

Classroom Exercise

Air Force Cheating Scandal Reflects Negatively on Organizational Culture

The first culprits people think of when they hear of cheating on a test are students. When the Air Force cheating scandal was brought to light, it would not be unreasonable to assume that it occurred in the Air Force Academy. However, the cheating scandal shocked many because it did not involve students or a school. Instead, the cheating occurred among a group of Air Force officers at Malmstrom Air Force base in Montana.

This scandal is one of several that have rocked the Air Force in recent years. In 2008 the chief of staff of the Air Force and a secretary were fired after failing to properly oversee a nuclear mission. In another incident, a general of the Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles force was terminated after an incident involving drinking. The cheating scandal itself has come to light because of an investigation into illegal drug use among 11 officers across six bases. Two of the officers under the drug investigation were implicated in the cheating scandal.

The cheating scandal involved a monthly exam to test the officers' proficiency in areas such as safety and launch protocol. It was estimated that the event took place in August or September in 2013 and involved a whopping 92 officers out of 190 crew members at the Montana air force base. This represents 20 percent of the work force, thought to be the largest scandal in Air Force history. An initial investigation revealed that one of the officers texted the answers to a proficiency exam to 16 others. Further investigation revealed that 17 other officers knew about the cheating but failed to report it. Altogether the scandal involved captains, lieutenants, and junior officers at the base.

The bad news continued to increase. Later investigations revealed that as many as 92 officers were involved in the scandal—nearly half of the crew members at the base. The officers were suspended and decertified. The Malmstrom Air Force base operates about one-third of the 450 Minuteman III nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. The Air Force maintains that the cheating scandal did not compromise nuclear society, but the scandal is disturbing nonetheless. As a result of the suspensions and de-certifications, the rest of the officers had to take on extra duties for the time being.

There are signs that all is not well at some of the Air Force bases. While the tests themselves normally have a 97 percent passing rate, the Associated Press revealed that officers had anonymously intimated that they were tempted to cut corners on these tests. It is also notable that in the spring of 2013, 17 officers were de-certified due to bad performance and bad attitudes. In August the Malmstrom Air Force base failed a nuclear safety and security inspection but passed in October. Air force officers may have felt pressured to cheat so as to earn high marks.

Ethical conduct in businesses involves individual values, organizational factors, and opportunity. It is important for organizations to have controls in place to limit the opportunity for unethical conduct. It would appear the Air Force did not have the necessary controls to prevent such a widespread cheating scandal. Additional pressure to succeed at the tests and threats of punishment likely created an organizational climate that encouraged cutting corners (as several officers had related to the Associated Press). In another AP revelation, a memo was discovered from a missile operations officer who complained that his force was infested with "rot." This does not reflect well on the organizational climate of the base. With both the opportunity and an organizational culture conducive to

misconduct, it remained for the officers to individually determine whether to cut corners. Research has frequently indicated that organizational factors often overcome individual inhibitions when the stakes are high; thus, even if the 34 officers had strong values against cheating, they might have decided to engage in this behavior to avoid negative outcomes.

This leaves the major question of who should be held responsible. Did the Air Force base create a high-pressure culture? With something as serious as nuclear security involved, high standards must be enforced to ensure the officers are familiar with the issues they must know to do their jobs. However, the Air Force has admitted that its culture could be the problem, and that it might spend too much time looking at test scores rather than at the officer's overall ability. In a statement by the Air Force secretary, she admitted that in her travels to three air force bases, officers had intimated that they felt the need to achieve perfection to be promoted. In other words, they felt pressured to score 100 percent on tests. The breadth of the scandal and officer feedback reveals that the Air Force not only lacked the necessary controls to prevent the misconduct, but also might have a cultural problem that indirectly encouraged officers to do what it took to excel.

Questions:

1. Describe how the three factors of individual values, organizational factors, and opportunity may have contributed to the misconduct.
2. While the officers are responsible for their misconduct, why might the organizational culture of the Air Force be a major contributor to this scandal?
3. Why do you think organizational factors such as the pressure to succeed will sometimes overcome one's individual values?

Sources:

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