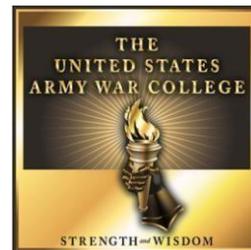


## Shame on Us: How Shame Contributes to Senior Leader Misconduct

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## Abstract

The toxic emotion of shame plays a sinister role in senior leader misconduct. It is a strategic issue for the Army as trusted leadership is a vital aspect of military readiness and civilian-military relationships. Unlike other negative emotions, shame is a core belief that one is alone, worthless, and fundamentally flawed. Military leaders are influenced by contemporary culture, which has transformed from a guilt-culture to a shame-culture. Military culture and the demands on senior leaders enable shame in various ways, however, leaders must recognize shame's impact in their lives, effectively address it, and shape their organization's culture to mitigate shame's effects. Leaders should practice shame resiliency in their lives and organizations by developing greater self-awareness, vulnerability, empathy, and engaging in resources that mitigate shame. The Army can mitigate the toxic effects of shame through clearer policy, training, and leveraging capabilities such as the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps. As a result, the Army's senior leaders will avoid the corrosive effects of shame, embrace the call to character, and retain the vital trust of their subordinates and a grateful nation.

## **Shame on Us: How Shame Contributes to Senior Leader Misconduct**

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies in us.

—Henry Stanley Haskins<sup>1</sup>

The United States (U.S.) Army is dealing with a challenging and strategic problem: senior leader misconduct. There is an unacceptable number of military leaders from Colonel to General who are being investigated and substantiated for misconduct, essentially failing to maintain the standards expected of leaders. The *2015 National Security Strategy* is clear and establishes the standard that the military will consist of the best talent “committed to an ethical and expert profession of arms.”<sup>2</sup> However, the Army is struggling to achieve this vision for its senior leaders. The U.S. Army Inspector General’s (IG’s) Fiscal Year (FY) 16 annual report disclosed that 2,201 reported allegations of misconduct made against senior officials from FY14 to FY16.<sup>3</sup> While substantiated allegations have slightly decreased in the past year, the national media regularly reports on the steady stream of high profile misconduct allegations among the Army’s senior leaders. Lieutenant general Gary Cheek, director of the Army Staff, citing deployments and work stress as possible factors, admitted that the cause of misconduct is unclear. He said, “If anything, as we look inward, are we missing things as we take care of our senior leaders, in terms of their mental well-being, their physical well-being.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, despite the values training, ongoing military education system, and high standards for leaders, we seem to be missing a vital piece that is negatively affecting our military’s most important asset: inspired and trusted leadership.

A recent and unfortunate incident occurred in July 2016 when Major General (MG) John Rossi committed suicide in his home at Redstone Arsenal two days before his change of command. The former commander of the Fires Center of Excellence at

Fort Sill, Oklahoma and a respected leader, MG Rossi was selected for promotion as the future commander of the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command in August 2016. The 15-6 investigation confirmed that he was not under investigation for misconduct or wrongdoing, nor was he influenced by the usual antecedents of suicide: failed relationships, financial difficulties, and misconduct. The investigation did, however, bring to light a hidden reality. Despite his success and abilities, MG Rossi suffered from a distorted sense of low self-worth, did not believe he deserved the honors he had received, believed he would be exposed as a fraud, and used his relentless work ethic to cover up what he perceived as intellectual shortcomings.<sup>5</sup> So unusual was this incident that the former Secretary of the Army, Eric Fanning, ordered an Army-wide investigation of mental health issues in the general officer corps.

Major General Rossi's suicide is an extreme manifestation of a common problem among military leaders. The issue is the toxic emotion of shame, which is enabled and even virtually ignored by a military culture that fails to seriously consider the effect of negative emotions. Shame, different than other negative emotions, is a core belief of the utter worthlessness of oneself. Research indicates that a shame-based self-perception negatively influences cognitive processes, leadership, moral and ethical behavior, willingness to receive support and feedback, and other important aspects vital to leadership. This paper argues that if Army senior leaders recognize and mitigate the negative effects of shame in their own lives, they will be less prone to misconduct and lead in ways that improve readiness and teamwork in their organizations. To understand the problem, it is important to consider the strategic importance of this issue, presence of shame in the current military culture and senior leadership, define key terms such as

shame, guilt, embarrassment and humiliation, discuss strategies of shame resilience, and offer important recommendations.

### A Strategic Issue

Leader misconduct in the military is a strategic issue for the Army. When our senior leaders fail to live and model the values of the organization, they violate trust and undermine readiness. General Mark Milley, the 39<sup>th</sup> Chief of Staff of the Army, said in his initial message to the Force that readiness for combat is the Army's number one priority and stressed the importance of leadership in readiness. He wrote, "Our most valued assets, indeed, the Nation's most valued assets, are our Soldiers and our solemn commitment must always be to never send them into harm's way untrained, poorly led, undermanned, or with less than the best equipment we can provide. Readiness is number one, and there is no other number one."<sup>6</sup> As the Army seeks to prepare and posture itself for its future missions, the role of trust and character remain at the center of readiness.

Leaders of character build trust within the organization and the U.S. Army recognizes the importance of trust to build teams. The first of six principles of Mission Command listed in ADP 6-0 is, "Build cohesive teams through mutual trust."<sup>7</sup> Failing character also erodes trust between the civilian-military relationships that are critical in a democracy, especially for military leaders in their role to provide expertise and best military advice. Poor character erodes professionalism and expectations of military senior leaders to be a trusted source of wisdom to the executive and legislative branches.

## Why Leaders Fail

Given the emphasis on the necessity of ethical leadership, what is the cause of the continuing misconduct trends among the Army's leaders? This question has plagued an organization that inculcates values in its leaders from pre-commissioning throughout the entirety of a leader's career. Many helpful studies shed light to better understand and answer the question, "Why leaders fail." For instance, Ludwig and Longnecker's work in "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders," cites success as an antecedent to ethical failure. Privileged access, control of resources, inflated belief in personal ability, and loss of strategic focus contribute to the problem of leader's violating trust and ethical standards.<sup>8</sup> Another compelling explanation studied at the U.S. Army War College is "ethical fading" by Bazerman and Tenbrusel. The authors argue that moral failures occur in leaders "who know better" because they rationalize their unethical decisions when they fail to meet pre-decisional ethical standards of conduct.<sup>9</sup> When rationalization is repeated, leaders experience ethical numbness and desensitization (ethical fading) as exposure to unethical temptation continues.<sup>10</sup>

Other research examines the complex dynamics at play in leader behavior. Researcher, Dr. Diane Chandler, concluded that a "toxic triangle" of shaping factors act as catalysts that often culminate in a decisive point tempting unethical behavior. The three factors creating vulnerability are leader dimensions, follower dimensions and situational context dimensions.<sup>11</sup> These factors work together like "the vortex of a tornado that sucks everything into its center, various factors converge over time to produce a catalyst, provoking unethical leadership behavior."<sup>12</sup> Other research identifies the role of emotions. Researchers found that negative emotions are linked more

strongly to specific actions and are more intensely felt than positive emotions.<sup>13</sup> This implies that unexplored and unresolved negative emotions often drive behavior even though a leader may “know better.”

These discussions provide a theoretical understanding on the factors that contribute to leader failure. In the last ten years, however, there has been significant research on shame’s effect on individuals and organizations. Research indicates that the emotion of shame almost always results in negative behaviors, which lead smart, intelligent, experienced highly-talented leaders to compromise. Shame also explains why leaders do not engage support resources when they perceive their integrity is being threatened or after they have violated their values. It carries a sinister message of failure, inadequacy, and psychological isolation, which often undermines the confidence and decision-making abilities required of senior leaders. While there are many factors and dynamics at play, shame research indicates that leaders who recognize the effect of shame in their own lives and engage in shame resiliency will mitigate its effects in their behavior, leadership, and organizations.

#### Rising Prevalence and Effects of Shame

Researchers observe that good character alone does not necessarily yield morally appropriate decisions, as humans are inefficient at finding the “right thing to do at the right time.”<sup>14</sup> There is a rising prevalence of shame in our culture which has negative effects on behavior, to include moral and ethical conduct. Until recently, shame virtually disappeared from researchers’ perspective for the past 200 years. While an understood emotion in ancient Greek warrior society, shame was, until recently, overlooked by modern psychologists as they understood guilt as the most crippling, toxic emotion.<sup>15</sup> Shame was once considered a stepping-stone in the socialization of

children and primitive precursor to guilt, but researchers are now insisting on the prevalence and effects of shame in our American culture.<sup>16</sup>

Writing for the New York Times, David Brooks explained about an emerging shame culture in the U.S. He argued the moral relativism of the 1980s has given way to a culture of judgment created by a transformed moral system. A characteristic of our shame culture is that one's acceptance is based on how the community views a person or group. Social exclusion in this shame culture implies they are inherently bad, not simply that they have done bad things.<sup>17</sup> This moral system is moderated by the omnipresence of social media and 24/7 "expert" news commentators, which is a world of constant display and observation. Moral life is no longer based on right and wrong, but on inclusion and exclusion.<sup>18</sup> One feels affirmed and good not by living according to a system of values, but by the approval (confirmed by the number of "likes") of their online or media community. This cultural shift is not only affecting American culture, but the military as well, which draws from society as a requirement to sustain an all-volunteer Army.

The topic of shame gained recent notoriety through the non-profit organization TED. TED stands for "technology, entertainment and design" and features compelling speakers giving short 15-20 minute talks, dubbed "TED Talks." Currently, the fourth highest viewed TED talk of over 2,300 episodes was presented in 2010 by shame researcher, Brené Brown.<sup>19</sup> She presented compelling research regarding the ubiquitous presence of shame and the power of vulnerability as its antidote.<sup>20</sup> In light of the emerging data, many agree that our culture has moved from guilt-based to shame-based. This phenomenon radically alters how individuals, to include leaders, see

themselves and behave when experiencing shame in their own lives. Another issue is the rising mental health concerns that have plagued the Army in the last two decades.

In addition to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, moral injury in the military is an unfortunate result of combat action, which practitioners believe is closely related to the emotions of shame. Service members and veterans who faced unanticipated choices and demands at odds with their moral, ethical, religious beliefs are suffering long-term psychological consequences stemming from that trauma defined as moral injury.<sup>21</sup> Maladaptive shame, along with guilt, is an empirically documented and common consequence of moral injury.<sup>22</sup> Due shame's role in our emerging culture and combat-related health issues, it is important to define what shame actually is.

### Defining Shame

Researchers describe shame as a dejection-based emotion of condemning one's entire self.<sup>23</sup> Ashamed people feel as they are bad people, devalue themselves, and therefore feel contempt from others, whether it exists or not.<sup>24</sup> Because of the threat to self and fear of scorn by others, ashamed people feel like the target of criticism and often respond with self-oriented behaviors, such as avoiding others and emotional isolation.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, ashamed people perceive that problem is centered on them, while guilty people perceive it to be focused on their behavior.<sup>26</sup> To avoid their self-imposed feelings of condemnation, ashamed people are more likely to isolate themselves, blame others, direct anger outwardly, are less likely to undertake measures to change their wrongdoing and to cooperate.<sup>27</sup>

At its core, shame stems from the fear of disconnection with others. As humans, we are "psychologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually hard-wired for connection and belonging."<sup>28</sup> Shame, however, makes toxic pronouncements over

individuals so that they believe, “I am flawed, I don’t belong, and I am alone.” Science indicates that shame is an emotion so painful that it stimulates the fight-or-flight response in our brains as the pre-frontal cortex is hijacked by the limbic system.<sup>29</sup> In an organization like the Army that is dependent on teamwork and relationships, the emotion of shame can be devastating. Ashamed individuals develop elaborate thinking and behavioral patterns to avoid the specter of experiencing additional shame. Overwhelmed by this emotional threat, they are driven by shame avoidance rather than their values, faith tenets, and higher ideals of service. Additionally, Brown writes that while everybody experiences shame at various levels, it is rarely talked about because of the intense feelings it evokes.<sup>30</sup> Her research indicates that individuals (especially men) avoid revealing shame, however, the ironic nature of shame is that the less they talk about it, the more control it has over them.<sup>31</sup> She writes, “Shame derives its power from being unspeakable. That’s why it loves perfectionists—it’s so easy to keep us quiet.”<sup>32</sup> In light of this understanding, it is critical to recognize and identify shame from other common emotions.

#### Shame, Guilt, Humiliation, and Embarrassment

Shame is a unique emotion that is often confused with similar emotions such as guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment. While the terms are often used interchangeably, it is crucial to be able to identify these emotions in oneself and an organization. The differences are best identified by the internal “self-talk” within the individual experiencing the emotion. As mentioned, the ashamed person internalizes their failure as self-condemnation. They are most likely to protect themselves by blaming, rationalizing their lapse, offering disingenuous apologies, or avoiding others (hiding).<sup>33</sup> A shame-prone individual’s self-talk is, “I am bad, something is wrong with me.” Guilt, while also a

powerful emotion, is different than shame in that its influence can be positive, not destructive. Guilt often motivates meaningful change in behavior when one considers what they have done and compares it to their values. When actions do not match values, guilt creates psychological discomfort and often motivates meaningful change.<sup>34</sup> A guilty person's self-talk is, "I have done something bad." Guilt is focused on the wrong act, not the person's identity, and from remorse can lead to reflection and genuine desire for values-based behavior.

To evoke shame rather than guilt, two self-attributions are important. First, one's internal attribution is judged to be fixed and unchangeable. Ashamed individuals view themselves as incapable of change and lacking essential abilities to perform adequately. Second, the eliciting of shame involves attributions to the entire person, rather than just one aspect of self.<sup>35</sup> In other words, shame involves a general condemnation of one's entire being, not a particular aspect that can be improved or developed. Shame is a destructive emotion that is the experience of the "utter worthlessness of self," while guilt is limited to a negative feeling about a particular act.<sup>36</sup>

Like guilt and shame, humiliation is also a negative emotion. However, humiliated people don't believe they deserve their humiliation, whereas shame-prone individuals believe they do. A humiliated person's self-talk is, "My mistake was wrong but I believe am better than this." They do not internalize the incident as one who is shamed. It is important to note that regular use of humiliation makes for a toxic environment, and over time can lead to shaming behaviors. Finally, embarrassment is considered the least serious of these four emotions. Embarrassment is normally fleeting and is often eventually funny. The hallmark of embarrassment is that one does not feel alone after

an embarrassing event.<sup>37</sup> An embarrassed person's self-talk is, "I wish I didn't do that, but others have done the same and I'll laugh about this later." Understanding the differences between shame, guilt, humiliation and embarrassment is important for leaders. Leaders' self-talk will often indicate the distinct emotion they are experiencing and may serve as an indicator as to how they may respond before, during or after a moral failure.

### Military Leadership At-Risk

Army senior leaders are an at-risk population for internalizing shame due to unique factors. One is the masculine group norms that are characteristic of military culture. These norms typically manifest in behaviors such as emotional control, risk taking, winning, dominance, self-reliance, and violence.<sup>38</sup> They are propagated by the demanding nature of military training, a like-minded population, the cultural resistance to change, and the ever-present expectation of mission accomplishment. Research indicates that shame for men is primarily experienced through failure, being incorrect, sense of being defective, revealing weakness, showing fear, and being criticized or ridiculed.<sup>39</sup> As a result, military cultural norms may enable shame-proneness, especially with men, and influence leaders to behave in counter-productive ways.

As leaders gain rank and responsibility, they tend to become more isolated from meaningful friendships and relationships. The demands of increasing responsibility, the burdens of command, the competition for promotions and limited assignments, and the self-imposed pressure to succeed contribute to psychological isolation. Another risk factor is self-protection. The Department of Defense IG identified that military leaders in the ranks of sergeant major, colonel and higher will experience a significantly increased likelihood of misconduct allegations brought against them, called the "Danger Zone." On

average, sergeants major, colonels, senior executive service civilians, and general officers have a 2.5, 4.3, 33.8, and 52.4 percent chance of being the subject of an allegation, respectively.<sup>40</sup> These dynamics place enormous pressure on leaders to isolate and protect themselves as they continue to serve.

Leaders also fall prey to using shame tactics to keep people in line. While this may be acceptable in military culture, shame as a leadership technique is highly correlated to greater probabilities of addiction, violence, aggression, depression, eating disorders and bullying among the led.<sup>41</sup> In organizations, shame erodes risk taking and it fuels disengagement. It also breeds fear, it kills engagement, innovation, creativity, productivity, and trust.<sup>42</sup> *The U.S. Army Operating Concept 2020-2040* stresses the importance of innovation in the face of current and future challenges. “Innovation drives the development of new tools or methods that permit Army forces to anticipate future demands, stay ahead of determined enemies, and accomplish the mission.”<sup>43</sup> Because leaders are at-risk in various ways, it is important to consider how the Army attempts to address threats of negative emotional patterns.

#### U.S. Army’s Attempts to Develop Emotional Resiliency

The Army’s performance enhancement course, Master Resiliency Training (MRT), is the primary means to build resilience and performance in the Force. The MRT is a vital component of Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2), which is mandated training for all Soldiers.<sup>44</sup> Master Resiliency Training is based on the understanding that one’s beliefs about events drive one’s emotions and behaviors. It teaches the core competencies of self-awareness, self-regulation, optimism, mental agility, character strengths, and connection.<sup>45</sup> These are very helpful and important skills in overcoming adversity, however, the toxic, powerful emotions of shame will “short

circuit” the application of these competencies if not identified. While it is beneficial to “think about one’s thinking,” MRT offers no discussion of shame or its damaging emotional patterns. The MRT is also based on positive psychology and fails to address the core negative emotions, which research indicates ultimately drive thinking and behavior.<sup>46</sup> The MRT is not the only Army strategy to address emotional resiliency.

*The Army Human Dimension Strategy* details the Army’s ends, ways, and means to develop cohesive teams of trusted professionals that thrive in the ambiguity and chaos in the future operating environment.<sup>47</sup> Line of Effort (LOE) 1 is “Cognitive Dominance,” which includes the supporting objectives: Intellectual Optimization; Social Intelligence; Holistic Health and Fitness; Decision making; and Human Performance Research and Assessment.<sup>48</sup> The Mission Command Center of Excellence (MCCOE) is the lead integrator of this LOE.<sup>49</sup> While the LOE’s strategic objective is to optimize human performance in the Total Force, the strategy gives a mere single mention to the study or treatment of negative emotions, such as shame.<sup>50</sup> The Army does not appear to grasp the significance of the role of emotions in leaders’ lives.

To win our nation’s wars, the military trains its warriors to use aggression and violence, to subordinate emotional reactions in the face of life-threatening challenges, tolerate pain of all kinds, and overcome fear of injury and even death. In the same way, we expect our senior leaders to succeed in every mission for the sake of our nation and its interests. The military must continue to maintain the highest standards of mental toughness. However, unless addressed, our culture, norms, and training may unintentionally perpetuate dysfunction in our organizations. In other words, the Army perpetuates a culture of shame due to existing paradigms assumed necessary for

leaders and mission accomplishment. Is it possible to build and maintain warriors and tough-minded leaders of character without enabling a culture of shame? It can be done when we can identify the effects of shame and incorporate shame resiliency.

### Characteristics of Shame Resilient Leaders

To overcome shame, a cognitive solution alone is not enough (such as MRT). Becoming resilient against the toxic emotion of shame requires important characteristics and relational skills that are typically not found in military cultural norms. Leaders should adopt the relational characteristics of empathy and vulnerability to counter shame in oneself and their organizations. It begins by understanding the antidote to shame, which is empathy.

#### Empathy

Empathy is the willingness and effort to understand another's perspective and put oneself in their situation. It is a ladder out of the hole of shame and conveys a simple acknowledgement that "you are not alone."<sup>51</sup> When empathy is present, shame patterns have a chance of being exposed and brought into the light. The emotion of shame can be rooted out and minimized through an empathetic leader. While empathy is not typically associated with masculine norms common in the military, service members feel admiration for leaders who display appropriate empathy. Empathetic leaders who take the time to understand their subordinates' unique stories, probe with vital questions, and apply that understanding, will develop them and build cohesive teams.

Recently, there have been calls for increased empathy in senior leaders. For example, Hooker and Collins write in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, that strategic communications during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars failed due to

two systemic disabilities: too much bureaucracy and too little empathy.<sup>52</sup> Military leaders were so enamored with their own perspective of the war that they failed to understand and communicate it from the civilian leadership's perspective. In a recent study on senior officer talent management, Colarusso and Lyle spent several years analyzing the Army's processes and policies for managing people. They identified three critical challenges facing the Army that necessitates organizational change.<sup>53</sup> One of them was that Soldiers and leaders must become more "adaptive, inventive, and empathetic" due to the fundamental shifts in the Army's nature of work.<sup>54</sup> Empathy not only creates an environment to empower talented leaders to solve the nation's future challenges, but mitigates the effects of shame personally and organizationally. Another key perspective and relational skill is vulnerability.

### Vulnerability

Researchers have identified vulnerability as the prominent characteristic in those most resilient to the negative effects of shame. Brown states that "vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences."<sup>55</sup> The word *vulnerability* is derived from the Latin word *vulnerare*, "to wound."<sup>56</sup> Given our military ethos, it is no surprise that Army leaders would resist vulnerability in their lives. In speaking with veterans, however, there is a near universal theme of closeness and emotional connection with those whom with they fought alongside in combat. This emotional bondedness is a result of vulnerability and trust between Soldiers, which occurs when experiencing risk, fear, uncertainty, and hardship together. Vulnerability bonds teams together and creates a sense of emotional connection between people. Despite the Army's cultural aversion to consider emotional issues, it is possible to build vulnerability in organizations through new skills in shame resilient leaders.

## The Leader's Role in Shame Resilience

Leadership in the military is critical to changing the shame-based culture of the Army. *Army Leadership* (ADP 6-22) is the Army's primer for leadership and explains the expectations (critical capabilities) of leaders. It states that leadership is the lifeblood of the organization and is the everyday "difference-maker" in the U.S. Army.<sup>57</sup> Speaker and author John Maxwell emphatically stated, "Everything rises and falls on leadership."<sup>58</sup> Leaders are crucial change agents preventing toxic cultures that may exist in their formations and must understand the elements or principles of shame resilience.

### Three Elements of Shame Resilience

There are three elements to incorporate a holistic strategy of shame resilience in leaders' lives and organizations. They can be summarized as look in, look out, and reach out. "Look in" includes recognizing shame and understanding its triggers. Leaders should ask themselves if they can recognize the presence and effects of shame, navigate through them, and determine what messages or expectations triggered it. "Look out" includes practicing critical awareness of the presence of shame in their organizations. Leaders should "reality-check" the messages and expectations that are driving shame, determine their effect on desired organizational outcomes, and take action to mitigate shame's effects. "Reach out" includes leaders displaying vulnerability and accessing resources that will provide support and empathy to counter the effects of shame. Individuals should be able to access resources without stigma when they realized they are experiencing shame personally or organizationally.<sup>59</sup>

#### "Look In" - Recognizing Shame and Its Triggers

Leaders must first acknowledge the shame problem in their own lives first then they can hope to change their organizations. They need to ask themselves to what

degree shame drives their leadership, relationships, emotions, and decision-making. This can be a challenging task, especially for senior leaders who have been “raised” in the military culture that doesn’t consider the impact of emotions. It is telling that 2,500 years ago, Greek Historian Thucydides cited fear, honor, and interest as the reasons nations fight wars. Fear is a core human emotion driving behavior, yet emotions are rarely, if ever, addressed as concerns in leader misconduct. However, a leader can become motivated to make necessary changes when he or she understands the role of toxic emotions, such as shame.

For example, an Army senior leader realized the impact shame was having upon his life and leadership. In order to avoid the shaming message he believed as a child, “I am deeply flawed,” he unconsciously adopted a coping technique of pleasing others to earn their approval. The methods of discipline at his pre-commissioning institution reinforced the message in his mind that he was flawed. He quickly learned that through outstanding performance, pleasing superiors, and physical aptitude, he could avoid shame messages he believed. He experienced emotional and psychological significance through the approval of others and it impacted several areas of his life. In relationships, he realized he based interactions upon gaining approval and avoiding conflict in order to avoid the messages of shame. In leadership, he sought approval from subordinates, which limited his willingness to give honest feedback, make hard decisions, and model vulnerability. In marriage and family life, this leader treated his family as though they existed only to help him feel approved. Because he sought the approval of others to avoid shame, he felt he could not say “no” to others. His family suffered because he prioritized others over his family and neglected those he loved the

most. In failure, this leader could not acknowledge his faults publically and developed elaborate, yet deniable, habits of lying, blaming, and covering up. Because of “ethical fading,” his behavior changed over time to meet this need. Unaddressed shame silently altered his core beliefs, which did not reflect the Army values or his espoused faith tradition.<sup>60</sup> Practicing shame resilience starts with recognizing shame and practicing critical awareness.

#### “Look Out” - Practicing Shame Awareness in Organizations

A leader who is aware of the category of shame can better identify it in his or her organization. For instance, if subordinates seem “checked out,” guarded, or are not contributing, it is possible there is a culture dominated by shame. The organization may not possess the psychological safety to empower leaders to speak openly and contribute their insights. A leader should proactively message to his or her subordinates their value to the team through words and action. Modeling shame resilient behavior is vital to creating psychological safety, as subordinates will feel empowered to contribute, engage, and offer their expertise.

#### “Reach Out” – Demonstrating Vulnerability and Engaging Resources

This element includes leaders displaying vulnerability and accessing resources that will provide support and empathy to counter the effects of shame. For example, a Division Commander spoke with his entire command and staff about his personal experience of dashed expectations when he was not promoted “below the zone” at a critical point in his career. He openly shared with the leaders about his frustrations and personal sense of failure. After receiving a needed “verbal counseling” from his spouse and personal reflection, he came to terms with the situation and determined to serve wholeheartedly. The effect of his vulnerability and empathy was palpable in the

Division's leaders. In a short amount of time, this leader created a climate of trust and contribution instead of disengagement and unhealthy competition.<sup>61</sup>

Performance counseling is an important leadership activity, which affords an occasion to practice shame resilience. Research indicates that vulnerability is at the heart of the feedback process and counseling is much more effective when a leader models appropriate vulnerability and empathy.<sup>62</sup> Specifically, it was found in senior executives that feedback processes (performance counseling) and life events can alter one's core self-evaluation, or self-concept, throughout life.<sup>63</sup> Receiving and providing counseling can empower leaders to actively assess and shape shame resiliency within their formations. Promoting and expecting teamwork is another method of shame resilience in organizations. Research indicates that shame-prone individuals are less likely to isolate and will engage in reparative behavior toward others they view as team members.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, religious faith and practice is a critical resource to address the roots of shame. Religion involves beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the transcendent that may be held or practiced in private or public settings. These practices are in some way derived from established traditions that developed over time within a community.<sup>65</sup> Many of the world's faith traditions teach in various ways the great value and worth of each person. Christianity, for example, teaches the principle of grace, or unmerited favor bestowed to people regardless of one's performance, as a foundational tenet. As a matter of fact, in the Holy Bible the emotion of shame plays a prominent role. From Genesis to Revelation, the essential message is that those who place their faith in God are recipients of a new identity. The new identity includes forgiveness of sins (past,

present, and future), acceptance by God, promises of blessing not punishment, and divine help in all of life's challenges. The practice of forgiving others is an important religious tenet. As a matter of fact, forgiveness of others and oneself (self-forgiveness) is a key component to address the shame associated with moral injury.<sup>66</sup> Regular practice of these and other religious tenets provides reminders of these divine promises during times of trials and doubt and is a source of great strength. In addition, research indicates additional benefits of religious faith that affect readiness.<sup>67</sup> They include numerous positive psychological, social, behavior and physical health benefits.<sup>68</sup>

Leaders possess the capabilities to provide religious support and resources through their Unit Ministry Teams (UMTs). The Army Chaplain Corps exists to ensure the free exercise of religion for all Soldiers, Families, and authorized Department of the Army Civilians. As religious professionals, chaplains lead religious services and provide active "ministry of presence" which brings restorative messages of hope and healing to their formations. *Moral Leadership* (DA PAM 165-16) requires UMTs to assess moral leadership and provide advice to commanders on morals, morale, impact of religion, and factors affecting the human dimensions of an organization.<sup>69</sup> Chaplains are trained counselors who understand the impact of negative emotions and can assist leaders to positively address shame issues in their lives and command culture.

### Recommendations

Given the destructive effects of shame, the following recommendations are provided to address its effects in the Army. First, senior leaders must consider including shame resiliency in their lives. They should seek to be transparent with a trusted friend, family member, or trusted professional about the effects of shame in their lives and leadership. Second, investigations as a result of leader misconduct, such as the one

ordered as a result of MG Rossi's suicide, should consider the effect of shame, negative emotions that may be perpetuated in Army senior leaders. Investigators must look beneath presenting issues (sleep deprivation, substance abuse, etc.) and identify root issues prevalent in the fabric of the organization's culture. Third, commanders should consider developing strategic campaigns with messaging that supports teamwork, shame resiliency, and vulnerability. For instance, in 2014, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault) developed a "Value of Life" messaging effort as part of the installation's Ready and Resilient Campaign. Command Teams, UMTs, suicide prevention trainers, MRT trainers, Behavioral Health Teams, Equal Opportunity and Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention Representatives specifically and creatively communicated a message of "You Matter and Have Great Value" as they led training and interacted with Soldiers and Families. Fourth, leaders should consider how they could model appropriate vulnerability and empathy. Especially effective are "testimonies" from Soldiers who appropriately share their stories of personal trials and help. Leaders profoundly communicate the message of value when they model vulnerability.

Fifth, Training and Doctrine Command should commission a study of effects of shame and recommend Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities and Policy solutions to reinforce changes across the Army enterprise. Training and Doctrine Command should incorporate these recommendations with updated MRT training. Because MRT is an established program of CSF2, it is a "quick win" to educate the Force about shame. The MCCOE, which has responsibility as lead integrator of the Cognitive Dominance LOE, should broaden its

understanding of organizational shame and strategies of shame resiliency for senior leaders. Sixth, the pre-command course at Fort Leavenworth should include discussions on shame during command climate and/or resiliency training. Future commanders and their spouses should consider the effect of shame in their own lives, its potential to affect their formations, and consider strategies to mitigate shame.

Additionally, commanders should fully utilize their UMTs, Behavioral Health Teams, Medical personnel, and Military Family Life Consultants as “sensors” to determine how toxic emotions, such as shame, are present and receive advice to mitigate their impact. Commanders should expect UMTs to provide assessments on the moral culture of their organization and provide sound advisement at all levels. Because religious practice provides divine hope and help, leaders must recognize the benefits of religious practice and leverage capabilities to provide these vital services. Finally, the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School should develop training to more fully understand the effects of shame and examine relevant religious support capabilities to help chaplains in their roles as advisors and religious leaders.

### Conclusion

The toxic emotion of shame plays a sinister role in senior leader misconduct. It is a strategic issue for the Army as trusted leadership is a vital aspect of military readiness and civilian-military relationships. Unlike other negative emotions, shame is a core belief that one is alone, worthless, and fundamentally flawed. Military leaders are influenced by contemporary culture, which has transformed from a guilt-culture to a shame-culture. Military culture and the demands on senior leaders enable shame in many ways, however, leaders must recognize shame’s impact in their lives, effectively address it, and shape their organization’s culture to mitigate shame’s effects. Leaders should

practice shame resiliency in their lives and organizations through greater self-awareness, vulnerability, and engaging in resources that mitigate shame. The Army can mitigate the toxic effects of shame through clearer policy, training, and leveraging capabilities such as the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps. As a result, the Army's senior leaders will avoid the corrosive effects of shame, embrace the call to character, and retain the vital trust of their subordinates and a grateful nation.

### Endnotes

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