



Although Army regulations provide strict guidelines for prohibiting alcohol glamorization, organizations continue to foster a professional expectation to attend events that gravitate towards its consumption. (Photo by U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center)

Alcohol and the Army

A Toxic Relationship

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Sergeants Major Academy

The earliest signs of human alcohol consumption extend back 100,000 years to Paleolithic humans fermenting fruit (Hirst, 2019). Alcohol consumption is deeply rooted in human society, arguably, more so in the military. People drink for many reasons. According to a wide number of studies, consuming alcoholic drinks, such as wine, in moderation is considered beneficial to your health. Alcohol is an element that can bring people together, serving as a social lubricant. A gathering of Soldiers from diverse backgrounds can be awkward until they have a few drinks.

One of the most common reasons Soldiers drink is stress relief. A high training and operations tem-

po along with more than two decades of continuous warfare created a stressful working environment for many Soldiers. That increased stress foments alcohol consumption. Consequently, alcohol glamorization and overconsumption among Soldiers may lead to adverse effects on unit readiness and discipline through alcoholism, increased health, and legal issues. Leaders can curb that glamorization by fostering an ethical command climate.

From binge-drinking in the barracks to social drinking among senior leaders at professional events, the staggering number of alcohol-related incidents continues to destroy discipline across the ranks. "On 28 September

1971, public law (PL) 92-129 mandated that the Secretary of Defense develop programs for the identification, treatment, and rehabilitation of alcohol or other drug dependent persons in the Armed Forces" (Department of the Army, 2020, p. 1). With regulations to address and correct alcohol abuse in the Army, units still plan social events that encourage drinking among Soldiers. This creates an ethical issue with a double standard. Soldiers are told not to abuse alcohol, but many social events within organizations commonly include it in their events.

The Issue with Alcohol

Alcohol is a drug and an intoxicant, classified as a depressant. It degrades cognitive skills, motor skills, and reaction time. Initial consumption produces a stimulant effect, reducing anxiety and giving the drinker a boost of confidence. The gain of confidence acts as an icebreaker. Alcohol relaxes people, lowering their inhibitions and enabling them to act in ways they would not normally act. It creates a temporary sense of euphoria and allows drinkers to forget the stressors of work or family life.

However, alcohol's effects can vary and drinking too much has many consequences. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), its effects can appear rapidly. "As you drink, you increase your blood concentration (BAC), which is the amount of alcohol present in your bloodstream. The higher your BAC, the more impaired you become by alcohol's effects," (NIAAA, n.d.).

Once drinkers consume enough to become intoxicated, alcohol may cause depression. This depression intensifies any emotional reaction to an event. Intoxication is also the point where cognitive and motor skills begin to decline, leading to poor decision-making, loss of balance, increased physical reaction times, and the inability to operate vehicles, tools, and machinery safely. In addition, the more alcohol Soldiers consume, the higher their tolerance rises. Continued use of alcohol over a long period of time can lead to addiction, known as alcoholism.

Alcoholism is a damaging pattern of alcohol use that includes tolerance to or withdrawal from the substance, increased use of alcohol or using it for longer periods of time, and trouble decreasing its use or failure to use it in moderation (Dryden-Edwards, 2022).

In the Army, the perception of no-fail missions, high standards, long work hours, and general stress related to combat operations puts the force at increased risk for alcohol abuse. A report in 2006 concluded that alcohol abuse in the military created a loss of 320,000 workdays, 34,400 arrests, and a \$1.12 billion cost the military (Schumm & Chard, 2012).

In addition, Army Regulation 600-85, The Army Substance Abuse Program, states "abuse of alcohol, use of illegal drugs and misuse of prescription drugs is inconsistent with Army values, and the standards of performance, discipline, and readiness necessary to accomplish the Army's mission," (Department of the Army, 2020, p.2).

The regulation also directs commanders to not glamorize alcohol by making it the center of attention at any military function (Department of the Army, 2020). For example, leaders who make alcoholic beverages readily available at social functions, gift them or alcohol-related items such as wine or whiskey glasses, and provide beer kegs after a field training exercise, regardless of intent, blatantly glamorize its consumption.

As a senior leader, it is your responsibility to ensure subordinate units adhere to Army policies about not glamorizing alcohol. In a community with high alcohol abuse rates and incidents of poor discipline, it is counterproductive to disregard an Army regulation, no matter how it affects unit morale.

Although Army regulations provide strict guidelines for selling, transporting, consuming, and prohibiting alcohol glamorization, organizations continue to foster a professional expectation to attend events that gravitate toward its consumption.

Alcohol and Unit Social Events

Army organizations conduct many social events to build unit cohesion and esprit de corps. These events help teams develop through socializing. Some events have a professional attendance obligation, including military balls, unit dining in/dining out functions, and



Army leaders build unit cohesion and esprit de corps through a variety of social events like holiday parties and barbecues. Although these well-intended events positively affect unit morale and cohesion, they may inadvertently promote or glamorize alcohol use. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Taylor Hoganson, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division)

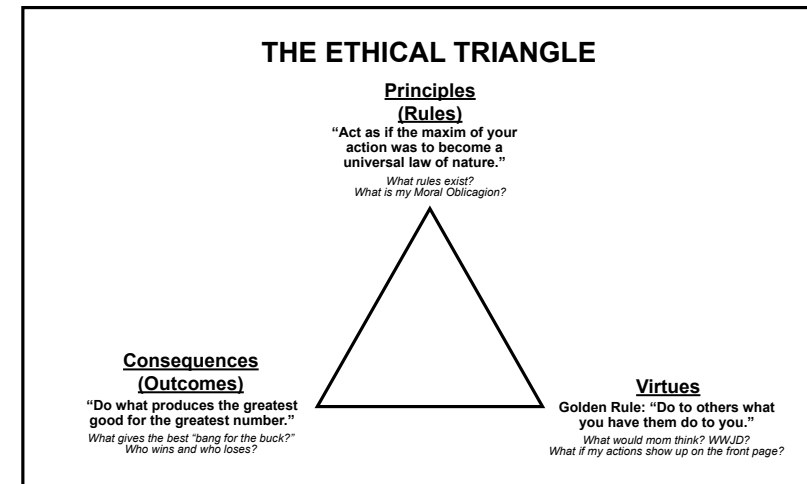


Figure 1. Ethical Triangle

monthly hail and farewells where organizations welcome new Soldiers and say goodbye to others as they prepare to move on to their next unit. Also, on occasion, commander's host holiday parties and barbecues, normally held at the squad and platoon level.

While there is a well-intended spirit to these events positively affecting unit morale and cohesion, they often violate Army regulations by promoting alcohol use. Nearly every Army ball provides free wine at each table with a wine glass, whiskey glass, or beer mug engraved with the unit's insignia or symbol as a takeaway gift.

The message some Soldiers receive is that it is socially acceptable to consume alcohol for good fun. In my experience in the days leading up to the function, Soldiers and leaders alike talk about how much they will drink and speculate on how intoxicated they will become. Although alcohol use at these events is commonplace, senior leaders should adopt an approach that prohibits glamorizing its use with an emphasis on doing what is right and setting a positive example.

Preventing Alcohol Glamorization through an Ethical Climate

Senior leaders have many tools to assess their organization's ethical climate and determine if alcohol abuse and glamorization are an issue. Reviewing the unit's serious incident reports (SIR) provides a quick snapshot of the number of alcohol-related incidents within the command. The chaplain and staff judge advocate, or brigade legal office, can provide insight on alcohol related incidents and whether an organization has a high rate of alcohol-related incidents compared to others.

According to the Department of the Army's Field Manual 6-22, Developing Leaders, (2022), advancing ethical standards fosters the probability of ethical decisions and bolsters an ethical climate. Leaders shape their units' ethical climate while growing the relationships

and trust that enable good leadership. Over time, the positive climate contributes to enhanced organizational ethical behavior. Army leaders can use the ethical lenses described by Kem (2011) to promote better decision-making in relation to developing an ethical climate.

The lenses of rules, virtues, and outcomes provide insight on how to incorporate or prohibit alcohol consumption within organizational events. The virtues lens is the most difficult. Not everyone's values and beliefs support the decision to drink. Likewise, the outcomes lens points out the high risk in many Soldiers becoming intoxicated and causing problems. While

looking at the issue through the rules lens, one might find alcohol consumption at unit functions is acceptable as long as there are alternatives, and alcohol is not the event's primary focus.

Allowing alcohol but understanding how to mitigate its abuse enables Army leaders to counter its glamorization at team-building events. An example of this strategy is planning an organizational day when half of the day is dedicated to sports competitions and the other half to a voluntary unit barbecue.

Kem (2011) also provides an ethical decision-making model which can help leaders make decisions that best support the Army values. The issue in this example is the Soldiers' perceived professional expectation that alcoholic drinks will be available when they attend the voluntary barbecue. Knowing the relevant rules associated with drinking at unit functions helps leaders determine if the function violates Army regulations.

For example, it is contrary to Army policy for a command to provide two kegs of beer while not providing alcohol-free beverages. Developing courses of action and evaluating them against Army regulation/policy standards helps the command pick a course of action that aligns with the Army values and standards of ethics.

Incorporating Army values into safety briefings and emphasizing personal responsibility and accountability also helps reduce the risk of severe alcohol-related incidents at the event. Alcohol is culturally acceptable in the Army; however, leaders should take every opportunity to mitigate risk and educate Soldiers on the responsibility associated with its consumption.

Conclusion

Alcohol abuse remains a problem in the U.S. Army. The associated cost of alcohol abuse significantly effects the Army's annual budget, due to medical treatment and damage to infrastructure and equipment. Army

regulations aim to prevent its glamorization and abuse. Many programs exist to combat alcohol abuse among Soldiers. Yet units continue to make it socially acceptable to drink. The Army indirectly enables a culture of drinking that starts at the reception in the barracks, builds through social events to increase cohesion, and continues in senior leadership circles. It is every leader's

role to lead by example and build ethical organizations that discourage drinking while attending organizational functions. Army leaders can influence organizations and make better decisions by using the ethical lenses, the ethical decision-making model, and emphasizing and reinforcing Army values. ■

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