IntegratedEthics® (IE) Journal Activity

PLANNING GUIDE


Overview
This journal activity provides a venue for reflection, discussion and inquiry about the concept of ethical fading and its antidote, leading truthfully. The article “Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession” was published by the United States Army War College. It examines how the bureaucratic culture of the Army is at odds with its values. While reading the article by Leonard Wong, PhD, and Stephan Gerras, PhD, you should reflect on the aspects of organizational culture and climate that lead Army officers to compromise their integrity and consider whether you see similar trends in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). At the journal club meeting, these ideas will be used as a basis for a collegial discussion about your experience with the ethical environment and culture in your facility.

IE Journal Activity Format
Journal activities typically take 45-60 minutes, and are suitable for “lunch and learn” settings or other short venues. Optimally, a journal activity is both the result of prior activity, i.e., reading and reflection, and the catalyst for further activity, as shown in the RADIUS¹ format below.

RADIUS
Read the article critically.
Ask yourself the key questions.
Discuss the questions and follow-up actions with colleagues.
Inquire into IE program resources for help resolving ethical issues.
Use what you have learned.
Sustain collaboration with others in ethical practice in your facility or VISN.

In preparation for leading a journal activity, the leader should follow the first two steps of RADIUS like any participant, reading the article critically and asking the key questions at the end of this Leader’s Guide. The discussion leader should also be committed to following up — and supporting participants in following up — on the last three steps.

Guide for Discussion Leaders

Objectives for the Journal Activity

- Foster a collaborative discussion among colleagues to improve the ethical environment and culture in your facility.
- Familiarize staff with the concept of ethical fading.
- Discuss behavior in your facility that might contribute to ethical fading.
- Provide staff with an opportunity to reflect on their own ability to lead truthfully in VA.
- Brainstorm mechanisms to promote ethical practices and behavior at your facility that support leading truthfully.

Logistics

Participants
Journal discussions are open to any staff members who wish to participate.

Preparation

At Least Two Weeks Before the Meeting:
- Work with your local library to get copies of the article while following copyright permission requirements. In this instance, this is a government product and does not have a copyright. It is available online.
- Reserve a meeting space.
- Announce the event and make sure everyone in the facility is aware of it. Ask people who are interested to contact you for materials.
- Disseminate the article and participant handout(s) to interested people and ask them to read through the materials prior to the discussion.
- Choose and confirm a leader for the discussion and plan a time to prepare the individual to lead it. The ideal person is a high-profile leader, such as the facility director, for whom this would be an opportunity to showcase their role as the ethical leadership coordinator. If no high-profile leader is available, the IE program officer is a good choice, or another leader in the facility who is known to be an excellent facilitator. Share this guide with the designated discussion leader.

A Day or Two Before the Meeting:
- Confirm the journal event in another announcement and remind participants to bring their participant handout(s) with them.
- Make extra copies of the participant handout(s) and bring them to the meeting.
After the Meeting:

- Summarize the notes generated during the discussion session and share them with the participants.
- Consider using the summary to create a brief write-up of the event for inclusion in a facility publication such as a newsletter, daily report or other local communication tool. A brief summary can help staff members who were unable to attend to learn from the journal activity discussion and encourage them to participate in future events.
- If ideas were generated that might be considered for implementation across the facility, the IE council could be briefed to allow them to consider the ideas.

Roles

Discussion Leader

- Initiate the meeting and set the tone.
- Facilitate an open, collegial and relevant discussion.
- Moderate the discussion and ensure that all participants who want to join the discussion have an opportunity to do so.
- Keep the discussion on track and on topic. However, it is not necessary to cover all of the key questions.
- Encourage participants to seek information about the IE program at the facility.
- Follow up on ethical concerns shared during the discussion.

IE Staff

- Give participant handouts to those who need them.
- Act as a timekeeper, if the discussion leader has delegated this task.
- Track who speaks next, if the discussion leader has delegated this task.
- Take notes on questions, comments or suggestions that require further action.
- Follow up on topics that require further action.
- Record how many participants indicate an interest in attending another journal activity, and any suggestions made about improving the activity.

Suggested Ground Rules

Who Speaks When?

Typically, a discussion among a group of six or fewer participants, seated around a table or in a circle, is self-facilitating. For larger groups, it may be helpful to ask participants to raise their hands when they want to speak. If needed, IE program staff can jot down the order in which hands go up. The discussion leader may need to intervene from time to time if one person is dominating the discussion or if the discussion goes off track. In those instances, the discussion leader may want to say, “Let’s hear from someone else on this,” or “Let’s go back to the question.”
**Timing**
The discussion leader should start the meeting promptly and give guidance at the beginning about how long each question will be discussed. The discussion leader is responsible for moving the discussion from one question to the next when the allotted time is up. The discussion leader may delegate timekeeping responsibilities to the IE program staff in the room or ask for a volunteer timekeeper from the participant group.

**Questions About the IE Program**
When participants ask for more information about the IE program at the facility, the leader may call on the IE program staff in the room for a brief response. However, the journal club activity is not meant to be a question and answer session about IE. If a brief response isn’t feasible, the leader should ask the IE program staff to make a note of the question and respond to it later.

**Participant Suggestions for Improving the IE Program**
The IE program staff attending the meeting will note any suggestions for improving the IE program, along with the names of the people who express an interest in following up on those suggestions. Review the notes with the participant group at the end of the session.

**Leading the Journal Activity**

**Introduce the Session and Set Expectations (5 Minutes)**
- Welcome the participants to the journal activity discussion.
- Introduce yourself by name and ask other participants to do the same. (IE program staff should mention their IE roles when introducing themselves.)
- Direct participants’ attention to the meeting objectives on the first page of the handout and quickly read through them.
- Explain your role as the leader of the journal discussion:
  - Facilitate an open, collegial, and relevant discussion.
  - Moderate the discussion and ensure that all participants who want to join the discussion have an opportunity to do so.
  - Keep the discussion on track and on topic.
  - Encourage participants to seek information about the IE program.
  - Follow up on ethical concerns shared during the discussion.

**Discuss the Key Questions (40-50 Minutes)**
- Read the initial statement and the accompanying first question and invite responses.
- If participants don’t offer a comment, refer to the discussion leader notes (if applicable) for prompts to use.
- When time for the question runs out, get the group’s attention and say something like, “I’m afraid we are out of time on this question. Any last thoughts before we move on?”
- If the group wishes to continue talking about the question, ask where the time will come from. Do participants wish to reduce the time spent on the remaining questions or perhaps eliminate a question altogether?
- Repeat this process for the remaining question sets.
**Key Questions**

1. The article discusses the concept of ethical fading (Page 17).
   a. What is ethical fading?
   b. What behaviors do the authors point to that contribute to ethical fading in the Army?

**Notes to Discussion Leader:**

**Ethical fading** is a defense mechanism that individuals use to protect themselves from psychological damage when asked to take actions inconsistent with their values. Instead of facing the discomfort of choosing between a lie or failing, an officer will convince himself that what he is doing doesn't really matter because it is just a bureaucratic requirement. This psychological process of rationalization allows individuals to neutralize the potential moral dilemma.

The direct quote for a definition of ethical fading is as follows: “ethical fading occurs when the ‘moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implication.’ Ethical fading allows us to convince ourselves that considerations of right and wrong are not applicable…”

The article names **three behaviors that lead to ethical fading**: 1) use of euphemisms; 2) organizational requirements that put one’s honor at stake in impossible circumstances; and 3) distance between the action and the ethical consequence.

- **Behavior 1: Euphemisms**
  - Checking the box or block
  - Pencil whip
  - Fudge
  - Beat the system
  - Get creative
  - Massage (the data)
  - Assumed risk

- **Behavior 2: Organizational Requirements Versus Honor**
  The authors point toward a growing list of demands (e.g., directives, data calls, training requirements) paired with the requirement to certify 100 percent compliance as a risk for ethical fading. Signing what you know is a false report again and again makes your signature worthless. It no longer stands for honor and integrity but rather as a means to navigate the bureaucracy.

- **Behavior 3: Distance Between Act and Consequences**
  The further removed the action is from the interpersonal or operational consequences attached to that action, the easier it is to rationalize the action. A face-to-face report to a superior demands more honesty than an electronic signature on a checklist. Consequences are also not evident when reports go to a bureaucratic office with no personal relationships at stake. Finally, if the reporting officer doesn’t know how the data are used or what the consequences would be if that data are wrong, he doesn’t recognize the operational consequences of his actions.
2. Reflect on the potential for ethical fading in VA and at your facility.
   a. What processes or aspects of VA culture do you observe that might contribute to ethical fading in your environment?
   b. Give examples of behavior or practices in VA, your facility or your unit that could result in ethical fading.

Notes to Discussion Leader:
Participants will likely think of many examples that contribute to ethical fading. If none are forthcoming, you can prompt a discussion with an example of a performance measure requirement, such as wait times.
Participants may need help thinking about how culture contributes to ethical fading. If so, prompt them with a question about whether staff always feel comfortable discussing VA requirements and giving feedback about whether the requirement is realistic.

3. The article suggests that leading truthfully, at all levels of an organization, brings integrity back into decision making and reverses the impact of ethical fading (Page 32).
   a. What conditions within an organization support leading truthfully?
   b. Does your supervisor or manager have opportunities to lead truthfully? Describe what those opportunities are and what leading truthfully would look like in those circumstances.
   c. Describe two actions that you can take to lead truthfully in your position. Describe each action and how it could reduce ethical fading.

Notes to Discussion Leader:
The organizational conditions that support the practice of leading truthfully include a psychologically safe environment or one in which staff feel comfortable questioning and discussing performance and training requirements. Open lines of communication between individuals who know one another (as opposed to reporting to a faceless bureaucracy) also promote leading truthfully.
Discussion leaders should be armed with their own personal examples of leading truthfully to help prompt discussion.
Front line employees can be prompted to think about personal responsibility as a means to lead truthfully. This could include taking responsibility for the accurate use and recording of time and leave, limiting personal use of government equipment, or being honest in interactions with other staff and with Veterans.
Supplemental Questions

4. The authors claim that excessive requirements, such as training, reporting or policy imperatives, lead to ethical fading because leaders are unable to meet all of the requirements and must pencil whip or game the numbers to comply. Another contributing factor identified in the article is the Army practice of certifying 100 percent compliance with training and policy requirements. This practice asks leaders to put their integrity on the line when they know that they have not fully met the requirement but are not permitted to report otherwise.
   a. If faced with such circumstances, what could a VA leader do to remain true to I CARE values?

5. The article theorizes that a first step to correcting the Army culture is for leaders at all levels to recognize and acknowledge their own contributing behavior.
   a. Do you think the current environment allows leaders at all levels in VA to acknowledge and discuss when their unit falls short of established goals and metrics? Why or why not?
   b. What would need to change to allow such open and honest discussions?
   c. If you were the facility director, network director, a VA Central Office executive or the Under Secretary for Health, what initial steps would you take to build an environment and culture that supports open and honest discussions?
**Conclude the session (5 min.)**
When there are only five minutes left, inform participants that time is almost up. If anyone objects that they haven’t had a chance to express an idea or concern about the practice of ethics in the organization, ask the group if they agree to let that person speak for a minute or two. (People will usually agree, if the facilitator has shown an ability to keep to the allotted time so far.)

**Second Half of Radius Model**
Remind participants (and yourself): the second half of the RADIUS model focuses on action.
Pledge your support for staff action in these areas:
- **Inquire** into IE program resources for help in resolving ethical issues.
- **Use** what you have learned.
- **Sustain** collaboration with others in ethical practice in your facility or VISN.

**Follow-up on Questions, Comments, Suggestions**
If participants have made suggestions about improving ethical practice at the facility, ask the IE program staff in the room to read out the suggestions (from their notes).

**Close**
Thank participants for a good discussion (and good suggestions, if any). Ask who would like to attend another journal activity, and how the meeting structure might be improved, if at all.