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LYING TO OURSELVES: DISHONESTY IN THE ARMY PROFESSION

Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras

U.S. Army War College Press, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2015, 53 pp. Open access (PDF)

Wong and Gerras present their research about the pressure on one type of public sector manager—U.S. Army officers—to prevaricate and lie. They describe a deluge of requirements which officers are required to certify they have satisfied, even though they cannot satisfy them all. For example, they cite Wong’s finding about the training that officers must have their troops complete:

...the total number of training days required by all mandatory training directives literally exceeds the number of training days available to company commanders. Company commanders somehow have to fit 297 days of mandatory requirements into 256 available training days. (p. 4)

Officers must either admit they failed to meet mandatory requirements, or falsify their official reports. The authors recount discussions with scores of officers about the problem of requirements that cannot all be accomplished, and how they cope. They say the officers often started with indignant statements that they would never give false reports, but as the discussion progressed would inevitably describe their coping strategies with euphemisms that showed they

routinely used evasion (e.g. “handwaving”) or explicit false reports (e.g., “pencil-whipping”). Discussions with higher ranking officers showed they take for granted that subordinates knowingly send them inaccurate reports.

Frighteningly, the falsifications that officers described went beyond training and administrative requirements, to the results of operations in combat zones. A colonel whose troops were fighting alongside local forces and preparing them to fight on their own said he rated the local force’s readiness as bad when he started his deployment and good at the end, so he could report success. The colonels working with those forces before and after him presumably did the same thing, so the readiness reported for the local forces cycled from bad to good and back as new U.S. officers were deployed.

The authors say routine lying in the army is enabled by “ethical fading” in which people learn to view considerations of right and wrong as less applicable to certain decisions. They point to euphemisms such as “giving them what they want” which shift blame from the officer who is misrepresenting to the annoying administrative demands she is coping with. They say many officers portrayed their misrepresentations in a positive light, as prioritizing, accepting prudent risk, or good leadership. But since every officer makes her own judgement about which official lies are acceptable, and their judgements differ, then some are making misrepresentations that their colleagues consider wrong and damaging to the army. Moreover, when officers routinely certify they have satisfied requirements which in fact cannot be satisfied, they shield the unreasonable requirements from critical examination and make it all the more damning for any officer to admit she has not satisfied them.

The authors propose solutions, which center on the highest-ranking army officers acknowledging the problem, exercising restraint in how many requirements they impose on

junior officers, and setting an example by leading truthfully. In particular, they propose that the army should monitor compliance with more requirements by sampling, auditing and other means, rather than by requiring each officer to self-certify. These other means will measure the extent to which a requirement is met, without pressuring officers to falsely report their own compliance.

This book is a valuable addition to the literature on organizations requiring dishonesty from their employees as a means to accommodate competing claims on the organization's resources. Bozeman (1993) theorized why organizations maintain rules that impose compliance burden while not addressing a functional objective; for example, because some party is using the rule for self-aggrandizement. Meyer and Rowan (1977) said organizations adopt structures that give them legitimacy in the eyes of society, even when those structures do not contribute to production, and that doing so causes the organization's structure to become decoupled from its actual activity. DeHart-Davis et al. (2014) noted that rules an organization does not effectively enforce ("undercontrolling rules") can indicate an insincere or superficial commitment to rule objectives. Wong and Gerras' book provides a rich real-world example of the phenomena those earlier works theorized.

This book is intended for practitioners within the military, particularly higher-ranking officers, to spur reflection and action. But it is a valuable source of information for anybody researching red tape, and would be good supplemental reading for a graduate course in organizational management.

Because of the book's intended audience and purpose, it is brief and omits some features one expects in scientific literature. It does not show the authors' methodology for their discussions with officers, which are the core of the book. While it provides many examples and

quotes from those discussions, it does not provide quantitative context for how typical such responses were. And while this book does relate to a broader body of literature as noted above, the authors do not discuss that. But noting these limitations is not a criticism; if the authors had added these features then the book would get less attention from its intended audience. This is a courageous book with valuable insights.

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