War College [AWC], pre-command courses [PCCs], and Capstone) to reverse this trend. Special emphasis on the character demands of senior officers should be a part of deliberate conditioning later in an officer's career. Naturally, the character education's quality matters and should also be a priority. Part of this education should be self-awareness generated by studying the LCR framework, especially the concept that the level of one's potential character can shift over time. During these

educational experiences, the Army should require officers to study numerous recent case studies of senior officers who failed in character in tandem with case studies where officers chose the harder right. Additionally, the Army should require mid-grade and senior officers to engage in deliberate reflection designed to examine character weaknesses and risks honestly by having operational psychologists administer confidential psychometric assessments of self-awareness, empathy, self-regulation, compulsive behavior, and narcissism.

Organization leaders should be incentivized and enabled to enact quality unit-level character development. They should ask institutional organizations (such as the Center for Army Leadership, the Army War College, the United States Military Academy, and the Combined Arms Center) to provide, and regularly update, character-focused officer and leader professional development programs (OPDs/LPDs) so they can be easily accessed and implemented by unit leaders. Additionally, units should be required to implement local character-development programs, including onboarding programs, to be briefed to bosses at quarterly training briefings.

Senior officers should be required to attend Army-sponsored resiliency-building programs/counseling that include a secular or religious-based spiritual wellness component. Character and moral growth are often developed through spiritual practice and can provide a constant during periods of change during an officer's career.<sup>36</sup> The value of workplace spirituality, characterized by a sense of community and alignment with the organization's espoused values, can positively impact an individual's moral judgment and an organization's ethical climate.<sup>37</sup> Army leadership can reach out to organizations that can host resiliency-building programs, including the Army's Directorate of Morale, Welfare, and Recreation; Army Community Service offices; chaplains; Army medical providers; and others.

The Army should incentivize individual mid-grade and senior officers to invest in character development. By providing officers with an annual stipend of up to \$5,000 to invest in individual character development efforts (such as book purchases, civilian character workshops and academic courses, and executive coaching with a character focus), Army leadership could create

---

36. Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*.

37. Badrinarayan Shankar Pawar, "Individual Spirituality, Workplace Spirituality and Work Attitudes: An Empirical Test of Direct and Interaction Effects," *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 30, no. 8 (2009): 759–77; and Lilian Otaye-Ebede, Samah Shaffakat, and Scott Foster, "A Multilevel Model Examining the Relationships between Workplace Spirituality, Ethical Climate and Outcomes: A Social Cognitive Theory Perspective," *Journal of Business Ethics* 166, no. 3 (2019): 611–26.

a positive environment for character development, and encourage raters and senior raters to document and reward self-improvement efforts positively.

Additionally, the Army must ensure all officers, especially isolated commanders, have an adequate level of checks and balances. Senior leaders must prioritize regular time spent with subordinate commanders in a deliberate coaching/developmental mode. Creating a healthy culture requires being present and getting to know subordinate commanders and their organizations. When interacting with subordinate commanders, senior officers should discuss and recognize acts of character as much, or more than, they talk about and reward organizational fitness, marksmanship, reenlistment, readiness, and other traditional unit-level accomplishments. In addition to requiring the regular review of subordinates' climate assessments (Commander 360, Defense Organizational Climate Survey, etc.), superior officers should host thoughtful, realistic discussions with subordinate commanders on practical daily actions that demonstrate an ethical life and ethical climate while recommending and resourcing steps, events, and courses that can build character along the way.

Army leaders should increase checks and balances through fostering values-based friendships in the form of peer-accountability groups. Each year, after officers are selected and slated as principal lieutenant colonel- or colonel-level commanders at command assessment programs, the Army should assign groups of four-to-six to peer-accountability groups (PAGs) based on professional and personal preferences, interests, and future command locations. When possible, officers who have different senior raters should be put together to reduce the chance of competition. In their article on best practices of peer support groups, Boris Groysberg and Robert Halperin explain, "Members also build camaraderie and form connections that help them feel safe, grounded, and capable in a volatile and uncertain world. The support they receive in forums sustains them through their toughest professional (and personal) challenges and fosters their long-term success."<sup>38</sup> With the help of an Army-funded civilian executive coach, these PAGs would meet (virtually or in person) for 90 minutes every other month to check in with a series of structured questions, including sharing character challenges and successes and allowing open time for free-flow discussion. Annually, each member should assess the PAG's effectiveness, with the Army switching members as needed to ensure

---

38. Boris Groysberg and Robert Halperin, "How to Get the Most out of Peer Support Groups," *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 2022).

the PAGs build positive, peer-accountability groups built on trust, values, and fit.

## Mechanisms to Mitigate Character Losses from Army Life's Environmental Influences

The Army can reduce stress by creating five years of predictability for battalion command selects. The period after selection for battalion command can be extremely unpredictable and stressful for senior officers and their families, including up to four moves over five years. Military leadership could provide the Army's new command-assessment program principal selectees with the ability to choose a command location, senior service college, and follow-on job locations and timing of moves. Additionally, senior officers could be stabilized at locations by changing the implicit career expectation that general officers hold two jobs at each level to holding one job for twice as long.

The Army could also reduce stress through sabbaticals. Giving senior officers six- to 12-month sabbaticals between major assignments without other work responsibilities would provide them time to reduce stress levels, prioritize health and relationships, and recharge.<sup>39</sup> During sabbaticals, officers would participate in required guided reflection with assigned mentors. Periods of education (for example, OES and advanced civilian schooling) are good for this, but senior officers would still have full-time responsibilities during educational assignments. With periods of reduced responsibilities, officers can learn new hobbies, regularly spend quality time with children, travel recreationally, and take better care of themselves.<sup>40</sup>

The Army can decrease the risk of stress by providing senior officers regular emotional/mental health assessment and tools. Since emotional and mental health can affect decision making, implementing in-depth health screenings as part of lieutenant colonel- and colonel-level PCCs will help prevent mental and emotional states that could lead to unethical decisions. Battalion commanders and above should be issued health-tracking smart devices, like smart rings that measure and give reliable feedback on sleep and exercise quantity and quality, so they can monitor and improve health.

---

39. Melissa Servier, "The Healthy Practice of Pastoral Sabbaticals," *Presbyterian Outlook* 199, no. 9 (June 2017): 32; Mohammad Yarmohammadian, Patricia Davidson, and Chao Yeh, "Sabbatical as a Part of the Academic Excellence Journey: A Narrative Qualitative Study," *Journal of Education and Health Promotion* 7, no. 1 (2018): 119; and Gabrielle Simionato, Susan Simpson, and Corinne Reid, "Burnout as an Ethical Issue in Psychotherapy," *Psychotherapy* 56, no. 4 (2019): 470–82.

40. Lee Tobin McClain, "A Sabbatical Ends," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 7 (October 2006).

Taking a holistic approach to sustaining the character of senior officers may not fully prevent a character failure, but it can slow the leaks and reinforce the character reserves built over a lifetime.

## Conclusion

The Leaky Character Reservoir framework conceptualizes a person's potential character as a resource stored in an open system, with gains and leaks over time. When modeled across a senior Army officer's career, the rate of formal character development typically decreases. In contrast, environmental character stressors increase, leading to slow leaks from the reservoir and, eventually, the potential for a character gap. To address this problem, the Army and unit leaders should recognize that character gains are not permanent and increase the rate of deliberate character development across formal and unit- and individual-level initiatives and promote positive environmental influences while mitigating negative ones. By taking these recommendations and other thoughtful actions, the Army can ensure future senior officers develop enough potential character to make selfless choices and take positive actions when faced with significant temptations, resulting in higher-quality leadership, better-developed subordinates, more-ready units, and a stronger Army.

---

---

Everett S. P. Spain

Colonel Everett S. P. Spain, US Army, is the head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the United States Military Academy. He has served with the 82nd Airborne Division, US Army Europe, and US Army Special Operations Command. He holds a bachelor of science degree from the United States Military Academy and a DBA from Harvard University.

Katie E. Matthew

Colonel Katie E. Matthew, US Army, is an academy professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the United States Military Academy. She has served as a logistician at home and on deployment with the 1st Theater Sustainment Command, 1st Infantry Division, 82nd Airborne Division, and Joint Special Operations Command, and most recently commanded the Brigade Special Troops Battalion and Camp Buehring, US Army Central. She holds a bachelor of science degree from the United States Military Academy, a master of business administration degree from Kansas State University, and a PhD in sociology from George Mason University.

Andrew L. Hagemaster

Colonel Andrew L. Hagemaster, US Army, is a clinical, aeromedical, and operational psychologist in the Army. He is a consultant for senior military leaders on behavioral health and leader development. At the United States Military Academy, he served as the director of the General Psychology for Leaders Course in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, installation director of psychological health, and residency director of training. He has served with the 25th Infantry Division, the 1st Infantry Division, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and multinational force and observers. He holds a master of arts degree from Reformed Theological Seminary and a PhD from Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences.

---

---

### Select Bibliography

- Barnes, Christopher, M., John Schaubroeck, Megan Huth, and Sonia Ghumman. "Lack of Sleep and Unethical Conduct." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 115, no. 2 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2011.01.009>.
- Bratton, Virginia, and Connie Strittmatter. "To Cheat or Not to Cheat: The Role of Personality in Academic and Business Ethics." *Ethics & Behavior* 23, no. 6 (2013).
- Caslen, Robert L., Jr., and Michael Matthews. *The Character Edge: Leading and Winning with Integrity*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020.
- Crossan, Mary, Daina Mazutis, and Gerard Seijts. "In Search of Virtue: The Role of Virtues, Values and Character Strengths in Ethical Decision Making." *Journal of Business Ethics* 113, no. 4 (April 2013). <https://doi:113.10.1007/s10551-013-1680-8>.
- Ludwig, Dean C., and Clinton O. Longenecker. "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders." *Journal of Business Ethics* 12, no. 4 (1993).
- Padilla, Art, Robert Hogan, and Robert Kaiser. "The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers, and Conducive Environments." *Leadership Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (June 2007).
- Robinson, Paul. "Ethics Training and Development in the Military." *Parameters*, 37, no. 1 (Spring 2007), <https://www.press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol37/iss1/8/>.
- Tenbrunsel, Ann E., and David M. Messick. "Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior." *Social Justice Research* 17, no. 2 (2004).