Understanding Ethical Leadership in Intelligence: Themes in Accountability, Self-Development, and Communication Among CIA Leaders

Caroline Walsh
University of San Diego, carolinewalsh@sandiego.edu

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UNDERSTANDING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN INTELLIGENCE: THEMES IN ACCOUNTABILITY, SELF-DEVELOPMENT, AND COMMUNICATION AMONG CIA LEADERS

by

Caroline Walsh

A dissertation submitting in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2024

Dissertation Committee

Hans Peter Schmitz, PhD, Chair
Antonio Jiménez-Luque, PhD, Member
Stanley J. Ward, PhD, Member

University of San Diego
All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the U.S. Government. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying U.S. Government authentication of information or endorsement of the author’s views.
CANDIDATE’S NAME: Caroline Walsh

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: UNDERSTANDING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN INTELLIGENCE: ACCOUNTABILITY, SELF-DEVELOPMENT, AND COMMUNICATION AMONG CIA LEADERS

APPROVAL:

____________________________________, Chair
Hans Peter Schmitz, PhD

____________________________________, Member
Antonio Jiménez-Luque, PhD

____________________________________, Member
Stanley J. Ward, PhD

DATE: March 18, 2024
ABSTRACT

This dissertation elucidates the concept of ethical leadership within the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Based on interviews with ten former senior-level officers from across different departments, the study analyzes how these leaders understand issues of accountability, self-development, and communication. The research also provides insights into their processes of sense-making and their methodologies for fostering ethical conduct amidst the complexities of intelligence operations.

Against the backdrop of the CIA's mission, structure, and norms, the study sheds light on the challenges and tensions inherent in the organization's operations. Through a thematic analysis of participant narratives, themes of moral cognition, personal values, and leadership strategies emerge, highlighting the nuanced interplay between individual ethics and organizational imperatives. One key finding is the emphasis placed by former CIA leaders on the importance of fostering a culture of care and respect among colleagues, even in high-stakes and stressful environments. Participants articulated the challenges and their commitment to upholding ethical standards while balancing mission objectives, underscoring the complexity of ethical leadership within the CIA.

The findings include an emphasis on accountability in ethical leadership, which encompassed both leaders and followers participating in the process of truth-telling to those in power, as well as the leaders' commitment to instilling standards by imposing sanctions when necessary. Moreover, accountability entailed leaders identifying with the leadership role by engaging with their own motivations to lead, which facilitated leaders' progression in self-development. These findings suggest a need for prioritizing the accountability aspect of ethical leadership as a foundation for advancing individual and organizational goals. The study's
findings recommend consideration of ethics when applying complexity leadership theory's encouragement for leaders to engage with enabling styles of leadership. The study recommends enabling leadership engage with moral inclinations among individuals and support developing ethical standards within an organization.
DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family for all their love and support
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Transfixus sed non mortuus, “pierced, but not dead.”

- Walsh family motto

Thanks to Dr. Hans Schmitz for advising on this dissertation. It would not be the same without the guidance, pragmatism, and appropriate rigor. Thanks to my peers for their support on this endeavor and holding space for me to grow. Your patience and good humor were life changing. Thanks to all my previous managers, whose ways of being, when combined, played a role in sending me on this journey of understanding ethical leadership. Thanks to the participants for their interest in the study and their trust.
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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Opening: The Ethical Leader

Dust swirls in the air of the desert, war torn landscape. You were sent here to paint vehicles for the CIA’s partner forces and spent the last three days at the US base, carefully creating camouflaged design, layering paint, sweating under the mask that kept the fumes from causing you to pass out. Painting, eating, sleeping, and trying not to get in anyone’s way. Today is your day to head back home. You return your equipment to the busy administrative officer, who is also making sure thousands of dollars remain accounted for in the operational budget. Your equipment is the least of their concerns. Then, you check out with the case officer, who oversaw the painting and served as a quality control to your design. That case officer has a late-night meeting for which they need to prep. The security personnel that assist the case officer are there waiting to coordinate the plan that involves going into a part of the city known to house plenty of terrorists. The case officer looks over the vehicles, gives you the thumbs up and goes back to his planning. Finally, you go to check out with the Chief of the base. The Chief oversees the money, the equipment, the partner relationships. The head of the base is responsible for everyone’s responsibilities. They have 15 years operating around the world in austere environments, war zones, and even some wealthy global regions, with prestigious duties that would never need camouflaged paint. You knock on the side of the door of the Chief’s office, expecting a quick sign off to serve as record keeping of your departure, but the Chief waves you inside the office. The Chief gets up to greet you, pulls out the chair for you at their desk and sits themself across on their side of the desk. A few of the Chief’s colleagues linger outside the office, the deputy and another senior case officer. They are probably waiting for you to leave so
they can move on to more important tasks with the Chief. The Chief waves them in to have a seat along the back wall, perhaps the lingering bothersome. You sit at the desk, one-on-one with the Chief. The Chief takes a deep breath, pulls out a notepad from their desk drawer and a pen from their pocket. The Chief asks you, “So, how was your experience here the last few days? How were you treated? Was the chow ok?”

Whether the Chief’s drive to ask how things were for you was an internalized moral self-concept that naturally makes them inclined to show care for another person or symbolic representation to display care publicly towards you, the leader produced morally significant behavior by giving attention to an employee’s experience (Trevino, et al., 2006), even under stressful conditions, like a war zone.

In this study on ethical leadership among former CIA leaders, the former Chief of base told a less dramatized version of this story from his perspective as the leader. He explained that his objective was to gather feedback from everyone who worked on the base. He described approaching leadership ethics with a balance of attention to the mission, ethics of care, and pragmatism about what leadership behaviors he thought would encourage employees to do their best work. The former Chief explained he saw that his role as a leader was to gather feedback to fix processes that would support mission accomplishment while showing respect to everyone who worked on base. His wider perspective on leader behavior towards subordinates was that yelling at people and treating them poorly was not motivating to his employees and thus did not support his goal to accomplish the mission.

In interviewing ten former CIA officers as participants of this study on ethical leadership, this particular participants’ philosophy on leadership was not far from how many of the other participants explained their perspectives related to ethics and leadership at the CIA. Participants
were managing tensions and pressures related to ethics every day, cognitively evaluating their options and alignment of decisions with their responsibilities and self.

**Alternative Opening: The Struggle to Maintain Ethics**

Alternatively, another participant, who also was a case officer, described an almost dark poetic evolution of the struggle to ethically maintain oneself in the environment of ethical ambiguities to the highest levels of the US government:

*Your initial sense of ethics carries you through your initial early tenure at the Agency.*

*You took the rules and regulations seriously.*

*You had a very black and white view of right and wrong.*

*Over time that gets graded.*

*One of the problems, if you have ethics, is that foreign policy, national security policy, in my opinion, in general, tends to veer toward the unethical.*

*We sugarcoat it, we lie to ourselves, and say ‘rah rah freedom and democracy.’ We have supported some of the biggest butchers in the world.*

*Your strategic ethics start to deteriorate over time.*

*Because again, foreign policy is all about it's what's good for the country and to hell with everybody else kind of thing.*

*You come in with a set of morals, your set of ethics. You try to keep them fresh while you're swimming in a sea of shit. You're lying, you're cheating. You're pretending, you're stealing secrets. We justify that we used to teach ethics at the [training facility] and explain to them why it was okay to do what they did. What they were going to do.*
I could still justify it, but after a while you it’s like the system has a way of seducing you.

They give you the secret handshake and when you're making your way up the chain, it's ‘oh, cool, oh, cool, cool.’ You can start behaving in an unethical manner, not breaking the laws breaking regulations doing wrong, but in how you treat people. How you work, how you portray yourself. There is a point where you start you start bringing those skill sets into the building. I think what times stops you from doing that is your moral compass, but I’m also looking at people whose arms on their moral compass have broken off.

In both descriptions, the individual actor makes the call to be seduced or maintain oneself and one’s ethics. Participant narratives emphasize that CIA leaders must have the capacity and awareness to hold the ethical tensions, seductions, and influences towards the unethical. The individual actor chooses to treat others well, even with the tensions and ambiguities.

**Introduction Roadmap**

This introductory section will begin with the Ethical Leadership in the CIA and explain the background and intent behind the study, then will move to describe the CIA Mission, Structure, and Norms. Following will be Leadership Direction and Indications of Challenges, which provides an explanation of the direction in which leadership in the CIA is going with additional information on the challenges. Finally, theories are introduced in Theories Overview and more in-depth examination of the theories as related to CIA officer potential for moral and leader development in the CIA Officer Potential section. The Study Design section includes diving into the research methods, such as how the participants were chosen, why interviews were conducted, and closes with descriptions of the participants before moving to Breakdown of the Findings.
Ethical Leadership in the CIA

This study analyzed former senior level CIA officers’ sense making of ethical leadership at the CIA and how their narratives might support improving ethical and moral development within the CIA and other organizations grappling with ethical issues, such as misconduct, poor treatment of others, and environments that allow for poor ethical standards. The CIA’s leadership context was chosen because of the ambiguous moral environment in the organization. The ambiguous environment includes acceptance of methods for completing its mission such as lying, stealing, and manipulating, in the name of US national security objectives. To add to the complexity, a major part of the CIA’s activities is in asking citizens of other countries to break their countries laws and commit treason by sharing secrets and information with CIA officers, essentially asking others to engage in morally ambiguous behaviors (Stevenson, 2021). At the macrolevel, CIA top leaders are involved in decisions about activities and technologies deemed morally questionable, such as drone programs (Brunstetter & Braun, 2011). The CIA’s regular high level of moral tension and ambiguity, both with regard to individual behavior and organizational decisions, made exploring how top CIA leaders made sense of ethics and morals intriguing, with potential implications for moral and leader development programs within the CIA and other organizations contending with complex ethical environments.

This study explains how these former CIA leaders made sense of their relation to maintaining an ethical environment in a high-tempo and intensely mission-driven organization with regular ethical tension at the micro morality level (between its people) and at the macro morality level, involving its role in the wider global society. Akin to common moral development theories, the study examined participants’ cognition and personal construction of views, stories, and values and descriptions of the change over time, which is considered
development (Rest et al., 2000). While a great deal of intelligence sector research focuses on the interaction between intelligence and security or foreign policy, or analyzing to balance between national security and liberal democratic values (Van Puyvelde, 2021), this study examined the field of intelligence through an ethical lens at the leadership level. It does not assume that the CIA participants are highly moral actors or highly ethical leaders, but explores what their narratives tell us about how cognition around ethical leadership is approached in such an organization.

CIA Mission, Structure, Norms

The CIA’s mission is to collect foreign intelligence, produce all-source analysis, and conduct covert action as directed by the US President (2020-2023 CIA Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, n.d.). Its aim is to support the US president and US policy makers in their national security decisions (Polymeropoulos, 2021). The organization is made up of employees who are members of one of five directorates, being either trained in espionage (the Directorate of Operations, “DO”), analysis (Directorate of Analysis, “DA”), science and technological development (Directorate of Science and Technology, “DS&T”), logistics (Directorate of Support, “DS”), and cyber and digital innovation (Directorate of Digital Innovation, “DDI”) (Organization-CIA, n.d.; Polymeropoulos, 2021). Members of the directorates work together under Mission Centers, which are focused on regions or high priority issues (Organization-CIA, n.d.). The organization also has executive offices, which include the Director, Human Resources, Congressional Affairs, General Counsel (legal advice), and Military Affairs as well as offices focused on talent, internal oversight, public affairs, among others (Organization-CIA, n.d.). The CIA is considered one of two “independent agencies” in the US intelligence community, the other being the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (Members of the IC, n.d.). Other
elements of the intelligence community fall under the Department of Defense or other
government departments and agencies, such as the Department of Justice’s Federal Bureau of
Investigation or the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (*Members of the
IC*, n.d.).

Being a secretive organization, with high restrictions on sharing their information, the
public’s general understanding of the CIA and intelligence organizations comes from media and
films (Stevenson, 2021) such as Jason Bourne, Mission Impossible, Jack Ryan, Homeland, and
many others. Many media sources depict a single employee as a skilled expert in of all the CIA’s
directorates’ roles, when the reality is that many operations require a team of people applying
their unique expertise and support to enable an operation (Polymeropoulos, 2022).

Popular media around the CIA, both fiction and non-fiction, and its involvement in the
“dark side” of the United States national security activities causes the organization to often be
deemed questionable by the public (Stevenson, 2021). The CIA’s public history includes
ethically problematic endeavors, such as supporting violent anti-communist regimes and rebels
during the Cold War and essentially leading torture programs after 9/11, among others
(Stevenson, 2021; Joint Hearing, 1977). Despite problematic operations, there is also evidence of
the capability for its workforce to stand up as independent moral actors. Individual employees
have found and used routes to report unethical activity within the organization and US
government at large (Stevenson, 2021). For example, an anonymous CIA analyst was
responsible for triggering President Trump’s first impeachment hearing after hearing Trump’s
the quid pro quo to Ukrainian President Zelensky (Stevenson, 2021). Additionally, the CIA
Inspector General followed through initiating an investigation into enhanced interrogation
techniques (Helgerson, 2004). Multiple former intelligence officers have publicly dissented to
organizational activities through writing and publications (Stevenson, 2021). While speaking up may not have always seemed timely enough, at times coming after the unethical behavior was already conducted, the examples show a willingness for some CIA officers to confront their own organization and the US government in terms of its operationally questionable or unethical behavior.

**Leadership Direction and Indications of Challenges**

Multiple artifacts outside the participant interviews point to a need for more ethical leadership at the CIA (Van Puyvelde, 2021; Polymeropoulos, 2020; Lansey, 2020; Gerecht, 2013) and research on ethics in management supports the notion that social changes have created new expectations in terms of values from which organizations operate, requiring a look inward at leadership (Fontrodona et al., 2018; Perri & Teague, 2022). At the micro morality level of human-to-human interactions in the CIA, former case officer and 26-year CIA veteran, Marc Polymeropoulos, wrote that in his message to the workforce upon his retirement, he stressed that officers needed to first and foremost, be good to each other (Polymeropoulos, 2020):

*My plea is straightforward — it is quite simply to be good citizens to those standing to the right and left of you...be good to your employees, your peers, and those above you as well. Just live by these five simple words: BE GOOD TO EACH OTHER. If you do that, generally all else works out. You sleep well at night, and when you are in need of something important or trivial, there always will be a long list of folks who will help you out, as that is in our hearts, the CIA way* (Polymeropoulos, 2020).

He sent that message as his final farewell to the workforce based on witnessing leaders
mock subordinates for personal and professional mistakes as well as experiencing behind the
back conniving behavior between officers, rather than a confronted disagreement, among other
poor behavior (Polymeropoulos, 2020). Additional artifacts about the micro morality level at the
CIA point to the cultural obstacles and challenges the organization faces in recruiting, retaining,
and developing ethical leaders who normalize appropriate behavior towards each other. The
challenges include a historic “cowboy sub-culture” that engages in racial and gender biases as
well as other inappropriate behavior (Van Puyvelde, 2021, p. 685) as well as evidence of some
officers having a short-sighted view of problematic and predatory behavior (Gerecht, 2013).

Developmentally, in the 1970s and 1980s, ethics waned from management theory and
practice when depersonalized and economic efficiency were prioritized (Fontrodona et al., 2018).
However, global complexity, damaging scandals resulting from unethical behavior (Perri &
Teague, 2022), along with societal sensitivity towards social issues has reinvigorated the demand
for ethical leadership in organizations (Fontrodona et al., 2018). Leadership needs to be a key
pillar in an organization’s strategy (Fontrodona et al., 2018). The moral competence of leaders
and managers is a competitive advantage and helps an organization navigate to avoid repetitional
damage by unethical behavior.

Next Up: The Study

With the above background information taken into account, the next section dives into
the study that was designed to evaluate ethical leadership themes among former CIA leaders.

STUDY OVERVIEW: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Study Design

The study was designed to qualitatively collect data from former CIA officers regarding
their views and sense making of ethical leadership at the organization. Qualitative research of ethical leadership practices explores how leaders in organizations are looking inward to identify the type of organization they want to be and the values they want to live by; the inward look being important to modern organizations (Fontrodona, 2018). Quantitative studies on ethical leadership generally fail to deeply explore the relational aspect of ethical leadership, rarely examine ethical leadership at elite levels, and primarily enact quantitative survey methods to collect data, which simplify the findings and characterizations related to ethical leadership. The qualitative design of this study provided the opportunity to dig deeper into the participants’ experiences and views and make further sense of the quantitative findings that ethical leadership scholars produced so far. Research can support the endeavor of incorporating ethics into strategy and be informed through collecting and analyzing data on validated ethical practices that work to establish ethical norms. Identifying and building on practices through research of elite organizations with autonomous actors, like the CIA is likely to help other organizations identify and uphold ethical values through daily interactions, operations, and decisions.

**Sampling**

This cross-sectional study was based on data collected via one-time semi-structured interviews with ten participants. It was designed using an interpretivist lens in which the goal is to see the social world as an emergent social process that is created by the individuals in the environment (Günbayi & Sorm, 2019). To study ethical leadership perspectives among CIA leaders, the participants were selected through a non-probabilistic, purposeful, snow-ball, convenience sampling of former CIA leaders who were GS-15 level or higher (GS-15 being the highest on the GS scale and senior executive/intelligence service grades above the GS pay scale), with one participant who was GS-13, for the purpose of adding an analyst to the study. There are
around 55,000 employees in the federal government who are GS-15 (Table A-3b Government-Wide employment of workers in GS grades, n.d.) and around 8,000 federal employees in the senior executive service (SES) which is above GS-15 (Partnership for Public Service, 2023). In this study, one participant had reached GS-13, three participants had reached GS-15, and five participants reached the senior executive level.

Initially, three former CIA officers were contacted, who subsequently recommended additional participants. Given the highly sensitive nature of working for an intelligence organization that maintains classified roles, operations, and practices, the sampling approach relied on the identification of participants through known links to other CIA officers whom participants trusted. This likely contributed to their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher had formerly worked at the CIA but had not worked with any of the participants.

Why Conduct Interviews?

The interview style was chosen because “leadership, [is a] a complex process spanning multiple traits, behaviours, and goal requirements,” (Bangari, 2014, p. 29) and interviews provide an opportunity to explore subtlety, nuances, reasoning, and underlying premises (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Moreover, there is a dearth of research on ethical leadership at the CIA from which to start. Open ended interview questions allowed for exploration of the topic, whereas tight structuring of close-ended questions would not have allowed for the same exploration of values and practices (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002).

Supporting this type of study, which examines sensemaking related to ethical cognition, is Rest’s analysis of Kohlberg’s theory in moral judgment. Rest’s analysis supports understanding moral behavior by working to understand how a person makes sense of the world (Rest et al., 1994). A semi-structured interview that involved open-ended questions allowed
participants to have wide-ranging discussions (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002) on their views on ethical leadership and ethical leadership practices they conducted or encountered. The interview also allowed participants to fully articulate their responses and explain their answers within their own frameworks (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002).

Prior to conducting the interviews, three pilot interviews were done with other senior government leaders with the purpose of refining the questions and obtaining feedback from leaders who served under similar contexts as the participants. The interview questions were adjusted in each interview based on the feedback from the prior pilot interview, and notes were taken on how the questions were perceived by the pilot participants. At the end of each pilot interview, participants were given the opportunity to share their thoughts on their experience and offer recommendations for improvement. After the pilot interviews were completed, the questions were updated to improve alignment with the research question and to streamline the interview process for participants. For example, one interviewee suggested sending a list of values prior to the interview so that participants could reflect on them beforehand and feel more prepared for the conversation. The finalized interview questions are available in Appendix A.

*Why Focus on High-Level Leaders?*

It is widely accepted that an organization’s ethical tone is set from the top (Fontrodona, et al., 2018), meaning that leaders at high levels and managerial levels almost certainly have an influence on employees’ ethical behavior and organizational ethical culture. Shared cognition of values may occur if leaders across various levels convey similar messages, however, one-way communication from leaders to followers is not likely to assert certain principles when it comes to making decisions in diverse situations (Downe et al., 2016). In ethical leadership, the leader is required to more than solely comply with rules; personal moral values are important in a leader,
“setting a tone, encouraging emulation, and adding authority to regulatory action.” (Downe et al., 2016). Passive transactional approaches are unlikely to be adequate in influencing employee conduct (Eisenbeiss, 2012). Ethical behavior is important in organizations, yet difficult to maintain (Hassan et al., 2014). In the last few decades, interest in ethical leadership has increased (Fontrodana, et al, 2018) and scholars have explored how leaders’ actions are important in promoting good conduct and fostering an ethical culture (Downe et al., 2016).

**How were the Interviews Analyzed?**

Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, (IPA) transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify similarities and distinctions across the data (Levitt, 2021). The first step was the listen to the recorded interview without reading it, coding, or taking detailed notes. The idea was to get a general idea of the themes within the interview. From the initial listening, a high-level summary was created for each interview. After the initial listening and high-level summary, transcripts were read with attention to taking notes on themes and coding themes using Atlas.ti software.

**What were the quality controls?**

Several quality assurance mechanisms were used to evaluate the findings. They included member checks, comparing participant accounts with other artifacts about CIA leadership, and coding for positive, negative, presence, and absence within the codes. In conducting member checks, participants were asked to review the findings and provide feedback, notes, and clarification. Four participants provided feedback that helped clarify their contributions. Those four also shared comments in support of the findings. Three participants acknowledged they did not have time to review the findings extensively, but expressed their support for the study. Other artifacts related to CIA leadership included books and articles with both positive, neutral, and
negative CIA experiences expressed. In terms of coding quality assurance, the codes aimed to document both negative and positive experiences related to the codes. For example, “accountability” was broadly coded to include examples of narratives that indicated a strong level of accountability and those that served as evidence for a lack of accountability. Likewise, things were marked in accountability that indicated a presence of accountability and a lack of it. This helped prevent overly positive or negative findings within the themes.

Counts on participant quotes were conducted to check on how evidence cited was distributed across participants. The below table shows how often each participant was quoted as providing a perspective on the topic in each section. The table shows the percent of the study with attention to each section. The table demonstrates that each participant contributed to at least seven percent of the total quoted perspectives in the study and no more than 15%. The most attention in the study was given to accountability, then self-development, then communication.

Table 1

*Participant Perspectives in the Study by Part and Total Attention to Each Theme.*

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<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OO2</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OO3</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of the study</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who They Are: Self Ratings and Initial Thoughts on Ethical Leadership at the CIA

Participants described themselves and their inclination to join the CIA as a blend of wanting to be dutiful, being passionate about service, and being pragmatic in their need of a job that would hold their interest, with some noting that the organization filled their sense of adventure. In the initial intake survey, when asked how they would rate themselves as an ethical leader, one participant rated themself as a ten and the others rated themselves as either an eight or nine. The participant who rated himself a ten communicated a high level of self-discipline in his interview and his narratives described a strong moral identification. One participant commented on his growth in becoming a more ethical leader, saying he was a one out of ten in ethical leadership at the beginning of his career, and eight by the end. Another participant, who gave himself an eight, noted that “survival” sometimes required bending the rules. As indicated by his interview, “survival” meant both career survival and survival in hostile environments in which one’s life was literally at risk.

In terms of their initial thoughts on ethical leadership at the CIA, there was a consensus among all ten participants that ethical leadership at the CIA needed work. One participant described the challenge to ethical leadership was in the intense focus on the mission, which detracted from human-centered leadership. Another participant felt that the organization was getting better at training people to be more ethical leaders, but contrastingly, a different participant shared they felt that if you didn’t enter into the Agency with ethical values, were not likely to develop them at the Agency. One participant shared that ethics is not ingrained in Agency leaders, beyond the emphasis to tell your Chief if you screwed something up really badly. The participant noted neither that ethics nor ethical leadership were formally taught in the
schools or trainings, as far as he knew.

**What do we know about how “truthfulness” of the participants’ accounts?**

The study does not take participant accounts at face value. It does not assume all participant accounts are complete or entirely whole. In any narrative, there are often multiple versions of one story and the participants are offering their perspective and narrative. The study assesses the participants’ perspectives and narratives, looking at how these former CIA officers made sense of their experiences. The researcher analyzed what participants emphasized as important to them within the interviews. It then looked for similarities and differences across interviews. Inferences were made based on the themes identified.

There were indications that participants were transparent and balanced in their stories, rather than creating embellished accounts, being completely limited by the desirability bias, or generally espousing themselves as great leaders and heroes. One indication was that participants spoke to their own mistakes, with eight participants sharing a story about their own fallibility. Another indication is that participants spoke to areas in which the CIA still needed to improve. The participants easily communicated how the organization was not perfect. Some participants emphasized the need for better leader development. Others felt strongly that high-level leaders in the organization had made mistakes when it came to ethics in operations. Those that spoke to operational issues emphasized that the organization and its leaders needed to be held accountable. They did not want the CIA to be immune to accountability. Additional evidence of “truthfulness” of their accounts is that participants shared close to sensitive information about their careers, indicating a willingness to be highly transparent, despite their secretive careers.

Overall, participants expressed an ability to hold and share the good and bad of their careers, themselves, and the organization. The admissions of positives and negatives in their
sense making indicated a level of trustworthiness in their accounts. That being said, five of the ten participants were had extensive training in manipulation for their role in operations, so perhaps we will never know what exactly is true, but this study examines how they expressed their views.

**Next up: Overview of Theories**

The study was designed to qualitatively collect data about ethical leadership in an organization that holds many ethical tensions and also, moral and ethical potential. The ten participants served as windows into the organization, describing their experiences and their perceptions of the organization. Their willingness to take part in the study was assisted by the CIA-connection of the researcher. Participants also spoke to being passionate about the Agency. A few noted they were highly supportive of the research and provided their time and viewpoints in the hope that examining the organization through this study might support improving leadership at the organization. The next section examines the theories considered in the study.

**Theoretical context**

Theories, such as moral development theories and vertical leadership theory, serve in this study as a framework to explore the potential for the CIA to develop an organizational context supportive of its leaders’ moral development. Social cognitive theory offers insight into how social norms affect moral agency and self-regulation. Complexity leadership theory provides a way forward for asking how leaders can enable attention to ethics and is challenged by the moral development of individual actors in the network. Table 2 summarizes the primary theories used to perform analysis on the participants’ interviews and make sense of the other artifacts.
Table 2

The Main Leadership Theories Incorporated into the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theories</th>
<th>Key authors</th>
<th>Specific focal area in Accountability</th>
<th>Specific focal area in Self-Development</th>
<th>Specific focal area in Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Brown et al., 2005; Yukl et al., 2013; Ciulla, 2018</td>
<td>Reinforcement via punishment and consequences. Being accountable to others.</td>
<td>Humility to improve leader-follower relationship</td>
<td>Two-way communication and other considerations in feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cognitive theory</td>
<td>Bandura, 2023</td>
<td>Turning moral judgement into action, consideration of social norms and sanctions.</td>
<td>Self-regulation and self-reflection as components of human agency</td>
<td>Leader communication to draw attention to behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral development theory</td>
<td>Kohlberg &amp; Hersh, 1977; Rest et al., 2000</td>
<td>Accountable to considering legacy of the organization in leadership behaviors</td>
<td>Taking interest in one's moral development furthers one's moral development</td>
<td>Leadership lessons to subordinates indicated sharing a sense of legacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertical leadership theory</td>
<td>Petrie, 2014; Petrie, 2015</td>
<td>Being accountable as a leader for learning and making sense of experiences</td>
<td>Engaging with assessments, coaching, and feedback</td>
<td>Communication concepts were not part of the theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity leadership theory</td>
<td>Uhl-Bien et al., 2007</td>
<td>Further communicating punishment and consequence examples to the network as tension</td>
<td>Identifying as an enabling leader</td>
<td>Enabling subordinates to get feedback from across their network; Creating tension for change through discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this study, the terms “ethics” and “morals” or “morality” are used interchangeably. The terms have historically been used as synonyms for each other and they tend to be used in definitions to define each other (Ciulla, 2018).
Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership theory involves leaders, “demonstrating normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making,” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Balancing ethics and effectiveness is the primary challenge for a leader (Ciulla, 2018). There is morally good leadership (following ethical standards) and technically good leadership (completing objectives) and the ultimate definition of a good leader is a leader who is both (Ciulla, 2018).

In this study, ethical leadership served as a base from which to discuss participants’ moral perspectives and examine their relationship to key ethical leadership concepts of values, reinforcement, and communication. The basic components of ethical leadership are the concern for morality and fairness, transparency, engagement in open communication, clarification of expectations and responsibilities, and “power sharing,” which involves allowing followers to provide input in decision making by listening to their ideas and concerns (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Ethical leadership also requires rewarding good ethical performance and holding people accountable when standards are not met (Downe et al., 2016). Ethical leadership has been shown to have positive effects, such as facilitating internal optimism (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008), group cohesion (Zheng et al., 2015), commitment (Hassan et al., 2014), and shared organizational identity (O’Keefe et al., 2019). Organization members who are exposed to bad leadership are less likely to problem solve nor engage in improvement-oriented behaviors and tend to have high levels of withdrawal behavior (Boudrias et al., 2021). It is often measured by scales related to fairness, integrity, and ethical guidance, people orientation, power sharing, and role clarification (Yukl et al., 2013).
Moral Development Theories

Moral development theories provide the perspective that people’s moral judgements have the potential to develop over one’s lifetime, with one’s profession influencing moral development in adults (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). James Rest evaluated the moral development of professionals under the assumption that morality among professionals can be assumed elevated beyond basic socialization concerns, such as mugging, stabbings, and rioting, and into the realm of people deciding between conflicting values (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Rest’s research builds on Lawrence Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental approach to examining and describing moral development (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Kohlberg offered a stage theory of moral development, in which there are six stages that represent the transformations in how a person thinks about how they approach moral dilemmas (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Critiques to Kohlberg’s stage theory are that the stages evaluate development over a lifetime, leaving the stages broad and without intermediate-level concepts between the stages (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Additionally, the stage theory only evaluates moral judgement (deciding which course of action is more moral), but not other components that influence moral action. Rest’s research found that there is evidence of a hierarchy for moral judgement and proposed the Four Component Model (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). The model includes not only moral judgement as a process to determine moral behavior, but also moral sensitivity (awareness of how our behavior affects others), moral motivation (the importance given to moral values), and moral character (involving level of courage and strength of conviction) (Rest & Narvaez, 1994).

Vertical Leadership Theory

Vertical development is related to how a person advances their capability to think in a way that is more complex, systemic, strategic, and interdependent (Petrie, 2014). Vertical
development contrasts with horizontal development, which is adding knowledge, skills, and competencies (Petrie, 2014). The theory proposes that horizontal development is important for leaders. However, leader development programs need to be aimed at vertical development and enhancing a leader’s capacity to address new and more complex issues (Petrie, 2014). The vertical stages progress through “dependent-conformer” to “independent-achiever,” to “interdependent-collaborator.” In each stage, there is development in how leaders behave and relate in consideration to strategic thinking, leading change, conflict, and leading across boundaries (Petrie, 2014).

The three primary conditions that support vertical leader development are heat experiences (a complex situation that evokes a search for a better way to address the challenge), colliding perspectives (exposure to people with different worldviews, backgrounds, and training that increases the number of perspectives from which a leader can see), and elevated sense making (integrating experiences and perspectives with the assistance of a reflective process or coach) (Petrie, 2015). This study examines the participant’s descriptions about the proposed conditions that enable vertical development and offers perspective on what participant evidence shows about the strength of each condition in the CIA.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Much of this study examines evidence about the organization through the lens of social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory frames people as self-evaluating agents who examine their own actions in relation to social standards. These self-evaluations directly contribute to people’s future actions (Bandura, 2023). Even if one’s actions are not socially witnessed, humans still evaluate the value of their action and apply significance (Bandura, 2023). The areas of social cognitive theory most relevant to this study were moral judgement and self-regulatory
mechanisms in moral agency. In terms of moral judgment, the study considers the moral standards of conduct that participants describe experiencing in the organization and their attempts to socialize moral standards based on their leadership values. The study considers what self-regulatory mechanisms might be missing, such as what social influences might be present, that would hinder individuals from displaying moral agency. According to social cognitive theory, it is both social sanctions and internalized self-sanctions that help regulate potential inappropriate behavior.

**Complexity Leadership Theory**

Organizations are becoming more complex to face the complexity of globalization and technological development (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Both leaders and organizations are still learning to adjust to the Knowledge Era, which requires adaptability, knowledge sharing, and learning (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Industrial Era organizational and leadership ways of operating focus on optimizing production and the flow of goods (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The Industrial Era ways of operating are unable to standup to increased complexity (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Much of leadership theory has not addressed that there exists a contradiction between the needs of the Knowledge Era and the current centralized power that still exists in many organizational structures. Complexity leadership theory calls for leaders to become enablers of network dynamics (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

This study examined a number of aspects of complexity leadership theory, to include highlighting where participants describe being more enabling leaders. The study also proposes that there is potential for enabling leadership to support widely socializing ethical behavior and notes where those opportunities may be, based on participant narratives. The study also highlights the importance of implementing complexity leadership concepts with attention to
ethical and moral standards in a network. For example, the enabling leadership function of complexity leadership theory involves managing entanglements between adaptive leadership and administrative and formal processes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Adaptive leadership is involved with emergent activities. Administrative leadership is involved with formal, structured activities in the organization. Of interest is identifying where ethical influences will come from, either in the network or administratively, when leading with attention to more adaptive leadership.

Next up: The Study’s Contributions to Ethics, Organizational Leadership, and Ethical Leadership

The next section provides an overview of what the study contributes to ethics, organizational leadership, and ethical leadership. The section examines humility as a concept in leadership. It also describes how the study contributed to research on organizational leadership and concepts such as organizational core values and where they stand compared to informal organizational values. In contribution to ethical leadership, the study highlights the theme of self-development, which is not present in the common definitions of ethical leadership.
Contribution to Ethics, Organizational Leadership, and Ethical Leadership Theory

This study contributes to the philosophy of ethics and its application to leadership and the intelligence profession through examining participants’ accounts about humility. It contributes to research on organizational leaders and how their influence must be supported by other social processes to more fully develop ethical norms. Moreover, the study provides practices and areas of focus to further define “ethical leadership.”

Contribution to Ethics

The evidence in this study supports research that emphasizes humility as a key virtue in leadership and brings to the forefront the importance of the virtue of humility in intelligence work. Leadership and ethics’ scholars have previously highlighted importance of humility in leaders (Sowik & Council, 2018; Chandler et al., 2023). Moreover, historically religious traditions also emphasize the importance of humility, with some arguing that humility is the source of ethics (Sowik & Council, 2018). The study’s findings challenge the critiques of the virtue of humility, which depict humility as submission and hindering of growth (Sowik & Council, 2018). Furthermore, humility, which has been defined as an accurate self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, limits pride (Sowik & Council, 2018). Pride is known to cause people to overlook risks and dangers. Thus, humility as a key virtue of intelligence organizations and its leaders supports the organizations in their ultimate mission to understand and mitigate risks.

Additional ethical insights come from participants' narratives showing how they learned to cultivate humility as they progressed in their careers, suggesting that humility is a skill that can be acquired and honed rather than an inherent personality trait (Chandler et al., 2023). The participants’ accounts demonstrated that engaging with humility in their leadership role supported their growth as leaders by allowing them to be open to viewing areas of themselves
that needed improvement. Humility contributed to participants being willing to explore and change their perspectives. Being open to updating their perspectives helped them keep up with advancing societal norms around leadership and organizations. Changes in demographics and society have resulted in the emergence of new values, priorities, and expectations, impacting the way organizations function (Fontrodona et al., 2018). The importance of humility and its connection to virtue ethics brings forward the discussion of ethics in the modern strategy of an organization, which has been of increasing interest in management research and practice (Fontrodona et al., 2018).

**Organizational Leadership**

For organizational leadership, this study contributes to understanding the impact of leadership and its role in fostering ethical behavior in the organization. This area of study is underdeveloped, particularly in the public sector (Downe et al., 2016). Participants described how, as leaders, they had limited impact on the wider organizational ethical norms, despite their desire to make changes. The study found that some leaders wanted the organization to help socialize ethical norms through communication of punishment and consequences across the organization. Participants also wanted support to understand practices they could use to more widely socialize behavioral standards.

The participants’ described limitation in embedding ethical behavior standards further into the organization, despite their desire for the organization to have higher standards of employee behavior. Participants did what they could to set standards with punishment, consequences, and communicating feedback. Organizational movement towards standards, such as training, were seen as not fully addressing the issue of inappropriate behavior.

In terms of research on ethical codes of conduct and their impact on organizational
cognition and behavior (Downe et al., 2016), this study demonstrated how organization stated values or codes of conduct likely have limited impact on how individual leaders operate in an organization that has high levels of autonomy. Only one participant, out of ten, knew the CIA’s stated core values offhand. The CIA’s unofficial top value of “the mission” was the top guess among participants, however, was not a stated organizational core value. The study affirms other research that concludes that the success of written regulations related to values, like ethical codes, is dependent on the organizational culture (Downe et al., 2016) and insufficient to affect change without other social processes (Ethics Resource Center 2005). Related, the study provides examples of individual leaders making decisions based on values and compliance, which could serve to support theory on the best development of value-based and compliance-based policies (Six and Lawton, 2013).

**Ethical Leadership**

This study calls for attention to one’s development to be considered as an important aspect of ethical leadership, which has not previously been outlined in ethical leadership literature. Additionally, the study’s themes provide areas of focus and practices that the definition of ethical leadership does not outline. The common definition of ethical leadership is, “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making,” (from Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005, p. 120). The definition has been described as vague and does not provide norms for leaders (Eisenbeiss, 2012). This study describes practices in reinforcement, development, and communication, for ethical leaders’ consideration within their own context.

**Next up: Summary of Key Findings**
The next section combines theory and evidence in examining potential for moral and vertical development of CIA officers. The section examines the potential of CIA officers to reach high levels of moral potential and vertical development. The theories, models, and approaches that explain the conditions that prime CIA officers to be highly morally developed leaders are Rest and Kohlberg’s moral development theories, Trevino’s model of ethical decision making in organizations, the Center for Creative Leadership’s Vertical Leadership development approach, and is combined with the interviewees explanations of themselves and their careers and the researcher’s knowledge of CIA careers. The next section breaks down the findings of the study by introducing the three evidential themes of Accountability, Self-Development, and Communication.
Summary of Findings

The next section provides a summary of findings about the potential for moral and vertical development of CIA officers. It examines the potential of CIA officers to reach high levels of moral potential and vertical development. The theories, models, and approaches that explain the conditions that prime CIA officers to be highly morally developed leaders are Rest and Kohlberg’s moral development theories, Trevino’s model of ethical decision making in organizations, the Center for Creative Leadership’s Vertical Leadership development approach, and is combined with the interviewees explanations of themselves and their careers and the researcher’s knowledge of CIA careers.

Differences between the participants are considered throughout the study, with attention to how some leaders had a natural willingness to address interpersonal issues in the workplace, whereas others were more challenged and less skilled in the interpersonal, which may affect their accountability options. Likewise, in self-development, some participants were more naturally inclined towards humility, while others had to learn to engage with more humility through trial and error. In communication, there was a common emphasis in being direct in feedback and holding negative feedback in private, however, participants’ feedback had many differing characteristics, with some opting for notes and statistics to prepare, others offering two-way communication, and still others describing a controlled two-way communication that kept them, as the leader, in control of the conversation.

Through the lens of the various theories, it is apparent that social cognitive theory and complexity leadership theory offer support to the CIA better socializing proper ethical standards. Looking at participant narratives, social cognitive theory suggests a need for better socialized consequences. Complexity leadership theory proposes that leaders consider ways they can enable
ethical thought in a way that does not always require their direct intervention as management. Vertical leadership theory and moral development theories support the idea that CIA leaders have much of the inclinations and conditions they need to be effective and ethical leaders. Obstacles in the organization to developing ethical leaders include likely being limited by mission intensity that prevents time for deep elevated sense making, a lack of social sanctions that support internalizing higher ethical norms, recruitment that has limited attention to leadership potential, a limited attention to ethical leadership considerations in leadership development programs, among other influences.

**CIA Officer Potential for Moral and Vertical Development**

CIA officers experience conditions that provide the potential for them to reach high levels of moral and leadership development, according to moral development theories (Rest & Narvaez, 1994; Rest, 1986) and vertical development theory (Petrie, 2015). They also are primed to have high levels of self-efficacy, which influences human agency (Bandura, 2023). The claim of high potential for moral and leadership development is based on the nature of the job, as evidenced by what participants expressed across interviews about themselves and their career at the CIA. Much of the work at the CIA involves exposure to role taking with others and exposure to solving moral dilemmas; both of these experiences have potential to enhance moral development (Trevino, 1986). Moreover, personal characteristics of people with inclinations for high moral judgement represent characteristics of people likely to be in line with the work of the CIA, being that they are risk takers, challenge seekers, and often see themselves in a longer historical context (Rest, 1986). In terms of leadership development, experiences that push one past their current abilities, experience understanding the perspectives of others, and reflection are proposed to support people in their leadership development (Petrie, 2014). Job positions, like the
case officer position, require officers to believe they have a high level of influence over their environments and are likely trained to have a high level of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy supports cognitive processes related to action (Bandura, 2023).

**Job Characteristics that Enhance Moral Development**

Job characteristics that provide the potential for adult moral development include the opportunity for role taking (taking into account the perspective of others) and the opportunity to be responsible for resolving moral dilemmas (Trevino, 1986). How these job characteristics show up in organizational culture may play a role in enhancing the individual's cognitive moral development. For example, an organizational culture promoting individual responsibility for decisions, conflict resolution at lower tiers, and consideration of diverse perspectives and interests is likely to support moral growth. Conversely, within an organization where roles are rigidly defined and decisions are predominantly determined by formal authority, individuals may experience limited progression in their moral development (Trevino, 1986).

People invested in their own development are the most likely to reach the highest levels of moral judgment (Rest, 1986). Personal inclinations that can align with moral judgement include loving to learn, taking risks, seeking challenges, and seeing themselves in the larger social context of history and the institution (Rest, 1986). Participants reflected these inclinations towards risk taking, challenge seeking, and view of legacy throughout the interviews. For example, participants directly referenced the importance of risk taking in the CIA over 15 times. Participants explained risk taking as an active movement towards problem solving and noted that risk taking was not the same as reckless behavior. Doing the job successfully required officers to take risks and not sit around waiting for things to fall into place.

Participants also described their affinity for challenges, whether leadership, mission, or
environmental challenges. They described willingly taking roles in more austere locations and the challenges and discomfort that came with overcoming difficult places. They described a general passion for the challenge of learning and working with different languages and the challenge of different cultures and locations.

Participants also spoke to their work in terms of legacy on the global and organizational levels. One participant explained how he would incite the legacy view with students he taught by telling them they have an opportunity to be involved in making history. Participants described numerous operational experiences in which they were involved in developing relationships with key world leaders and people with access to information that was vital to US interests. They saw themselves as part of the history and legacy of the organization and the US national security mission. This view of legacy is what can trigger considerations of ethics, participants did not see their acts and behaviors as insignificant, but saw the importance of their acts in a longer history.

While job characteristics and personal inclinations can leave people at the CIA primed for moral development, movement towards higher cognitive abilities in moral judgement are not behaviorally prescriptive, they will not necessarily result in moral behavior (Bandura, p. 110). In other words, just because someone's moral judgment improves, it doesn't guarantee that they will behave in a morally superior way. Behavior is influenced by various factors, and moral judgment is only one of them.

**Job Experiences that Enhance Vertical Leader Development**

To be effective as a leader, one needs to be equal or superiorly developed in the complexity of thinking compared to the complexity required by the environment (Petrie, 2014). Horizontal leadership development is about adding knowledge skills and competency to a leader’s mind while vertical leadership development involves enhancing one’s capacity to think
Vertical development supports people in thinking in ways that are in more complex, systemic, strategic, and interdependent (Petrie, 2014). The vertical development requires three primary conditions: heat experiences, colliding perspectives, and elevated sense making. The conditions are defined as experiencing roles beyond one’s current capabilities (“heat experiences”), exposure to people with different worldviews (“colliding perspectives”), and opportunities for elevated sense making (“reflection”) (Petrie, 2015). In a simplified, way of describing adult development, adults develop through stages that start with the stage of dependent-conformer, which is characterized by being reliant on authority and a faithful follower (Petrie, 2014). They can then move through the independent-achiever stage, in which a person is more self-directed and guided by their internal compass. The next stage is reaching the interdependent-collaborator stage in which they can hold multiple perspectives, think long term, and see systems, patterns, and connections.

Participants described numerous heat experiences and had a job in the international context that provided regular exposure to colliding perspectives. Their ongoing sense making, through moments of reflection, supported their vertical development as leaders. It was apparent by the interviews that time for reflection was often limited in the participant’s careers and served as a potential gap in the CIA’s vertical development initiatives. The lack of value for resources that support elevated sense making may be of concern in developing ethical leaders and normalizing ethical behavior because according to social cognitive theory, the chance for ethical transgressions increases when employees fail to reflect (Bandura, 2023). Self-reflection is a core property of human agency (Bandura, p. 7).

**Heat Experiences**

Participants shared that heat experiences occurred for them throughout their careers and
they carried on in providing heat experiences for their subordinates. During these heat experiences, participants or their subordinates had to step up to address a challenge or role beyond their previously encounter circumstances. This study broke down types of heat experiences into “organization or leader initiated,” “self-initiated,” and “society initiated.” The study also counted “heat for others,” which was the number of times participants described providing heat experiences for their subordinates. “Organization or leader” initiated heat experiences included times when participants described being put in a position or asked to do something by a leader or the requirements of the job that were beyond their current experience level. “Self-initiated” were times that participants put themselves into a new role or position where they faced new challenges. “Society initiated” heat experiences included narratives when what was happening in society or the world forced participants to face address a challenge of which they had no had a similar context to pull from. The society heat experiences included prolonged crises like the COVID pandemic or war experiences in which they were asked to solve issues in an unfamiliar context. The participants’ many heat descriptions demonstrated that the CIA’s likely most present condition for vertical development was heat. There seemed to be no shortage of opportunities to challenge oneself, whether initiated by the organization and its leaders, by the officers themselves, or by societal events that required a unique response.

Colliding Perspectives

Participants described colliding perspectives they experienced throughout their careers that this study broke down into categories of taking place “global cultures,” “outside of the Agency,” and “within organizational culture.” The “global culture” calling perspectives were in the context of working overseas or working in the context of other global cultures. Additional colliding perspectives were “outside of the Agency.” Outside the Agency colliding perspectives
among participants included other experiences that offered perspectives different from the Agency. Experiences included their employment prior to the Agency, descriptions of their education, and community volunteer experience. The third category of colliding perspectives was “within organizational culture,” which were colliding perspectives local to the organization. This included participants sharing how they came to understand how people in different directorates thought and functioned via experiences in other parts of the Agency.

As an example, one participant, who was an analyst, spoke to the “global culture” colliding perspectives he experienced on the job. His travels and experiences with other cultures allowed him to see different perspectives of how democracy defined. The participant described how seeing and learning about other parts of the world lead to him appreciating the US and being able to appreciate it even with all its flaws. The global colliding perspectives offered a new view from which participants created a more dynamic view of the world. Examples of colliding perspectives from “within the organizational culture” included participants referencing the priorities of one directorate over another and “outside of the Agency” examples included comparing how the CIA tended to function compared to other government organizations or volunteer organizations. The descriptions indicated that colliding perspectives helped build the capacity to hold the many organizational and global perspectives. Their experiences increased the number of perspectives from which participants could see the world.

**Elevated Sensemaking**

Participants described elevated sense making in the context of momentary reflections, some reflective practices, and in the context of their experience with the 360-degree feedback program that some participants went through. Participants shared their affinity to learning throughout the interviews. However, even with the learning mindset, it was apparent though their
descriptions of their careers that there was often limited time for elevated sense making. The reflection required for elevated sense making part of integrating all those heat experiences and colliding perspectives (Petrie, 2015). Moreover, reflection is a core part of human agency and lack of can lead to ethical transgressions (Bandura, 2023). Evidence of the lack of time to reflect included participant speaking to sleeping in the office due to the intensity of his job and the mission. Another participant, who described momentary reflections throughout his career helped his values evolved over time. The same participant spoke to having a notebook that supporting his learning and sense making of different cultures. He documented what he wanted to learn and reflected on it, still having the notebook with the words and phrases he wanted to learn.

Indications from the interviews were that participants communicated a learning mindset, that served in naturally reflecting as time allowed. However, unless the organization allocated time for deeper reflection for its officer, it seemed to be hard to come by, given the intensity of the mission and their work. Six participants had been interested in a leader development program that involved coaching and 360-degree feedback from peers, subordinates, and superiors. This was one example of organization-supported coaching opportunities, intended to support elevated sense making. The leader development program is explored more deeply in Part II. Self-Development, Personality and Other Assessments. Some participants critiqued the program as occurring too late in an officer’s career.

The lack of value for resources that support elevated sense making may be of concern in developing ethical leaders and normalizing ethical behavior because according to social cognitive theory, the chance for ethical transgressions increases when employees fail to reflect (Bandura, 2023). Self-reflection is a core property of human agency (Bandura, p. 7). It involves reflection on their efficacy, their thoughts, and their values. At higher levels, people reflection on
alternate courses of action and competing values or tensions that are at play.

**Social Cognitive Theory Potential for Action**

A brief examination of participant input indicated that many roles at the CIA offered sufficient heat experiences and colliding perspectives to support vertical development. Participants spoke to naturally wanting to learn and elevate their sense making. However, there was evidence that the CIA’s mission intensity almost certainly limited the time allowed for deeper integration of the experiences and perspectives. The next section explores social cognitive theory’s self-efficacy concept, considering the CIA context and the individual moral actor. It examines how the interaction between individual and social experiences impacts cognition and motivation related to morality.

**Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Efficacy, and Bias for Action**

Through the lens of social cognitive theory, this section argues that CIA officers almost certainly have the level of self-efficacy needed to support moral action. Officers are also likely have experiences with psychological processes that support further self-efficacy and thus further support for action. The previous sections that support that CIA officers have high potential for moral and vertical development. This section continues to examine the support for moral action through the lens of social cognitive theory.

Social Cognitive Theory describes human agency as an interactive model in which people are driven by their inner will power and influenced by the social world (Bandura, 2023). Along with social influences, a range of personal factors influence human agency. Self-efficacy standing out as central to people’s beliefs about exercising control over events in their lives. There are other motivators and regulators to human behavior, however, self-efficacy stands out due to its influence on goal setting, outcome expectations, and analytic thinking capabilities (Bandura,
Self-efficacy beliefs are a class of judgements in which one perceives their level of effectiveness in meeting challenges with success. They go beyond considering intentions, to beliefs about what one can do in a current or proposed situation. CIA intelligence officers have intense job roles that require an ability to act and enact power over their environment. This is often the case whether the officer is a case officer in the field, an analyst in a briefing, or a support officer enabling operations, or other officers in the Directorate of Science and Technology or Digital Innovation. Many jobs require pushing through to achievement in difficult environments or with difficult tasks. Thus, many CIA officers almost certainly have high levels of self-efficacy. Those that are successful likely are highly developed in the processes needed to turn their efficacy into action. When it comes to moral action, with the proper moral development, CIA officers likely have a high potential to act in the direction of morality, despite complex challenges, ambiguity, and other influences that dissuade from action, despite cognitive recognition of a moral decision.

To move from self-efficacy to action, one must engage in an interplay between psychological processes related to selection, cognition, motivation, and affect. The process are highly consequential to achieving a wide range of activities and social contexts. Below is a description of the processes and proposals to support that CIA officers are likely to have extensive practices in each of these processes. Evidence of officer’s experiences with the processes begins with the action of applying to the CIA. It also includes their training and work experiences, in which they are required to take action under high risk and complex conditions.

**Selection Processes**

“People can exert some influence over their life course by selecting environments they
encounter and activities they pursue,” (Bandura, 2023, p. 55). People’s choices are, in part, based on their self-efficacy and limited by self-doubts (Bandura, 2023). One’s selection then impacts one’s potential development. People have some levels of influence over the environments by selecting and activities they pursue (Bandura, 2023). In choosing to apply to work in the CIA environment, applicants had a degree of self-efficacy in which they selected the intense CIA environment as a possible future workplace. The act of applying was an act of removing some level of self-limitation. Not to say that their are not biases in hiring, but the act of choosing to apply indicates that people who end up working at the CIA have some sort of strength in their self-efficacy. This self-belief, especially when built to be resilient, a person can remain strong in acting despite the taxes or threats related to what they are about to do (Bandura, 2023).

**Cognitive Processes**

Self-efficacy affects one’s thought patterns. Individuals with a strong belief in their problem-solving skills tend to maintain high efficiency in analytical thinking, even in intricate decision-making scenarios (Bandura, 2023). On the other hand, those grappling with self-doubt exhibit inconsistency in their analytical thinking processes. (Bandura, 2023). CIA intelligence officers are recruited for their cognitive processing capabilities, such as problem solving and writing (Ziegler, 2014). Screening includes assessing their potential to not only learn new skills, but apply them in high risk scenarios. Effective case officers must confidently meet potential sources and carrying out intricate schemes to evade detection. Analysts must be confident in their conclusions to brief the highest levels of government on their analysis, with potential for global impacts. Support officers face various cognitive challenges in supporting logistical elements of operations and administration, with some support officers needing to confidently and swiftly build infrastructure in austere and challenging environments, sometimes evading
detection. Officers in the Science and Technology department must be able to creatively develop and confidently employ scientific solutions for changing and complex environments. Similarly, in the Digital Innovation Directorate, officers must create and anticipate scenarios in support of major national security initiatives. Overall, it is likely that successful CIA officers have a level of self-efficacy that enhances their cognitive processes and thus affects performance outcomes.

**Motivational Processes**

Motivational processes influence how much effort a person will exert towards their endeavor (Bandura, 2023). A robust sense of motivation is needed in the face of obstacles, especially following failures. Motivation is supported by firm belief in one’s pursuits. Motivation helps override early rejections of one’s abilities or work (Bandura, 2023). It is widely known that CIA officers experience a lengthy onboarding process and intense training. Both experiences require motivation. Motivation is also supported by a firm belief in one’s pursuit (Bandura, 2023). Thus, it is likely that CIA officers who are successful in the application process and training are primed to have high levels of motivation that support action. These processes are helpful in the present and future activities (Bandura, 2023).

**Affective Processes**

Emotional reactions can affect the nature and course of one’s thinking, thus affective processes are important in supporting acting from self-efficacy. Individuals who hold the belief that they can exert control over potential threats do not generate anxious thoughts, making them less susceptible to the impact of stress and heightened arousal compared to those who struggle to manage such states. CIA officers, in many of their roles, must control intrusive and stressful thoughts to achieve their objective. Repeated exposure to heat experiences, which the CIA pushes on its officers, build beliefs in their ability to control anxiety and stress reactions, thus
building the affective process towards action.

Using SCT Processes for Moral Action

This brief examination demonstrates it is likely that most CIA officers have sufficient levels of self-efficacy and experience in the psychological processes to support action. It does not necessarily mean they are all primed for moral action. However, the analysis supports the idea that CIA officers are likely to be high in self-efficacy and have strong psychological processes that they at least are primed with the possibility of overcoming other influences that might dissuade from moral action.

Next up: Themes Among the Participants

The next section looks individually at the participants. The section focuses on what each participants emphasized. It also highlights commonalities indicated by the directorate of which the participants are associated.
Individual Themes and Comparisons

While the book distills themes across the interviews, it was important to also recognize themes within the interviews that were unique to the interviewee. There were also indications of trends by their directorate. Below is a background description of each participant, written to maintain anonymity. For each participant, the profile also includes a brief summary of their ideas regarding leadership, accountability, self-awareness, and ethics. The within participant themes aim to recognize the unique conditions, experiences, and perspectives that shaped their leadership perspectives within the organization. Participant quotations in the book have not been labeled by their descriptions in this context to avoid the aggregation of information that might inadvertently reveal their identities. The profiles are written without identification of gender and do not identify ethnic or racial backgrounds. Among the ten participants, seven were male, three were female, eight were White, one was Black, and one was Hispanic. Four participants had served in the military prior to joining the Agency. Four participants had been case officers who served in the Directorate of Operations, three participants had served in the Directorate of Support, with one of the three in Support also having served heavily in the Directorate of Operations. Three had served in the directorate of Analysis.

Only one participant was able to identify the CIA’s core values of integrity, service, excellence, courage, teamwork, and stewardship. Two participants strongly related their ethical way of being to lessons in their childhood and five participants described how the values they learned from their upbringing with their family stayed with them into their adulthood and career.

The Support Officers

Three support officers participated in the study. Two of them had a military background. A common theme across their interviews was servant leadership. Expressed dedication to service
was their way of supporting the mission. They seemed to have developed this mindset through early experiences, prior to their work at the CIA. Their job in the Directorate of Support, to logistically support operations, perhaps further confirmed their value of service to others.

Participant 1 was a support officer whose leadership in the CIA was primarily in the context of the Iraq War. They explained themselves as highly mission-focused, with their least favorite job being a high-level staff officer in DC because, although the participant admitted they learned a lot, they felt very far removed from the mission and felt like if they hadn’t shown up for a day, no one would really notice. The participant much preferred to be in the field, where showing up made a huge difference. Their leadership ideas encompassed pragmatism of doing what needed to be done to support operations, along with the servant leadership style of being the one responsible for serving their team, the organization, and the country. The participant’s colliding perspectives going into the CIA included military experience, which they continued into a military career in the reserves, while also leading in the Agency. They generally saw the CIA and their military service as patriotic endeavors, noting that patriotism was a key motivator for them.

For accountability, the participant provided multiple examples of how speaking truth to power was their duty as an employee, being fully accountable to their subordinates was their duty as a leader, and being fully accountable for their mistakes was their way of being dutiful to others and to themselves. Even when one of their former leaders seemingly treated them unfairly, the participant highlighted what they perceived as their own errors in communication with that leader and how they would have done things differently. They had a strong loyalty to their people but did not let that stop them from holding people accountable for inappropriate behavior, such as financial misconduct. On the job, the participant took on accountability for problem-
solving and were proud of creatively getting resources needed for the mission. The participant felt ultimately accountable for the country and mentioned their patriotism as a driver for their service.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant described a deep value and practice of humble leadership. They saw their leadership role as representing their teams by sharing their successes, supporting their needs, and taking accountability for their teams' errors or poor outcomes. They had an awareness of people’s needs, citing Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs when telling a story and providing their explanation of why people were acting up under the circumstances of not having their basic needs met.

Communication was important to the participant, particularly having two-way conversations with subordinates when it came to logistical decisions. They often laid out the options and let them choose their preferred scenario, acknowledging that with limited resources, they could not have everything that they wanted. The participant was keen to let them pick what they wanted. It did not matter to the participant what their subordinates chose and the participant willing to work with them.

The participant viewed ethics as challenging at the CIA because there was not always a clear “right and wrong,” which they described as not a clear “black and white.” They described that leaders at the CIA often had to navigate “gray areas” in which options were not entirely right or wrong. They thought that ethical leadership at the Agency took good judgment and personal courage. In their military career, they saw themselves also as a servant leader but noted that in the military, they only needed black and white thinking from leaders, whereas in the CIA, they were expected to operate and make decisions “in the gray.” Being “in the gray” meant that CIA leaders had a lot of flexibility to make the decisions they thought were the right ones. “The gray”
also described how at the CIA there was such a variety of contexts and new situations that there was a lack of clear rules, regulation, or precedent that would give leaders an easy answer.

Participant 2 was a support officer who also served in operational roles and led in military contexts in the CIA. The participant had a passion for developing people and giving them opportunities to take the lead. Joining the CIA was practical for the participant; they joined after college when looking for a job, and their other prospects were not working out. They started out at a low GS-grade and successfully advocated for themselves multiple times early in their career. The participant’s self-advocacy-initiated job changes and advocating for a better performance review.

Accountability themes for this participant included being accountable for giving subordinates experiences for their own growth. They highlighted giving their subordinates “heat experiences” and being present to be accountable if they needed support. They saw leaders as being ultimately accountable, and when challenges arose, that is when a leader earned their keep. From the participant’s perspective, organizational performance reviews that leaders gave to subordinates needed to be normalized to be more transparent and direct about where someone struggled or needed to learn or grow. They saw how reviews did not directly state issues, and the lack of transparency meant people were not held accountable for improvement. The opaque reviews allowed people to move into leadership positions for which they were not ready or should not have obtained.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant advocated for power-sharing between leaders and subordinates and had a learning mindset in their own development. They described how they came to understand leaders for whom they worked. Some of the poor leaders they understood, over time, were not natural leaders and did not have opportunities for more formal leadership
development programs during their tenure. This participant had moments in which they could see themselves and how they were being perceived, which led them to adjust their behavior. They strongly appreciated the challenge of the 360-degree feedback and sought it out during their tenure.

The participant described having hard conversations and not shying away from them. Prior to more challenging conversations with subordinates, they psyched themselves up, knowing it was their job to have this conversation. They also made sure they did their research on resources the organization could provide the person, depending on the topic at hand.

Ethical leadership for the participant was being honorable and doing the right thing. The “right thing” for them had to do with taking care of people, and they cited a time they did so as an example of ethical leadership. Their example of ethical leadership was a time in which they went against immediate mission priorities and put resources into the human side of bringing people together in a time of grief.

Participant 3 was a support officer who had served in the military prior to their service at the Agency. The participant described in their narratives that they took on the mindset of servant leadership. They took on serving their subordinates by supporting people who needed to grow and serving the organization by being willing to take on whatever role they needed them to fill. The participant was an advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion and formed groups and activities to help people connect at the human level. Service and love of county were key motivators for them, which stemmed from their family upbringing. They spoke to seeing the organization as a family.

In terms of accountability, the participant highly valued integrity and saw the work at the agency encompass people’s whole lives. This mindset was revealed further in their holistic
approaches to issues. For themselves, they made a point of never asking people to do what they would not be willing to do themselves. The participant felt that leaders should be skilled in the basics of the work so that it all did not fall on the subordinates to manage. They thought that unethical behavior reduced trust among employees and was a threat to the security of the organization. They described a strong compassion for people who were struggling to find their fit in the organization and made themselves accountable to supporting them holistically in their skills development and comfort in the organization.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant came to understand the struggles of others through their own challenging early career experiences. They built on that understanding of struggles through understanding people, taking into account who they were and what they had experienced beyond the workplace. The participant understood that some people just face more challenges and were compassionate for that. The participant often put their awareness in the context of the larger societal times. In their own awareness, they learned through feedback from a mentor in their teenage years that they did not need to be the highest skilled person to be an incredibly impactful leader to their teams.

This participant did not shy away from hard conversations and they used their mediation skills to support solving interpersonal problems. Their willingness to be a mediator and sit people down to talk during interpersonal conflicts was a unique skill of which not all participants described being comfortable doing. When giving feedback, they had a system that supported the conversation being two-way communication between them and the subordinate, not just them giving their input. They also explained how it was important to them to ask questions when time allowed, even in times of crisis, because they might not know best.

The participant was the only one to know the CIA’s core values of integrity, service,
excellence, courage, teamwork, and stewardship. Ethical leadership to them was about serving others and living by their own high standards. They believed strongly that self-discipline and empathy were important leadership traits.

The Analysts

Three analysts participated in the study. They all expressed that there needed to be organizational-level accountability. Participants described wanting the organization and its top leaders to be held accountable for unethical behavior and operations. They saw the organization’s history of evading full accountability as hindering its collective moral development.

Participant 4 was an analyst who had reached GS-13 before leaving the Agency. Although the participant had not reached the GS-15 or SIS levels, they were included in the study so that there was at least one more representative from the Directorate of Analysis.

Accountability themes for this participant included that leaders were there to protect subordinates and to be reliable. Leadership was not simply positional but had to be earned from people at all levels through their actions, such as treating others with respect. It was important to them that people admitted their mistakes and spoke up when something was not correct. Being open to feedback, correct information, and speaking the truth were responsibilities that CIA employees had to take on.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant displayed humility in how they talked about their knowledge and expertise. They were careful not to claim being better than anyone but were just doing their job as an analyst and leader. The participant came to understand their own leaders over time, and taking the time to reflect on who their leaders were, their leaders’ experiences, strengths, weaknesses, and perspectives, helped the participant see the leader as a
whole person. The participant described impactful mentoring sessions that they received from their leaders. In particular, one leader made sure to have one-on-one sessions with the participant over coffee to give them feedback during their first year, which they believed would set them up for success in their career. The participant appreciated the guidance and attention and noted that it helped them grow as a leader and an analyst. The participant’s reflection on their own communication demonstrated a comfort that grew in them with speaking up not only about analytic topics but in standing up for their own style of leadership.

The participant appreciated that there were “gray areas” in ethics but also called for accountability for “black and white” ethical behavior. Some behaviors were right or wrong and needed to be socialized as such. The participant thought that ethical leadership meant setting the standards for right and wrong and helping people navigate the gray areas. The participant called on leaders to live those principles and admit that it is a challenge to live to high standards and principles.

Participant 5 was an analyst who was passionate about leadership development and spent time in part of the leadership development training area for the Directorate of Analysis. The participant joined the CIA because their education aligned with one of the CIA’s areas of analysis and because of the pragmatic mentality that they needed a job after completing their master’s degree. They referred to two key leaders who they described as the best and the worst of leadership types and influenced what they thought needed to be implemented and developed in leaders in the organization.

The participant thought that it was important to emphasize that high-level leaders are the ones ultimately accountable for setting the norms and values among the middle-level managers they supervise. They thought leadership development programs were important to embedding
ethical values throughout the organization, as were consequences for inappropriate behavior. The participant had a number of negative experiences with leaders, including authoritarian leadership and leadership with tunnel vision who only considered the mission and not the people.

In terms of self-awareness, building trust and being humble were key concepts the participant felt leaders must learn to develop and practice. Trust was a key value they thought was necessary to develop between leaders and followers, and they described how an ideal leader of theirs built trust through humility. That leader came from a place of curiosity and took time to mentor the participant one-on-one, both supporting and challenging them in their career. The participant took that style of leadership on in their own leadership tenure. The participant embodied the value of building trust in their own engagement with a subordinate in which they made sure to fully listen and address their own mistake. They thought trust was also built through role modeling integrity, like doing what they say they will do and only asking people to do what they themselves would be willing to do.

In terms of communication, the participant talked about giving people feedback and they felt that it was key for feedback to be given with kindness and support. They witnessed leaders giving feedback in a way that was arrogant and demeaning and saw that as ineffective in forming strong teams and motivated workers. The participant also spoke to the importance of leaders communicating their values to make them clear to subordinates and the team.

The participant described ethics as doing the right thing, even if no one was watching, and having general integrity, especially as a leader. They thought being honest in administrative work, like financial accounting, was a key way to exemplify ethics and integrity. Being unethical was not necessarily doing things that might put them in jail but dealt with everyday actions and situations. The participant thought it was important to consider what was right for the
organization and what was right for the people working there.

Participant 6 worked primarily in the CIA’s training and development area and had worked as an analyst. The participant joined the Agency out of an interest in service and the pragmatism that their husband and other friends and family worked there. The participant saw risk taking as an important part of Agency culture. They described developing as a leader as they were placed in roles with a high level of responsibility early in their tenure. They spoke to seeing the organization as a family.

The participant emphasized the importance of documentation when it came to accountability because that would serve as data for consequences, should a pattern emerge with an employee. In their experience, documentation is what supported removing people from their jobs when they had patterns of inappropriate or illegal behavior. The participant felt that leaders could not allow the personal and emotional connection to others get in the way when it came to documenting and providing consequences for inappropriate behavior. They had the sense that most people in the organization were about the mission and did not have bad intentions, and at the same time, because of the focus on the mission, accountability was not often the first thing on leaders’ minds.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant spoke about really appreciating people whose skills and way of thinking were different than theirs. The participant was in awe and thankful for people who could get their ideas out in a certain way because they saw that they did so differently and sometimes took them a little longer. They also were curious about people and were open to having a conversation to explain how people were being viewed and find out more about them so that they should improve relationships. The participant described ethics as a deep knowing that people had to learn to sense in themselves. They thought that leaders needed to be
consistent and reliable in order to build trust. They also had to show some of their vulnerability, such as owning mistakes. Listening was an important part of communication that helped to build trust and would be beneficial to the team and the mission.

The participant saw feedback and communication as being important to self and leadership development. They emphasized the point that other participants had made that feedback should be addressed between the leader and subordinate and should not linger as judgment on the person. The participant had received feedback early in their career on their presentation skills that led them to better self-management and communication for the rest of their career.

**The Operations Officers**

Four operations officers participated in the study. A trend among case officers was their commitment to being the leader who would stop the trend of abusive treatment of subordinates. They all acknowledged that they were not perfect leaders, but that any screaming and humiliation they saw or experienced from their leaders was not effective and not the right way forward. They had a strong commitment to excellence and wanted to embed that in others without the arrogance and tyranny they experienced from their leaders. The case officers also communicated an ability to hold multiple truths about their work and how it was viewed around the world in terms of ethics. They acknowledged the ambiguity in ethics with being trained to lie and manipulate for their job roles, yet telling the truth and being honest within the US government being vital.

Participant 7 had a career at the CIA that began in the more military-like contexts and developed into advocating at the organizational level for more attention to leadership development. The
participant joined the CIA after serving in the military with a blend of pragmatism. They were not ready or interested in the private sector and had a preference for teamwork. Societal crises during their tenure affected their family life, including being away from key family events following 9/11 and serving as an organizational leader during the 2023 COVID pandemic and major US events like the killing of George Floyd and the January 6th attack on the capitol building.

The participant had served in many roles in the organization that gave them enterprise-wide knowledge, not only of operations, but increasingly in their career, in terms of people. Their roles included working in recruiting and screening individuals. The participant highlighted that a screening to indicate leadership potential could be useful to document in the person’s files, which include a variety of other skills and personality assessments.

The participant was particularly passionate about accountability. They explained behaviors that needed to be met with zero tolerance from leaders, such as harassment. The participant wanted to put structures in place that made accountability easier organizational-wide. While analysts focused on wanting the organization at large to be held accountable for unethical operations, they focused on wanting people to be held accountable for their behavior throughout the organization. They had clearly thought through the risks involved in holding someone accountable via severe punishment or removal in an intelligence organization, in which employees have access to a great deal of valuable information. The participant explained some mechanisms they thought might mitigate the risk, like having people under investigation be removed from their position to work on lower classification projects until their case was determined. They knew exactly how many senior people they had removed from leadership positions for inappropriate behavior.
In terms of self-awareness, the participant put resources into development programs for their teams because they saw the growth and impact from those programs. They argued that these programs should be implemented organization-wide. They saw a future in the organization with uneven personal and leadership development and predicted that it would negatively affect those who were not exposed to such opportunities for growth. The participant acknowledged humility as a leader by working to understand the emotion others experienced and the emotions that could be provoked in themselves. They ensured that they prepared themselves to hold capacity for others’ emotions during difficult situations and they allowed others to support them in managing their own strong emotions and passion.

For communication, the participant emphasized stories in which they or another leader clearly and regularly communicated their values to their teams. They described being told useful leadership lessons from a trusted leader during their career. That mentor provided them feedback on their own leadership tendencies and the mentor provided back stories on the mentor’s ways of leading. The participant mentioned caring for people, even in the moments of counseling someone, noting it was important to leave people with their dignity. The participant talked about preparing for those hard conversations and knowing there was a lot of emotion that would come back at them.

The participant began describing ethics as being part of how they were raised and the importance of lessons in “doing the right thing.” They felt that ethics was deeply rooted and something people either had or did not have. Efforts to teach ethics required reinforcement to change pre-existing beliefs. The participant saw a main ethical requirement as being able to admit one’s mistakes. They communicated ethical dilemmas with a sense of virtue, with statements such as, “There's no way that actually in good conscience…” “I felt compelled to do
it.” and “I always felt compelled to…” The participant saw people with bad ethics who obtain leadership power as something that could increasingly damage the organization. Participant 8 described holding and understanding the tensions present in the CIA and in the greater US national security system when it came to ethics, noting that much of the underlying intentions of US national security could be seen as unethical. The participant delivered a very somber portrait of the big picture of US national policy, offering what they pointed out was a Western point of view of ethics. They had joined the CIA from a sense that they owed the US their service and also knowing that they liked the idea of adventure, new challenges, and not getting bored.

To the participant, being accountable as an ethical leader meant to take on the challenges being a leader poses. It required shifting from solely being a technically focused employee to identifying as a leader and being accountable to the leader identity. It also meant doing the right and honest thing, no matter their position and refusing to follow orders that ask them to do something dishonest. The participant thought a leader was accountable for facilitating hard work and connection among teammates because people could not do everything by themselves, even if they thought they could.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant often asked themselves what people might have thought about them in order to help the participant understand and regulate their own behavior. The participant asked themselves if they were behaving as a leader that someone could trust and rely on. The participant appreciated feedback from subordinates and their peers. They would regularly check in with their teams to get an idea of how they were doing and what they needed. They also really appreciated formal peer and subordinate reviews.

The participant believed in communicating with subordinates honestly, fairly, and
directly. They thought that feedback that was not direct did not serve subordinates. It was important to be clear about issues so that the subordinate had a fair chance to address it. The participant made it clear that subordinates would not be judged entirely on outcomes because sometimes you do things well, but get unlucky. They clarified that if you don’t do things well, then that’s not ok and it will be addressed.

Ethics to this participant meant listening to oneself in order to do the right things when there was a major dilemma. It also meant doing the smaller, daily things to be ethical and build rapport with subordinates, like checking in on them and being consistent as a leader. Being truthful and reliable was important, which the participant described as being honest with subordinates about what they did not know and generally being as transparent as a situation would allow.

Participant 9 was highly committed to learning and working through challenges as a technically skilled employee and as a leader. They had a great deal of compassion for a variety of global views and understanding why people believed what they did, even if it was hateful or misinformed.

Accountability themes for this participant included being accountable for learning leadership and being a leader that took care of administrative items so that others could focus on their work. They regularly offered multiple justifications for their leadership behaviors, including the idea that a leader could behave in a way that was of service and served their own self-interest. The participant described examples of how their own passion for the mission let them be highly engaged as a leader in the operations. Knowing their role as the leader allowed them to support those conducting the operations. The participant thought it was important to hold people accountable for excellence by pointing out when subordinates cut corners and offering a chance
for them to do things the right way.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant was very comfortable sharing their own tendencies in their personality and how those impacted their behavior. They knew their preferred way of working as a case officer, which was often a solitary job, was working alone. The participant had to learn to adapt to working with and supporting others in order to be a good leader. They began to embed the idea that actually, being a case officer was a team sport and checking in with others could help an officer be more effective.

They were naturally very direct in their communication and had to learn to have a little more attention to how feedback might affect others, emotionally. Data was important to them and they did not want to give feedback that was too general or not backed up with evidence. As the participant matured as a leader, they reviewed their emails more carefully to check the tone of what they were saying or would send them to another person to review before sending.

The participant thought about ethical dilemmas through step-by-step logic exploring the legality of options or orders from above, alignment with the government, and alignment with personal ethics. Integrity was important to them. As a person and operationally, integrity was important and meant reporting things accurately, being honest, and working hard. The participant acknowledged that having integrity, being honest, working hard, and not cutting corners was difficult and may not come easily to everyone, but that those things were challenging did not mean you should not do all those things.

Participant 10 joined the CIA after meeting a recruiter during graduate school. They were passionate about leadership and the challenges the CIA faced in developing operations officers into good leaders. Although the participant had experienced authoritarian leadership at the organization, the participant also worked with leaders who provided time to connect on a human
level and who went beyond job roles to support the participant as a person.

Accountability for this participant was doing the right thing, even if it was against popular opinion. They had an outlook that people, especially junior officers, sometimes needed a second chance after they screwed something up. Providing a learning opportunity after a mistake was part of being accountable to caring about others as a leader. The participant saw care and accountability as good for the person and good for the organization because the training and teaching people to do their job involved investing a great deal of resources into people, so it’s not in the best interest to fire people for initial mistakes.

In terms of self-awareness, the participant appreciated feedback they received from subordinates and peers. The participant described really thinking through others’ perspectives, and integrated feedback by considering and adjusting their own behavior. Even without direct verbal feedback, the participant realized times when the participant needed to self-regulate not just their own behavior, but their own words or attitude. The participant had no problem acknowledging when their own views had become outdated and adapting to newer ones.

As the participant got more confident in his leadership, they held regular meetings where they made sure everyone had a chance to participate and share what was going on with them. The participant felt that facilitating communication between subordinates was important. They also saw that giving people permission and an opportunity to take a break from the intense work and engage in the human side of the workplace was important.

Being ethical to this participant was being honest and telling the truth. An ethical leader was responsible for promoting such a culture to their teams. They saw ethics as standards and that people needed to uphold their own high standards throughout the day, whether people were watching, would find out, or not.
Next Up: Breaking Down the Evidence Sections

The study findings are broken down into three parts: accountability, self-development, and communication. The next section outlines the themes of the study.
Breakdown of Part I., II., and III: Accountability, Self-Development, and Communication

The range of issues over which leaders are expected to demonstrate expertise continues to grow (Tourish, 2019). This study emphasizes three leadership themes, Accountability, Self-Development, and Communication and proposes that exploration of these themes serves as a solid base for leaders from which they can consider the wide range of issues they encounter and are increasingly called upon to address. Through the stories of CIA leaders arranged within these themes, readers are able to consider how leaders made sense of their leadership journey in an ethical tense environment, with implications for organizational leaders across contexts.

The first part, Accountability, explores how leaders made sense of speaking truth to power, their perspectives on punishment and consequences for a variety offenses, from financial fraud to adultery, and their relationship to holding themselves accountable, given the leadership positions they were in by choice or not.

The second part, Self-Development, examines the personality and other assessments that participants across interviews referenced and reported useful or needed work. It also looks at their stories that describe humility (or lack of) in leadership and its impact. It closes with participant notes on emotional awareness and regulation, with attention to a few participants who shared the importance of social support in self-regulation.

Part three, Communication, offers similarities and differences in how participants prepared for hard conversations, such as giving negative feedback to subordinates. It describes some of their process for delivering feedback and touches on the value described in verbally communicating leadership lessons, drawing additional attention and explanations for behavior beyond just leader role modeling.

The three parts ultimately play off of each other. Some initial steps in leadership are
covered in accountability, such as holding oneself as accountable to the identity of a leader, which subsequently requires attention to learning and developing oneself in that leader role. A leader then needs to prepare for and engage in related communication. In a similar interplay, a leader should learn to engage with humility, which is supported by self-development, and that base serves to support leaders in having accountability conversations, such as verbally addressing inappropriate behavior or verbally expressing ethical standards that will be enforced by consequences.

The closing chapter discusses implications for the research, considering what the evidence implies when looked at through the lens of the theories and how knowledge from theories could guide organizations towards more ethical leadership in action in the organization. The discussion chapter also challenges the theories in their implementation. For example, there is attention to how enabling leaders, per complexity leadership theory, could be enabling unethical behavior, if individual moral actors are not developed in the network.
PART I. ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability: See the problem, own the problem, do something about the problem.

Introduction

The conventional definition of ethical leadership emphasizes leaders' responsibility to “reinforce" standards (Brown, et al. 2005). Another common definition says that an ethical leader promotes ethical conduct through practicing and managing ethics and holding others accountable for it (Yukl et al., 2013). From these definitions, as well as others, it is apparent that to be an ethical leader, a leader cannot just behave ethically themselves, a leader is responsible for socializing those ethical standards so that they can be practiced and internalized by others. The process of accountability includes other aspects of ethical leadership which include honesty and integrity, fairness in decisions, and support for others (Yukl et al., 2013).

While helpful to define ethical leadership in terms of accountability, definitions tends to overlook the nuances involved in the application of enforcement, as well as other critical accountability aspects integral to effective leadership. Accountability is a multifaceted concept with various interpretations, attempting to reduce it to a singular definition would oversimplify its implications (Koppell, 2005). Nevertheless, accountability, in its many meanings and interpretations, holds significance in the realm of public administration. Continuing to establish the many forms of accountability, the process of enacting accountability fairly, and broadly socializing accountability remain important.

Failing to have congruent notions of accountability in an organization can undermine an organization’s performance. An organization plagued by "multiple accountability disorder" will fluctuate between conflicting interpretations of accountability (Koppell, 2005). For example, the CIA as an organization cannot be accountable to the mission at all costs and also be accountable
to employees’ health and well-being. The conflict between those notions is that, when simplified, being 100 percent mission focused does not allow space for there to be accountability to employees’ overall health and well-being. The organization would have to campaign and educate its workforce to instill and teach, with more complex considerations, how both notions can work together, because employee health and wellness enables the mission. The conflict in simplified notions of accountability and lack of guidance on how to incorporate seemingly competing notions leads to frustration among leaders trying to manage the organization’s struggles.

Five dimensions of accountability at the organizational level are transparency, liability, controllability, responsibility, and responsiveness. At the leadership level, definitions and quantitative investigations into ethical leadership have struggled to fully describe the array of aspects leaders encounter in terms of accountability (Yukl et al., 2013). Nonetheless, proficiency in using reinforcement, maintaining high standards, and tackling emerging issues is crucial for leaders to cultivate an ethical atmosphere (Downe et al., 2016). This section on accountability focuses on leaders’ responsibility to laws and rules, responsiveness to subordinate and organizational needs, and liability for behavior and performance for themselves and others. The concern is with leaders' perceptions of the relationship between different stakeholders and how they approach managing the relationships for an optimal outcome. The sections are broken down into themes across the participants’ views on accountability, which are punishment and consequences, accountability to others, and truth to power.

**Key Findings in Accountability**

Discoveries within the segments discussing "Truth to Power," "Punishment and Consequences," and "Accountable to Others" point out that the CIA is an institution where its leaders emphasize a strong commitment to values such as excellence, fairness, justice, and the
mission. However, they also acknowledge the presence of norms within the organization that undermine leaders' capacity to enforce these standards uniformly throughout the organization. The narratives underscore a perception that as individuals progress within the organization and assume leadership roles, some may feel a decreased sense of accountability rather than an increased one, with regards to appropriate conduct.

The participants' encounters with expressing candid views to authority reveal the conflict between the organization's principles and what is genuinely tolerated within the organization. For example, the CIA headquarters has a verse engraved in its main entrance that highlights the importance of truth, yet participant examples show that their instances of speaking truth to power was not always welcomed. While none of the participants were reprimanded for speaking the truth, it tended to not be immediately well-received. In terms of enacting the truth, two participants provided specific examples of when they had to make a decision on their own to act against what was expected of them. One participant used intelligent disobedience to prevent harm to another person and another participant felt the potential self-sanctions that led him to open an investigation into an incident that required one, but that others did not support.

Several significant themes emerged concerning punishment and consequences. These encompassed the participants' emphasis on addressing financial misconduct, their commitment to mitigating gender discrimination, and the difficulties in ensuring accountability for adultery and inappropriate relationships. Participants took to enforcing small infractions to try to create the norm that officers needed to be up to standards at all times. They used discernment in their processes of holding people accountable, with a focus on fact finding.

In being accountable to others, participants held themselves to high standards as leaders and admitted that they learned leadership over time, with trial and error. In an ambiguous
environment, leaders had to be constantly learning from positive and negative experiences. They found it important to help people in the organization find the role in which they could be successful. Participants told stories of dedicating their time and finding resources to support subordinates who were struggling to find their fit. While they spoke to noble intentions, it was apparent that leaders had a lot of power in deciding whether subordinates should move or stay. The changes in roles often required one specific leader to advocate for the subordinate, rather than an administrative process that would assess the role change. While this streamlined the role changes, it was an example of the power that leaders held. Appendix B displays the breakdown of participant contributions to the themes.

**Tensions in Accountability: Power and Systems Considerations**

In much of the sections, there's a notable tension within the theme of accountability. Accountability inherently involves power dynamics, and this tension arises because it's possible to wield power excessively. The brief explorations of tension that follow the participant perspectives in each section sheds light on the intricate nature of power within the context of leadership accountability. While the officers expressed their ethical intentions to utilize accountability power for organizational improvement and ethical environment creation, the tension considerations acknowledge potential pitfalls, like the overuse of power, unintended organizational consequences, and context-specific challenges. Tensions also include how the systems inside an organization influence employee’s ability to enact accountability. For example, the sexual harassment reporting processes within organizations can leave people reporting open to revictimization and retaliation (Buchanan et al., n.d.). This nuanced perspective offers a critical dimension often missing in popular organizational and leadership books in the security and military space that often fall into the category of former organization members congratulating
each other in their explanations of how their approaches solve organizational problems, with limited attention to the balance of complex tensions, particularly ethical tensions (McChrystal, 2015; Willink & Babin, 2017). This study lays no claim to solving any problems, but aims to lay out the complex perspectives and tensions in ethical leadership that the CIA faces. Through the lens of the various moral, ethical, and developmental theories; this study recognizes the complexity of supporting a more ethically-led environment in a mission-driven organization.

**Accountability and Social Cognitive Theory**

The moral environment within the CIA was built upon a history without the most ideal behavioral norms and a level of compartmentalization, mostly for secrecy’s sake, that led to uneven social and moral standards across the organization. Participants observed the results of the CIA’s history of uneven standards and took it upon themselves to hold people accountable for inappropriate behavior by enacting punishments and consequences, in attempt to embed higher standards across the organization. Although passionate about enforcing social and moral standards in the organizations, leaders remained dismayed at the lack of organization-wide results and contemplated how else the organization could influence the standards by which more employees would behave. They wrestled with the limits of their power.

When an environment contains shared moral standards, socially approved acts are a source of self-satisfaction, while acts violating moral standards face both external and internal sanctions. The dynamic fosters social reinforcement for the environment's internal mechanism of self-evaluation (Bandura, 2023). Without the shared high moral standards to facilitate self-regulation, leaders felt like they were left to regulate and provide accountability in attempt to develop shared high standards. The standard across employees was needed because regulation of moral behavior is not solely a matter of individual willpower; instead, it is influenced by how
moral standards are put into action.

Leaders are not the sole influence on moral conduct, however they are able to impact the interplay that regulates moral conduct. Moral conduct is regulated by the interplay between thought, self-sanction, and the network of social influences (Bandura, 2023). Leaders are able to impact each of these influences on moral conduct, particularly via punishment and consequences to establish and reinforce norms in an organization. At the lower levels of moral development, consequences help a person learn what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior in an environment. At the higher levels of moral development stages, individuals consider their actions not only in immediate rewards and punishments (logic of consequences), but also in relation to justice, and human dignity (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) as internalized notions shaping self-sanctioning (logic of consequences).

Essentially, leaders end up being constant enforcers when what they are enforcing fails to be socialized at a grander organizational scale. According to social cognitive theory, for social norms to take shape, CIA employees must first learn the right thing to do through role modeling, communication, and experiencing or witnessing rewards or consequences for behavior. Knowing the right thing must be internalized before the employee becomes a leader themselves. They must have developed their own internal self-sanctioning that keeps the power they gain in check.

**Accountability Conceptions**

The term "accountability" has been employed to signify various concepts, from being law-abiding to being externally or internally constrained (Koppell, 2005). Instead of creating a definition that would incorporate every meaning for accountability, five dimensions of accountability have been found to better explain the dynamic function of the word. The five dimensions, also called conceptions, of accountability are transparency, liability, controllability,
responsibility, and responsiveness (Koppell, 2005). The conceptions were created within the field of political science to support organizations’ evaluation of their areas of accountability. This study looks at the multiple conceptions of accountability in terms of how participants’ explained accountability in the ethical leadership context.

**Organization Culture Type**

This book is not formally assessing the CIA or US military’s measures for culture type, which is available via the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCIA-Online, 2019). However, this book contains interpretations of cultural type, when there was evidence of one of the four dominant types in the participant’s descriptions and “war stories.” Interpreting the culture type helped make sense of the tensions employees faced when it came to accountability in their organization and with organizations with whom they collaborated. While not a key theory in this research, this study touches on the ethical leadership tensions at the CIA based on conflicts between the culture types when it comes to accountability. The study references terms such as “clan culture” and “hierarchy” which the Organizational Cultural Assessment Instrument (OCAI) defines.

The OCAI is used to find out how strongly an organization represents each the four dominant types of corporate culture: Clan culture, hierarchal culture, adhocracy culture, and market culture (Koehn, 2022). Each of these types of culture contains preferences, norms, and tensions in managing accountability. OCAI defines culture as shared assumptions in an organization regarding how to adapt, survive, and thrive. The assumptions are expressed in leadership styles, “war stories,” rituals, processes, and incentives. Below is a brief overview of the culture types:

Organizations with a strong clan culture tends to have teams that operate informally and are encouraged to act based on what their values dictate. Employees do not have to wait for leaders’
top-down instruction. There is a sense of family in clan cultures. Clan cultures have a potential ethical weakness in that employees may not want to “out” other employees who are behaving inappropriately.

Adhocracy culture seemed to be what might strengthen acceptance of speaking truth to power in an organization. Employees in organizations with strong adhocracy traits value their independent judgement and feel empowered to speak out if they disagree with leaders or what fellow employees are doing or saying. The following accountability section on truth to power shows evidence of employees pushing for adhocracy. The section on being accountable to others shows the participant’s dedication to learning, which is necessary for an adhocracy culture to achieve success, but was not described as being embedded throughout the organization when it came to leadership.

Organizations with strong market cultures are based in getting things done successfully and do not like risk or experimentation. There is a great deal of internal competition and reward. Employees in these cultures want to win and are expected to push themselves and preserve the organization’s reputation for high achievement.

Hierarchical cultures are highly structured and formalized. Employees look to top leaders and policy for guidance. The reliance on high level leaders and structure can provide a false sense of security because some leaders will not be competent and some policy will be dated or will not fully address a situation. It can be difficult to get employees in an organization with a strong hierarchical culture to take initiative and speak truth to power.

The CIA officers’ reflections on situations, their careers, and the organization showed that the organization was balancing all the cultural types when it came to ethical tensions. While this book does not offer an exact measurement of the CIA’s cultural profile, its points out where
an ethical tension may be explained by the cultural type that was surfacing.

**Accountability and Ethical Approaches**

Officers described a Rawls-like approach to leadership and justice (Sequeira, 2018). Rawls saw the role of the leader as safeguarding basic liberties for their people and providing equal opportunities to socially compete in pursuit of their interests. Like Rawls, officers emphasized fairness in imposing punishments and consequences and using accountability as means to an organization with less discrimination and more equal opportunities for employees. Although the CIA is a hierarchical organization, participants emphasized the importance of speaking truth to power as a way to collaborate with positional authority and ensure their views were represented. Also like Rawls, officers perceived leaders as responsible for protecting people from the outer risks to ensure the continued stability of the organization (Perry, EL book, p 202). Officers protected their employees by taking responsibility for errors or mistakes under their watch. Officers welcomed taking “hits” for mistakes in their own higher positions, rather than letting the responsibility fall on the lower-level employees, whose status might not be developed enough to be protected from consequences, such as formal or informal career sanctions.

Of course, too much protection of employees can lead to a lack of transparency and hyper-loyalty that causes further behavioral problems. However, when approached from the Rawls angle of leaders shielding employees under the umbrella of justice and fairness, participants noted successes in developing people and moving the mission forward. They removed the shield when subordinates’ behavior was not a mistake, but was inappropriate and unfair. For example, when it came to acts that were illegal and immoral, such as sexual harassment, officers did not hesitate to hold people accountable, once the process to fairly gather facts had been conducted. In those scenarios, officers did not see the sexual harassment as a mistake, but a clear violation
that needed consequences. The participants then used punishment and consequences with an eye on justice.

**Navigating Part I. Accountability**

The presentation of evidence is organized into three main parts, Truth to Power, Punishment and Consequences, and Accountable to Others. Truth to Power encompasses an analysis of the participants’ experiences verbally speaking truth to power and enacting the truth. Punishment and Consequences describes different contexts in which the need for accountability emerged. Accountable to Others provides evidence of participants learning and practicing leadership and finding the right fit in the organization for themselves and others.

**Section One: Truth to Power - Speaking and Enacting**

*Walking into CIA headquarters, on the on the left, there's the biblical verse, ‘And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.’ It demonstrates the ideas of integrity and honesty. In a profession where we definitely manipulate, a culture of truth telling is critically important.*

Speaking truth to power aligned with the primary accountability concept of transparency
Participants strongly emphasized the importance of "speaking truth to power" within the CIA, viewing it as a demonstration of organizational excellence. This accountability to the truth was seen as crucial, intertwining with the CIA's mission and individual integrity. However, there was a tension between standing up for the truth and potential career costs. The CIA's unique culture, characterized by a blend of hierarchy and clan-like traits, allowed for a distribution of power uncommon in other government organizations.

**Key Findings**

"Truth to power" was viewed as a trait relevant to both leaders and followers, embodying active decision-making and a sense of ownership in the mission. Participants explained that the high stakes involved in national security underscored the criticality of truth and transparency within their work, acknowledging the potential risks associated with being forthright. Ultimately, this accountability for truth extended to verbal expression, action driven by truth, and an understanding of the associated risks, necessitating leaders to exemplify and instill this culture of truth-telling. Given the CIA's historical challenges with transparency, the task of speaking truth to power often fell upon participants to exemplify, articulate, and strive to instill as a concept, against prevailing cultural elements that incentivized opaqueness and dishonesty.

**Accountable to the Truth and Self**

Participants repeatedly emphasized instances of speaking truth to power and felt deeply that it was part of displaying the excellence on which the CIA prides itself. Their accountability to the truth encompassed being accountable to the US government, the CIA’s mission, and to themselves. In the conceptions of accountability, their descriptions demonstrated commitment to the primary concept of transparency. Transparency deals with revealing the facts and is the "literal value of accountability," (Koppell, 2005, p. 96). In action, transparency requires regular
review and questioning, as well as presenting truthful information to stakeholders. CIA officers knew that at the individual level, they had to be accountable to transparency so that at the organizational level, the CIA could be transparent in their role of providing truthful intelligence information to the rest of the US government. While officers expressed a willingness to be transparent and speak truth to power, there was a tension in standing up for the truth and themselves at the potential cost of their careers.

Throwing hierarchy to the wind, when it came to high-impact information, made the CIA unique and showed a distribution of power among employees that was uncommon in hierarchical US government organizations. Officers spoke to the difference between the CIA and other organizations that they experienced when it came to being accountable for transparency. They found the military, with its strong hierarchy, sometimes displayed resistance or defensiveness at the CIA employees speaking truth to power. Although having traits of a hierarchy, the CIA had had strong clan culture traits, with employees able to operate informally and relying less on purely top-down instruction than a hierarchical organization. Hierarchical organizations and clan organizations are both inwardly focused with strong mission and values. However, hierarchical organizations are highly formalized and structured with well developed policies, rather than encouraging spontaneity and innovation (Koehn, 2022). Uniformity and control are valued in the hierarchy, and leaders are known for having the answers. The clash in culture types was apparent when CIA officers described the reactions of military officers at the CIA officers’ willingness to “know” and speak the answer, even when they held a junior rank.

Truth to Power; What it Says about Ownership in the Organization

The inclination to express the truth to those in authority is a trait that exists as both a follower and leader. This action encompasses not only leading and serving as a role model, but
also emphasizes that followers are not mere contributors in their job roles; they are actively making decisions with ramifications for both themselves and the organization (Ward, 2018, p 296). When CIA officers could openly voice the truth to those in power, without facing career repercussions, the organization was fostering a culture where employees felt a strong sense of ownership in the mission. Conversely, in the other direction, the degree of ownership CIA officers felt towards the mission empowered them to articulate the truth to those in authority. Empowered followers hold ownership and own their responsibility for shaping the direction of the organization. Allowing employees to speak truth to power is a critical part of developing agency in the workforce (Ward, 2018). Followers can serve as a force for moral accountability and empowered followership is often expressed in courageous behaviors.

**Speaking and Enacting the Truth was Crucial Given the Work**

Participants emphasized the importance of truth to power in their line of work, being that lives are on the line, whether immediately or in the long term outlook. They emphasized that their work could change policy and affect national security, making the truth even more crucial. One officer described being accountable for the truth in her discussion of the importance of excellence in honesty, as well as in job skills:

*What does excellence look like? In the context of the CIA, we'll talk about tradecraft, we'll talk about evaluating sources. We'll talk about recruiting sources and how you need to be honest, not mislead from the truth because you're responsible for people’s lives.*

She described the high stakes of responsibility at the CIA and how that required a high level of responsibility for the truth. Another officer echoed the sentiment that the CIA’s mission in
national security made transparency vital. He discussed how you never knew when you were going to be in a situation where you need to speak truth to power:

*That's a lesson too that I think I learned continuously throughout my time there. You never know when you're going to have to, or when you're going to be called on to do that very thing. You never know how sensitive someone is going to be to receiving the message, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't give the message. This is national security. It's not grocery shopping.*

The officer recognized that the person to whom you need to speak the truth might not be ready to receive the message, but that did not mean that you did not deliver the message. The work at the CIA was too important to not speak truthfully and express one’s views:

*Being honest is important because of the day to day business of things, like the our ability to handle money to pay sources, to be out on your own all the time, to obtain intelligence from that one-on-one operational meeting where you have to come back write up a piece of intelligence that could change US policy. Overall, a culture of truth telling I think is critically important.*

Lives, policy, and national security were on the line, which meant the truth and transparency was vital. Within the participants’ context of speaking truth to power, it encompassed verbal expression of truth, action driven by truth, and an acknowledgment that doing so could still pose risks for the speaker, despite efforts to cultivate a truth-centric culture.

**Navigating Truth to Power**

In the following participant perspectives, officers describe truth telling in the name of the
mission and national security, to include telling the truth about operational limitations, risks, and failures as well as analytic transparency. The sections are broken down into examples of participants verbally speaking the truth to power figures and enacting the truth against social pressures from authorities and peers.
Verbally Speaking the Truth

Verbalizing the truth was important across contexts, which included environments in which a leader might be known for not taking subordinates’ comments very well. Officers told stories of speaking truth to power throughout their career at the CIA, to include continuing to have to speak truth to power as a GS-15 in a meeting with the CIA Director. When participants ventured outside of the Agency, to work with other US government organizations, like the military, it was apparent that even if the CIA had some shortcomings in their norms of truth to power, that they still had lessons to teach in being accountable to the truth. The lessons might support culturally hierarchical organizations in which employees typically look to top leadership for guidance (Koehn, 2022). In culturally hierarchical organizations, formal rules and structures are strongly emphasized, which can lesson the freedom for junior personnel to speak up.

Within the CIA, one officer spoke to some of the weaknesses in their culture of speaking truth to power. The officer explained that in meetings with the director, it was customary that “back benchers,” who sat across the walls and not at the table, were not expected to speak up. He, however, felt ownership of adding information if he saw that it was needed:

*When I would be briefing the most senior, like the Director, I'd be back benching, even as the Deputy Director of [Directorate]. But when you're talking with the Director and everybody, you're now a backbencher, you're not sitting at the table. But if I had something to share, opinion or value to add about what was going on in the conversation, I would do that. But people would say well, backbenchers are supposed to just sit and observe. And I'm like, ‘Yes, but I'm there for a reason. If I have value to add that I'm going to add it.’*
The officer elaborated on the leader-follower relationship. Despite being the deputy leader of an entire directorate, he emphasized the need to embody the role of a follower, specifically a courageous one, prepared to express the truth in the presence of the CIA director during a briefing. He continued to give an example of when he spoke truth to power to a CIA director who had a background in the military. That director did not appreciate his comments and his colleague questioned his willingness to communicate limitations to the Director as a “back bencher,” but he continued to feel that the truth was the right thing to express:

I think leadership to me, which also then rolls into courage. I remember one specific example with Director [former military director]. Doing that back benching, I got asked a question about a delivery of material. And the Director got very upset in the meeting about my answer and he closed the meeting and everybody was like, ‘Why did you say that to him?’ And I'm like, ‘because it's the truth.’ It's not that I was trying to upset him.

He explained speaking the truth to the Director as a matter of his job role, yet it also required personal courage to do. The participant attributed the Director’s poor reception of the truth to his background in the military, in which his behavior of speaking the truth would have been seen as a challenge to a leader’s job and role.

But it's my job as [job role] to make sure he's aware of the limitations of what we can and can't do. So when he asked the question, I answered the question honestly. And that's that personal courage thing where sometimes people don't want to get yelled at, for lack of a better word. And [Director with a military background] would do that, he would yell at people. I would
call it yelling. Civilians in the room would call it yelling...I would sit there and go, that's nothing...But he would get irritated and agitated.

The participant was proud of his willingness to speak truth to power to a leader whose values did not develop in an organization that valued being accountable and transparent in the same way that was expected at the CIA. The participant himself had a military career and perhaps saw his behavior to speak up not only as the right thing to do, but a lesson to the Director needed to learn in leading a civilian intelligence organization, where this behavior needed to be welcomed.

A participant in the analytic realm spoke to the discomfort and defense she found from high level military personnel when she spoke truthfully about her analytic area of expertise to people of higher rank. In one example, she was on a military base, in their territory, and still spoke the truth about her team’s analysis. It was counter to the military’s views, yet, she saw it as her job to share her team’s perspective:

I got to go out there with all of these colonels, and majors and captains. I’m consulting, so I'm supposed to speak up when I think that there's something that they're not considering, these men with guns are not considering, and it’s something I did over the course of the week. At one point at the end of day, this Colonel, turns around and looks at me and he says, ‘You should go to (country) and run for office,’ because everything that I was saying, the advice that I was giving was, ‘I don't think you understand the politics on (country).’ And I was trying to say as politely and diplomatically as I possibly could, and apparently I wasn't quite making it. And he was really offended, but his information and his reaction were also wrong. It would have been wrong to not speak up.
The officer attributed the poor reception as part of military culture, in which leaders in the hierarchy were more likely to be seen or want to be seen as “all knowing.” The analyst indicated in this example, and in others, that there might have been gender dynamics at play when she spoke the truth to male superiors. Not only was speaking truth the power not particularly welcomed because of the military’s hierarchical culture traits, but perhaps there was a resistance in the typically male, military leadership culture to hear the truth, which to them, were unwelcomed critiques rather than factual considerations.

The officer gave another example of a former military leader who worked at the CIA and “gave orders” in a way that might be accepted in a organization with strong hierarchical traits, but were counter to the CIA’s clan and adhocracy traits that allow for employees to use their own judgement:

_The deputy manager told me I had to do a rotation assignment to another office, which was fine, but he had this thing where he would tell us, ‘This is a paramilitary organization, you follow orders,’ and I'm just like, ‘What?’ When I knew him better, I was like, ‘What planet are you living on?’ We are analysts, I'm not following orders just for the sake of following orders._

When she was junior, the officer internally reacted to the manager’s direction and once she had a higher rank, she spoke more transparently about her reaction to his instructions to “follow orders.” Not only did the manager’s military-like directions clash in the CIA, in general, but the DA officer indicated that analysts, in particular, owned their responsibility in speaking truth to power as part of their job identity.
In other directorates, however, participants expressed that speaking truth to power was a welcomed role. One support officer said he was praised for his consistency in speaking truth to power throughout his career:

*I had a friend of mine, that I worked with, and later on worked for, who said to me after his retirement a number years ago, he said, ‘You were always the one we could rely on to speak truth to power.’ If I didn't agree with what the boss thought, I would tell him, so that's, I guess that's courage.*

He had multiple examples of speaking the truth in support fair evaluations, to include writing a rebuttal to a performance review one of his first supervisors wrote about him, which he thought was not fair. Writing a rebuttal to a performance review was structurally allowed, but was against the social norms, and something “everybody told me you should never do.” He did it anyway because he felt there was an injustice in his review and, subsequently, his review was reevaluated and his supervisor was moved to another position. The participant also valued hearing the truth when he was in power and spoke of implementing a routine in which officers under his supervision would go around the room in their weekly meeting and speak to one thing they messed up that week. He saw that speaking the truth could create changes and worked to support others in practicing it with him as a willing receiver.

Tensions: “Better” than the Military, but is that Enough?

One tension from the participants’ sense making of their experiences with speaking truth to power was that the CIA was “better” than the military at being transparent with leaders, but the examples provided doubts that the CIA’s norm to speak truth to power was strong in their
own sense. It was easy to see how the CIA’s strong clan-like culture put them at valuing transparency more than the military’s strong hierarchy; however, it was not clear than Agency employees always reached their highest potential for transparency, internally. While one officer was valued for his track record of speaking truth to power, the expression of value in his behavior could be an indication that his courage was not a norm found throughout the organization.

Though clan-like in many ways, the CIA also has strong traits that align with the hierarchical cultural type. The hierarchical culture traits likely played a role in hindering employees speaking truth to power and created tension between organizational norms and the necessity for transparency. For example, the traditional expectation that "backbenchers" should remain silent during high-level meetings deterred individuals from speaking up, even if they believed their input was valuable. This expectation clashed with the concept of speaking truth to power, which encouraged honest communication, regardless of rank or position. One officer experienced social sanctions for speaking up as backbencher, both from the leader and from peers who disapproved of him speaking during the meeting.

The existence of cultural remnants that reward a lack of transparency and truth within the organization posed a significant challenge. These remnants can undermine efforts to instill a culture of accountability and openness. Officers were left navigating the fine line between speaking the truth and potentially offending superiors, especially those not accustomed to receiving candid feedback. This balancing act requires personal courage and a commitment to doing what was right.

**Verbally Speaking the Truth Conclusion**

Examples in the verbal realm of speaking truth to power highlighted the importance of
speaking truth to power within the CIA, emphasizing its necessity, even in contexts where leaders may not readily accept subordinates' input. Officers recounted instances of courageously expressing their opinions throughout their careers, showcasing the vital role of truth-speaking, even at higher ranks and in critical meetings with top CIA officials. The contrast with other government organizations, particularly the military, revealed the unique challenges and advantages the CIA faced in fostering a culture of transparency. Despite the CIA's clan-like culture valuing transparency more than hierarchical structures, like the military, there existed internal tensions, such as social sanctions and the persistence of remnants rewarding opacity, presenting ongoing challenges to cultivating a truly open and accountable organizational environment.
Enacting the Truth: Intelligent Disobedience and Not Backing Down

Officers described moments “knew” they were right, the stakes were high, and they acted against the direction of their superiors. In some instances, officers demonstrated what has been termed, “intelligent disobedience,” which is not following an order because the orders are ethically problematic, of faulty judgement, and likely to lead to an undesirable outcome (Chaleff, 2015). In other instances, officers owned their duty for transparency in acting in what was “against the grain” of what social norms would have supported. They were not necessarily disobedient to superiors in these cases, but acted on what they knew was the truth that surrounded the situation. In their processing of these instances, they considered their own personal sanctions, the high stakes of national security, and potential repercussions. In the end, the officers described their inclination to take the risk of doing what they perceived was the right thing to do, based on the ‘truth’ in the situation.

Enacting Intelligent Disobedience

Intelligent disobedience is taught to service animals and is the act of the animal disobeying the human’s instructions for the safety of the human. For example, if a human gave the signal for the dog to step off the curb, but the dog sensed a car coming, the dog would disobey the order. In humans, intelligent disobedience is learning how to respond to authority and when to authorize oneself over the positional authority when the actions or outcomes are unethical, faulty, or dangerous. One officer enacted a textbook example of intelligent disobedience, yet the term was not used in any interviews with the participants when discussion ethical leadership, which indicated the concept had not been recognized in the organization.

An operations officer fully described his act of intelligent disobedience as part of the discussion on the general concept of accountability. He described being asked to conduct an
operation that would put an asset’s life at stake. The account describes the heavy push from superiors, all the way up to the White House, his considerations of the risk versus the gain, and the stress that followed such an act. The officer began by describing what he was asked to do and the reaction from leadership to his written and verbal push back to leadership:

They would get killed doing this and that was not necessary. I was told to do it so I pushed back. I pushed back and headquarters called me. The boss screamed at me. He said, ‘You need to follow orders. There’s a chain of command. We briefed this to the White House.’ They yelled and screamed at me.

His superiors yelled and reiterated the framework of the CIA and the hierarchical structure within the US government. Following the pushback he received when he spoke truth to power, he explained how he considered the circumstances. He took into account the longer term view, the lack of necessity for the almost certainly lethal operation, and the human compassion for a man with a family:

The operation was a briefing point. It was a briefing point for headquarters to the president. I thought, ‘First of all, I need that guy’, Plus, there would be no intel, and it was an unnecessary thing. And, he was a guy with three kids.

He described the operation and how he intelligently disobeyed orders. He tactfully told the person who would be carrying out the operation, who would be at risk, that they could abort at any time:
I told him, ‘If you see anything, just abort.’ I said, ‘Anything’. He said, ‘Oh you mean if I see [a certain thing]?’ I said, ‘What I said was, if you see anything, just abort.’ And I kind of leaned in and I said, ‘You got me?’ And he smiled and I smiled and he smiled and he said, ‘Bless you.’ And that’s what he did.

In a very human moment, in a mission-driven organization, the officer intelligently disobeyed orders and prevented someone from putting their life at risk for an operation that he “knew” did not have any true value. The officer proceeded to record the events. He described how he documented his own actions, without lies or coverups:

I wrote it, I wrote it accurately. I wrote that I gave him the guidance if you see anything, abort. So I didn’t lie, but I did not faithfully execute the guidance because I thought, I don’t know if it was illegal, but I just thought it was wrong. And I just didn't do it. Did I ever lost a sleep over that one? Yes. I think that might be the only time I ever disobeyed an order, but I've never had any problem with that one insight. I just thought that was crazy they asked me to do that.

In reflecting on this act of courage, he detailed the stress it caused and highlighted that, in his extensive career, this was among the very few instances that kept him awake at night. The officer described how his status, the environment and skills gave him confidence to act how he thought was right. He knew that his writeup was read for what it was, intelligent disobedience:

I think they knew what I did. But what are they going to do? It's the middle of a war, it’s not like
they are going to send someone out there to reprimand me. And they wouldn’t be able to find a replacement with my language skills. Plus, my reputation was good. I mean, I was friends with those guys, but they were mad at me. We all got over it.

The officer rationalized the lack of repercussions for his act as partly the chaotic circumstances at that time. He also factored in his favorable reputation and personal connections with individuals at headquarters, who had advocated for the operation to take place. His overall position and network played a role in enabling him to smartly defy orders while still advancing in his career to higher-level positions. Had he not had the status, it seemed that he would have still disobeyed, but might have faced professional consequences.

Not all officers might think to intelligently disobey when their attempt to speak truth to power is not well received. Even if they believe they are morally justified in their view on an act or operation, they may not have smartly doing things differently in their repertoire of options. Furthermore, there is the question of how much knowledge and experience an officer must have to identify that they are within a context that calls for intelligently disobeying, versus being in a context where the orders might not be ideal, but should be followed. This officer believed he was in a position where knew enough about the wider operational and strategic issues to make the call to intelligently disobey.

The described intelligent disobedience is one that provided the best outcome for many of the actors. The officer kept his job and reputation, and the other person was kept away from harm. The loss was that the White House did not see the operation fully carried out.

Standing Against Social Norms and Leadership Preferences

Officers had other examples of times in which they stood up against social norms to do what
was right and truthful. Their acts were not necessarily intelligent disobedience against orders, but they were disobedient against what was inappropriately expected of them. In two examples of standing up against social norms, officers displayed courage for acting that was internally rewarded, if not socially rewarded by leaders and others involved. Despite the social sanctions, officers described how self-sanctions were what kept them aligned with acting on what was as true and right, either by duty or by law.

An analyst described a case in which her boss tried to tone down her analysis of a policy that was failing and it was seen as deviant by other US government members. The analyst’s boss called her into his office to address the reaction he received from the other US government members about their critique on a program the US was supporting:

*He called me, my boss, and he screams. I hear him yell my last name and I'm like, ‘Oh, crap, that doesn't sound good.’ I walked in, he's like, ‘What the heck, I just got my ass handed to me by this guy for 15 minutes, because you wrote this.’ And I'm like, ‘What?’ I'm looking at the opening line and, it was in the first sentence, so he didn't even have to read through. And I'm like, ‘well, that's not even what I said. You changed my language.’ And he's like, ‘because what you said was actually worse. I was trying to tone it down.’*

The officer pushed back on the manager’s reaction and explained how it was not just her analysis, but her team’s analysis that they all agreed upon:

*I said, ‘Okay, that's fair. But I wasn't wrong.’ Everybody in my office knew I wasn’t, we weren't wrong. And so everybody stood behind me because, truth to power. Right? If the US*
government is using national security resources towards this issue, this thing, and that's failing?
They need to know that.

Her piece communicated that a national security policy was failing. While the manager tried to soften the language, it still did not land well with the US government customer. Nonetheless, the officer felt it was important to communicate their findings and not hide the message just because it was not what the government leader wanted to hear. The officer did not want to bend to an apparent norm of being dishonest or not entirely truthful to someone who could not handle the true analysis. She continued to assess that maybe there was a better way to have communicated it, but did not think that backing down was the right thing to do:

He needed to know that exact thing so that he could make adjustments…maybe it was just a messaging situation. But…it was still the right thing to do. And my management knew, that after the initial shock of being yelled at, at eight o'clock in the morning, they knew that it's something that you have to do and I think part of it is, if you're going to speak truth to power you have to be willing to own it.

Although the officer’s manager was initially frustrated, they came together and agreed the piece had been the right thing to communicate because otherwise, policymakers would not know what might need to be adjusted. The story recognized the importance of not only standing by the truth, but owning it, no matter the reaction.

Another operations officer recalled a tough situation in which he stuck to the truth of what happened, despite the social pushback. In this instance, someone in a foreign service had acted
inappropriately and against the law. The foreign service killed someone who had sabotaged an operation in order to kill a leader in their unit. Although the inappropriate act could have been viewed as morally acceptable from some perspectives, an eye for an eye, it was against the rules and laws under which the CIA operated. The participant knew he had to act, despite peers and others who did not see the killing as a problem because from their perspective, it was fair:

I remember sitting back saying ‘Holy shit, let me see, oh, this is against all the rules that, you know, the ethics and the ethos that we held’. Now, I had unit advisors who really didn't care. Your instinct of God is, ‘This person deserve it, so screw it.’ But then I thought about it for a long time and we had to launch an investigation.

The officer took his time and could not get past his “knowing” that the incident needed to be investigated. He continued to describe the social backlash he received from launching the investigation:

I remember calling the Chief telling them about this and everyone was pissed at me, the unit folks were pissed at me, the [foreign] commandos were ... upset and they were mad at us too, because I said, ‘What you all did wasn't right.' It’s doing the right thing and kind of going against the grain sometimes. the idea of just taking ownership of everything or you do, your successes and your failures, that was always really important for me...to follow all the things I'm talking about.

He knew he was violating social norms and “going against the grain” to do the right thing.
and communicating what was right and wrong to others. Others saw the incident as morally ambiguous, and he admitted it was when considering the will of God, but when considering that the laws made it black and white, there was a clear right and wrong. The officer’s deliberation allowed him to feel that if he did not initiate the investigation, he would face the personal sanctions for not acting rightly. The officer summarized how he could not just preach “doing the right thing,” but it was important to him to also do what was right and truthful in his own career and experiences.

In the theme of difference between the CIA and military organizations, a case officer commented on a reaction a military General had while interacting with the highest levels of CIA leadership. The participant shared the General’s shock at the leeway the CIA offered its people:

*The General once commented to me how he the biggest thing that struck him at the Agency was the amount of authority and independence that we provide our officers. He said, “You give the authority to a GS 10, the equivalent of a first lieutenant, that I wouldn't give a colonel.”*

The participant’s reflection on the General’s comment demonstrated a major difference in how the CIA authorized its people versus how the military did, or did not. CIA officers down to even low ranks had some authority to act in the way they determined appropriate, likely with less threat to punishment than military members might face.

**Tensions: Reputation and What Was Morally Acceptable?**

In recounting the stories, it was clear officers wanted to do what was appropriate and ethical, but navigating the perspectives within the organization remained a challenge. Moreover, the potential social and professional repercussions were unclear at the time of their action, but the
officers hoped they could leverage their reputation to keep them out of trouble. When they found that verbally speaking truth to power was ineffective, they acted in their disobedience or other actions that worked to transparently show the truth.

The right thing to do remained challenging because officers had to navigate differing perspectives on what was morally right or wrong. Some actions were perceived as morally acceptable by certain individuals but were illegal or against established rules. This tension emphasized the need for clarity and alignment regarding ethical standards within the organization. The perception of courage and integrity varied among individuals within the organization. While some recognized and appreciated the officers' acts as acts of courage and integrity, others perceived them as deviant behavior. This difference in perception adds a layer of complexity to the ethical narratives.

Another tension evident in these narratives was the uncertainty about the outcome had the officers not possessed favorable reputations or if their leaders had opposed their efforts to act ethically in alignment with the truth. The officers faced potential backlash and sanctions due to their choices, whether it was dissenting against superiors' orders or challenging prevailing social norms within their work environment. When people are of lower rank or have not built their reputation, their income and benefits are at risk with enacting courageous followership. This tension between doing what is right and facing the fear of negative consequences sheds light on the courage and resilience required to uphold ethical principles.

In addition to the complexity in their work roles, the officers had to grapple with high impact ethical dilemmas when it came to being transparent about the truth. The social norms at the Agency allowed officers to potentially follow through on acts they deemed were universally unethical, such as putting a life on the line for minimal gain, retracting analysis that was “bad
news” for leaders, or not following through on an investigation of unlawful acts. While the
officers’ narrative told of success in acting in transparency, it was likely that others who did not
have the moral judgement, courage, or self-sanctions might have bended to the unethical asks
and expectations.

**Enacting the Truth Conclusion**

Officers defied social norms to uphold truth and do what was right. These acts didn’t
necessarily involve disobeying direct orders, but rather challenging inappropriate expectations.
Two instances demonstrated courage in standing against social norms.
Truth to Power Conclusion

The ideal CIA culture embodies the idea that the truth is important to speak, hear, and be acted upon, no matter from what rank or status it may be revealed. This section highlighted that the norm of speaking or enacting the truth is not as strong as the organization may desire it to be in its ideal. In action, as a leader, being receptive to viewpoints from employees of all ranks tests the leader’s ability to “flatten” the structural hierarchy and receive from lower levels across contexts. It seemed easier for the more authoritative leaders to rule at the organization’s headquarters than over officers who were at a distance in the field. One officer’s ability to act against orders and remain unpunished was likely due to not only the CIA’s more acceptable culture of truth to power than other hierarchical organizations, but also enabled by the officer’s reputation, mission intensity during a war, distance from headquarters’ senior leadership, and the officer’s unique and needed skill set. Truth to power was more strongly embedded at the CIA when compared to other military and government organizations, but the CIA could still work on tactics to help leaders embody the ideal.

Next up: Punishment and Consequences

When it comes to individual actors, the prior section revealed the importance of the ability for employees to be individual actors who are willing and able to speak to and act on the truth. However, the following section examines narratives about the organizational norms socially authorizing individual actors to engage in inappropriate behaviors. *Punishment and Consequences* explores the social context in the organization and participants’ narratives of attempting to raise and enforce standards.
Section Two: Punishment and Consequences

*I think there are infractions, that if you partake in that type of thing, you should never be allowed to have a leadership job again... but we don’t do that.*

Punishment and consequences deal with the accountability concepts of liability and responsibility (Koppell, 2005). The fundamental concept underlying liability as a component of accountability is that simply exposing wrongdoing or poor performance is not sufficient to establish accountability; there must be repercussions, either in the form of professional advancement or setbacks (Koppell, 2005). The participants focused on accountability via punishment and consequences by imposing setbacks to make it clear behavior that was unacceptable. Responsibility deals with asking if the rules were followed. It includes fidelity to law, formal and informal professional standards or behavioral norms, and internal standards of behavior and performance that are not set by law. The participants’ perspectives on accountability provides much needed information on how leaders deal with large sets of morally relevant factors, how social influences change the weight they give to different factors, and what combinatorial rules they use to determine their actions (Bandura, 2023).

Key Findings

Participants saw themselves as highly accountable for enacting punishment and consequences against inappropriate behavior that was clearly illegal, such as financial misconduct and harassment, assault, and discrimination. They also took on high levels of accountability in using punishment and consequences when enforcing smaller infractions that were not illegal, such as operationally cutting corners and poor performance. Officers had varying levels of ownership when it came to affecting issues of adultery and inappropriate relationships among fellow employees. Though participants who discussed those adultery and
inappropriate relationships saw the behavior as immoral and problematic to the work environment, they found the lack of legal base made it difficult to know if they should and how they would step in to address the behavior. They reported wanting organizational support and training for enforcing issues and embedding norms for inappropriate interpersonal behavior, such as harassment and discrimination. They more easily discerned inappropriate behavior that was mostly fact-driven, such as financial misconduct and poor performance.

The participants generally approached their accountability with the theme of social contract theory, which asserted that moral obligations depended on agreements to which one must adhere to support the governance of society, or in their immediate context, the governance of the organization (Sequeria, 2018). For the “redlines” of illegal behavior, the social contract leaders held was written in law and their job in federal service to uphold the constitution. Whereas being accountable to others, simply by holding a leadership position, dealt with the implied contract a leader had with followers, which was not necessarily written, and not always spoken about. In terms of ensuring justice through consequences and punishment, participants’ examples of their processed towards accountability aligned with the process of discernment. Many participants depicted a thoughtful process that resembled their approach to tackling intricate intelligence matters during their CIA roles outside of leadership.

Punishment and Consequences: Considerations of Legality, Illegality, and Morality

When it came to illegal financial behavior, assault and harassment, and inappropriate relationships, participants agreed that these behaviors were not acceptable under any circumstances. They saw that in an ideal organization, standards surrounding these behaviors were strongly enforced, but in their own experiences, organization-wide commitment to enforcement varied. Their own ability to influence inappropriate behavior hinged on the legality
of the behavior itself. Additionally, they perceived that their capacity to influence behavior depended on the level of seniority they held, which determined their authority to enforce consequences. When in positions of authority, they approached accountability with a sense that they needed to enforce minor infractions to protect against further misconduct and normalization of that behavior. To make determinations about consequences for subordinates, officers displayed skills in discernment. They held themselves accountable for enacting a systematic analysis of the situation before asserting consequences. Discernment helped officers identify the right course of action for holding people accountable. The participants exhibited notable proficiency in gathering information.

Much of the CIA's culture revolved around navigating gray areas, but participants specifically highlighted certain clear boundaries where behavior was unquestionably unethical. Most notably, all participants emphasized the importance of controlling misconduct related to finances. Regardless of whether there was a lack of social sanctions for such behavior, by peers or other leaders, these leaders took it upon themselves to enforce consequences when it involved actions that represented financial misconduct. They were motivated to enforce consequences from their own self-sanctions and their own self-interest. They felt that enforcing was the right thing. They also knew logically, from the legality inappropriate financial behavior, that enforcing proper financial behavior was the right thing to do so that their career was linked to enabling illegal financial behavior. All participants who brought up the topic of holding people accountable for improper financial behavior saw the financial misconduct as a clear red line. However, for many participants, other improper behaviors were not as easy to address.

Participants expressed strong views regarding the repercussions for assault and harassment. However, there were also examples of some participants partially excusing misbehavior. For
example some participants recognized that harassing behavior was wrong, but they also emphasized the environmental influences that contributed to such misconduct. In the case of adultery and related inappropriate relationships, participants approached with similar ideas that the behaviors were immoral and problematic to the work environment. However, without clear a clear legal line, officers approached adultery and inappropriate relationships with varying levels of belief in their capacity and duty to hold people accountable for the sake of security and integrity.

Table 3. breaks down the types of inappropriate behaviors described by the participants. Notably, personal harm to others caused by individuals was overall viewed less critically when it was not also illegal. The legal regulations surrounding financial misconduct made inappropriate behavior easier to identify and enforce. Officers authorized themselves to regulate poor performance, though poor performance not illegal and generally did not harm others. Regulating performance, however, clearly linked to their leadership identity and within their perceived bounds of enforcing.

Table 3

**Typology of Inappropriate Behavior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Operational or Administrative</th>
<th>Personal, with harm to other employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illegal</td>
<td>Financial misconduct</td>
<td>Assault, Harassment, Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not illegal</td>
<td>Poor performance</td>
<td>Adultery, Inappropriate relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social Cognitive Theory and Consequences**

Moral behavior is influenced by factors beyond just moral thoughts or personal
determination. In social situations, our actions that go against norms (inappropriate behavior) may elicit two types of consequences: social consequences imposed by others and self-imposed consequences, which are imposed by the self and align with internalized norms. Both types of consequences are part of self-regulation. Social consequences come from external sources and can involve various negative outcomes that a person fears. On the other hand, self-imposed consequences guide our behavior by making us anticipate that our actions will impact our self-esteem and inner contentment. Even if our behavior is not externally disapproved, self-imposed consequences ensure that it still affects how we see ourselves and how we feel about ourselves. When inappropriate behavior more difficult to justify to oneself, people are more inclined to behave morally (Bandura, 2023). When behavior is not illegal, a clear external signal of morality, it will be easier to justify.

Personal antecedents that influence inappropriate behavior include a desire for resources, pursuing a cause, unfulfilled emotional needs, poor achievement, and also power (Van Kleef et al., 2015). Social antecedents for norm violations involve a “local” norm that overrides how someone ought to behave. Local norms of inappropriate behavior can be formed when people see others break the rules without consequence, or see others as ambivalent about violations. Engaging in inappropriate behavior seems to involve a calculation based on personal desires as well as social influence that may corrupt someone.

Self-efficacy beliefs involve judging one's capabilities in challenging situations and perceiving how effective they can be in achieving success. It reflects one’s confidence in exerting control over their behavior and environment. Participants communicated varying levels of self-efficacy in holding people accountable and impacting the wider organizational environment. They spoke to a desire for CIA leaders to enact more accountability throughout the
Agency when it came to behavior what was illegal or immoral. They saw enforcing consequences as a way to encourage more moral behavior among officers. Participants also described a need for additional support, such as effective training and organizational methods of publicly sharing instances of accountability and punishment to further communicate to others that there will be consequences for inappropriate behavior.

**Laws Versus Regulations**

Regarding their perception of inappropriate behavior, participants discussed the distinction they made between laws and regulations. For participants, regulations were guidelines, while they defended laws in their role as government servants. According to participants, laws were not to be adjusted or broken:

*The Agency says the regulations are there as guidelines. But every regulation can be waived. It may take the director to waive it, but it can be waived. Ethically, of course, the big thing we can't waive is law. The Agency can't waive law. US law is US law. But regulations are not US law.*

*I felt like it was my job to play up to the line. Get things done as long as we stayed on the allowable, the legal side of the line.*

*People who work in government were supposed to be upholding the Constitution.*

*Following the law doesn't mean that the Agency is going liberal or going leftist.*

*Following the rule of law is something that every American should be able to agree with us.*
Laws were supposed to stand as the ethical “line” for the organization. Regulations could be formally waived, but laws could not. Illegal actions were those that went against the US law, whereas the CIA had its own regulations that remained flexible. Participants, however, recognized that not every act that is legal is moral. One officer described how they weighed the “right” or ethical thing to do when it came to her boss asking her to enact something for the mission that she thought and felt was inappropriate, to the point where she would not want to be associated with the act:

_I probably couldn’t say it was illegal. So the legality of it probably was there. Weighing what to do about the dilemma definitely included, ‘What would I be thinking and feeling? How would I explain that behavior to my kids? When they knew what I stood for? Or my staff, when they knew what I stood for, or all the people that I had led over the years that had respect for me._

The participant experienced a moral dilemma with an act that she felt was immoral, but was probably was not illegal, the participant looked to social sanctions, citing her kids and colleagues who would be disappointed if she carried out the act.

**Navigating Complexity**

Officers understood and communicated the nuances in what was moral in the CIA environment. One officer described multiple lines of questioning he asked himself when it came to identifying if something was ethical. He used this across work contexts:

_For me at work, the first standard was, ’Is what I'm doing or what I'm being asked to do_
legal?’ Takes us to the Constitution. Is it legal and is it properly approved? Because of the nature of the work, is it right and consistent with the intent of the executive branch? Then, I always thought of things that are at the personal level, am I treating other people the way I would want them to treat me if our roles were reversed?

The legality was the first question a few participants communicated that they had in mind when it came to the “right” course of action. They let the CIA and US executive branch dictate the legality. Once legality was determined, they moved into their personal ethics and the self and social sanctions they might experience for carrying out an act.

Dealing with Job Skill Contradictions

Participants provided numerous examples of their efforts in holding others accountable for transgressive behavior. In the DO, in particular, participants cited the challenge leaders had in regulating behavior in a directorate that trained people to lie, deceive, and generally reduce the self-sanctioning of their own conduct, when it was part of their job role as a case officer. The nature of the job seemed to offer cognitive practice in excusing one’s bad behavior. As predicted by social cognitive theory, self-imposed limitations could be weakened or removed through the rationalization of moral considerations and the influence of current social contexts (Bandura, 2023). In the CIA context, in the DO, there was daily practice in lying and manipulating as part of the job that had to potential to weaken self-sanctions:

At the end of the day, there is a degree of culturally unacceptable behavior that we have to engage in, which is lying, cheating, thieving, that kind of stuff.
The participant noticed when the lying and manipulating was happening outside of someone’s operational role. The participant provided an example of when taking that behavior back to their way of working with others within the office was problematic: 

But he was manipulating the system because he wanted to rise up and he had wanted to be chief of the office and wanted to do this that and other stuff.

The self-interest and manipulation bled into how they saw some officers worked using their operational skills, even outside of their operations. In addition to the manipulative abilities of officers hired into the DO, the nature of the job likely weakened normal self-imposed limitations for inappropriate behavior, like lying and manipulation.

Peers and Leadership Lacking Social Sanctions

Participants spoke to the ease at which they saw certain peers, subordinates, and leaders partake in inappropriate behavior without punishment. One participant concluded the solution was not only training, but consequences that were made known within the Agency that would collectively shift the social norms. One officer described the larger issue of double standards as a major problem in the organization when it came to consequences to build social norms against inappropriate behavior:

The biggest problem that I think we have in the building is that there are double standards. Certain people have been allowed to get through who are connected or already senior literally have been fired from jobs while they were already senior and then subsequently went on and got other jobs. People who are GS-12 doing that same behavior get fired and they
are told they have to leave the agency.

Another, saw a person who behaved like a bully move into the senior ranks. Although the leader’s behavior was not illegal, it had a harassing element. Moving up the ranks allowed him to impose himself strongly over the workforce:

*Once that individual became a senior manager, his willingness to bully was only exacerbated by the authority that he thought he could throw around.*

The officer who was allowed into the senior ranks pushed his ways onto the workforce with limited overhead. His treatment towards those on his team did not create an environment open to feedback, reporting, or other communication. Another participant further described the lack of social sanctions that allowed for inappropriate behavior:

*There were issues with drinking. There was an issue with some sexual harassment. Maybe not physical touching, but like, comments in sexual innuendo or unwanted advances after somebody had had a couple of drinks.*

Because there was a lack of social sanctions for the inappropriate behavior, participants found themselves policing the inappropriate behavior that did not socially police itself. The participant spoke confidently of his dedication to holding people formally accountable throughout his career. He removed 27 people for “all sorts of things.” The participant described one example of a financial scenario in which he removed people:
For instance, you have a revolving fund, maybe of several $1,000. You don't want to like pocket 200 bucks and then come up with some BS line item that says ‘oh, I took someone to go out to dinner and I fabricated a receipt,’ that's unethical. Okay. I fired people for doing that.

Another participant described an incident in which a peer approved an act that was inappropriate. The peer had allowed someone to leave the base for administrative reasons without formally tracking her departure. This was seen as a safety and security issue in a high threat environment. Instead of letting it go, the officer reported the incident. She described how her self-efficacy in reporting was related to a strong identification with her job duty.

In trying to find solutions for the lack of social sanctions, one officer who spent time in a training department believed the organization and its leaders were relying too much on training and not imposing consequences for behavior.

Despite the fact that you had multiple EEO officers come out and do training. I don't care if it's leadership training analytic training. Any kind of training, doesn't matter. Training can't fix some problems, without some consequences behind them...I understand the need for privacy, but unless you advertise anonymously, at a minimum, the consequences of people's behaviors, people are like, ‘Oh, you know, I can get do this and get away with it.’

The officer thought that the organization needed to go beyond training and educating people to behave better and create social sanctions through advertising incidents in which punishments were enacted. Making the consequences known in the organization would build the
perception among others that they would not get away with inappropriate behavior.

The Need for Consequences and Punishment

Throughout the topic of punishment and consequences, participants expressed a general frustration when it came to sanctioning inappropriate behavior, whether legal or illegal. Participants expressed their self-efficacy in holding people accountable, however, they were often exasperated by the environment in the organization that they were up against. Officers felt the strongest in their ability to hold people accountable for financial misconduct. They were dismayed with harassment, assault and discrimination. Adultery was a red flag and security issue, they assessed the behavior was problematic and immoral. Yet, officers displayed varying levels of self-efficacy in impacting the behavior. Many provided examples of enforcing small infractions and spoke of its importance as a deterrent. Their discernment process exemplified the strategic capabilities that CIA officers have to incorporate fair and effective accountability measures into the Agency environment.

Figure 1. reveals general norms of whether inappropriate behavior was enforced by whether it was legal, illegal, operational or administrative, or personal and caused harm to others. The flow chart indicates the contexts in which participants spoke to enforcing inappropriate behavior in their career and the perceived Agency-wide enforcement, based on the participants perceptions and influenced by media and journal publications available on such topics.

The participants’ perspectives indicated that they were willing and able to enforce inappropriate behavior that was illegal and operation or administrative, illegal and harmed other employees, and behavior that was not illegal and operational or administrative. The participants differed on their willingness and ability to enforce inappropriate behavior that was not illegal, but was person and caused harm to others. Across the Agency, there was a perception from the
participant’s views and from other articles and media that behaviors that were illegal and were operational or administrative were not strongly enforced. Inappropriate behavior that was illegal and caused harm to others was something the organization was attempting to strongly enforce. If the inappropriate behavior was legal and was operational or administrative, it tended to be enforced, whereas if the behavior was legal and caused personal harm, there was not an organization-wide attempt to enforce it.

Figure 1. Inappropriate behavior traits and enforcement perceptions

Navigating Punishment and Consequences

The participant perspectives is broken down into five subsections. The first section is financial misconduct, which covers instances of career consequences for financial misconduct and confrontation as a form of punishment. The second section is about participants experiences
and views on the issues of harassment, assault, and discrimination in the organization. The
discussion part discusses the value of confronting small infractions. The fourth deals with the
emergent topic of adultery and inappropriate relationships at the agency and their impact on
teams and resources. The fifth section addresses how participants approached instances of
infractions using discernment to gather facts and try to fairly evaluate misconduct and impose
consequences for it.
All About the Money
*It's a million dollars...*

Financial Misconduct

Financial misconduct gave participants a clear red line to enforce, perhaps in part because it was a regulation that was also legally based. Participants generally saw regulations as up to interpretation, but they viewed laws as standing and “in stone” and linking back to their commitment to government service and the constitution. The financial red line was often socially sanctioned early in their careers with experienced instructors during their first training experiences reinforcing the standard of complete honesty on their accounting documents. Self-interest might have partially motivated participants to focus on regulating financial misconduct. Due it the legality regarding finances, leaders would be held accountable for subordinates’ financial behavior that was not in line with the law.

*Ethics is critical, even just the day to day business of things, like the our ability to handle money to pay sources, to be out on your own...*

With the autonomy that CIA officers experience in their roles, especially in the DO, finances served as a clear redline that leaders enforced with the hope that stopping transgressions would serve to develop the self-regulation needed to guard against other potential transgressions. However, participants’ goal of developing self-regulation through consequences became limited when officers tried to impose consequences and higher authorities failed follow through.

Career Consequences for Financial Misconduct

Regardless of the motivations for regulating finances, participants explained, with passion, their enforcement of ethical financial behavior as part of their personal standards for the
organization, rather than with underlying self-interest. One support officer described his reaction to finding out that subordinates at GS-level seven and eight were ignoring administrative guidelines in order to maximize their allowances:

*And they said, ‘Well, we've been doing it for months.’ And I'm like, ‘We ain't doing it anymore,’...And I went, 'It's wrong. I don't care how long it has gone on. I'm not gonna take it. Nobody's gonna take it.' I'm not saying oh, I'm gonna get this and you're not. No, it's wrong. We're not going to do it. Now that I know about it. It stopped immediately...it's a mistake. It should never have happened. We're gonna tell people that we made the mistake and we're gonna fix it today.*

He explained further,

*People were trying to figure out ways to maximize the money and I'm fine with maximizing it within the guidelines.*

The participant then responded to the subordinate saying they will leave with a consequence imposing social sanctions:

*The subordinate said, ‘I don't want to be here’. And I'm like, you can leave. But I'm gonna document why. It's not punishing you. It's just, that's the best interest of the US government. That's what it's all about. And they said, then I'm leaving, like okay, then you leave and I'll say your TDY was cut short because you couldn't get per diem. I'll just document it.*
The participant did not see the subordinates sanctioning themselves, thus imposed social sanctions through the consequence. The consequence, which was recording their potential reason for leaving in CIA communication channels, ensured that others within the organization would be informed if someone departed due to newly enforced financial standards.

Another participant, who was an operations officer, explained that he fired people for financial misconduct. He explained the context in which officers had a fund given to them and would take from that find to finance their personal lives, then lie to cover up their accounting fraud. He described the hypothetical situation and then the consequences he enacted when that situation occurred:

You have a revolving fund, maybe of several $1,000. You don't want to pocket 200 bucks and then come up with some BS line item that says “Oh, I took someone to go out to dinner and I fabricated a receipt.” That that's unethical. I fired people for doing that, by the way. I don't know if they ever were kicked out of agency but they didn't have a job for a while. And dollar amounts far higher than that.

The participant imposed heavy consequences for financial misconduct. However, the Agency did not follow suit by removing the person from the organization. While financial misconduct was illegal, the ultimate consequence, even for financial fraud of large dollar amounts, seemed to be career stagnation in the organization and not career loss.

**Confrontation as Consequence for Financial Misconduct**

Two operations officers explained their dealings with financial misconduct in the operational
context, with one participant having the control to address the misconduct and the other participant experiencing a superior curtailing punishment. The examples demonstrate how officers communicated with the subordinates about financial misconduct, with both taking a direct approach and one officer using his tone as means of punishment. They both saw that calling people out for the inappropriate behavior was part of the punishment.

One participant described confronting a subordinate after the participant’s found a problem during a routine spot check of a subordinates’ operational expenses. The participant explained that although finances was not main thing he looked at when spot checking, it was something he took a look at and addressed as needed:

*I started seeing one officer expensing personal items, as part of operational purchases. I called him in and I said, ‘Hey, did you buy an 18 dollar piece of sheet music last night? I just saw it in your accounting.’ The officer said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘Okay. So either put it in the office, or take it off your expense report. I have no qualms with the operation’ So I just called him out. He got all red in the face. I had no problem with enforcing that.

In this example, counseling and stopping the behavior was the consequence. In another example, a subordinate made a financial mistake, that was not self-serving. In this instance, the subordinate lost track of a large amount of money. Although communicated as a major mistake, there was not formal accountability, only verbal reprimand:

*I've yelled at people when I thought it was it was warranted. After one guy lost a large amount of money, I started screaming at this guy and was like, ‘You lost the money! “I mean, it was just
curses coming out. ‘How the hell could you do this?’ And then I got a call from my supervisor who yelled at me for yelling at this guy. There are times when I think a more forceful approach is warranted, but in general, you don’t lose your temper.

The participant acknowledged that he became emotionally agitated yet believed that raising his voice was a suitable response to a significant financial error. Despite his perspective, his supervisor did not view the yelling as warranted. The participant noted that the supervisor appeared to prioritize personal relationships over an impartial assessment of a big mistake:

He was he was one of these people who allowed personal friendships and loyalties to overcome good judgment and the right decisions.

The story began as an instance in which the participant yelled at a subordinate, correcting himself and offering an exception, after he had stated that leaders should never yell. However, the participant held the view that in extreme circumstances, there might be an allowance for raising one’s voice. Nonetheless, the subsequent events revealed that his shouting was an effort to impose a repercussion for a significant financial error. This action was curtailed by his supervisor, not because the supervisor believed there was no bad intent, thus no need for consequence, but because the supervisor shared a personal connection with the subordinate involved. The supervisor’s intervention was seen as justifying the error by eliminating the intended consequence.

Tensions: What Might Subordinates be Experiencing Financially?

It is unknown why the subordinates committing the financial misconduct failed to
sanction themselves and prevent these acts. While the “economic man,” (Homo economicus), is part of society that prioritizes individualistic preferences and is unencumbered by personal relations, the “social man,” (Homo sociologicus) wants to fulfill their social role and is relations-driven (Ng & Tseng, 2008). Employees guilty of financial misconduct may have been acting in their own self-interest to obtain wealth with efficiency, seeking to maximize their utility (Homo economicus) economy or they may have felt underpaid and sought to use extra money to fulfill their social role (Homo sociologicus), such as paying themselves so they can support family or engage in the social world indirectly, for example, being driven to maximize wealth so they can afford to live in a certain neighborhood within which they have social connections.

The absence of self-imposed sanctions for financial misconduct could be indicative of a broader concern related to junior employees’ compensation. While the CIA demands excellence and high levels of intensity and dedication, the organization still followed the federal government pay scale. The US General Schedule (GS) federal government pay scale reaches into the 100k level at its highest GS-15 grade. Mid-level from GS-10 to GS-12 range from an annual salary between 52k to 92k, as of 2023, with variations based on locality. CIA officers receive compensation for overtime work, as well as other financial compensation from temporary travel or living overseas, which often has a lower cost of living than the DC metro area. However, from how the participants describe their experiences, there appears to be a feeling, rightly or wrongly, that low to mid-level officers deserve additional compensation. Participants knew that despite the justification, the financial misconduct was still illegal, thus wrong and deserved consequences.

The reasoning may vary and the emotional responses of the subordinates suggested that they either believed they were justified in their financial misconduct or were emotional about being caught. There was a high level of resistance from subordinates who were GS-level seven
and eight, which were fairly low grades, considering many analysts and operations officers entering on duty at the GS-10 or 11 level and managers were typically GS-14 and above. The subordinates had been engaging in such behavior, unchecked, until the intervention of these officers. Beyond attributing the misconduct solely to greed, there seemed to be a sense of unfairness in being halted from benefiting financially.

**All About the Money Conclusion**

Financial misconduct created emotion in each of the cases, both with the participants and the other people involved. Each participant felt justified in their sense that accountability was needed for the behavior. One officer employed his emotions to administer reprimands by raising his voice, believing that this was the mildest form of consequence required. Two officers had to deal with subordinates who became angry when confronted about financial misconduct. The subordinates’ emotional reactions in both examples indicated that they had been allowed to partake in the financial misconduct, over time, until these officers intervened. Despite the legal context surrounding financial misconduct, the officers encountered opposition when it came to ensuring accountability for individuals involved.

Even the most obvious and clearly illegal conduct was not uncommon and instilling ethical behavior with regard to finances was difficult. Officers had to put aside social sanctions for enacting enforcement, such as putting aside personal loyalties and wanting to be liked as a leader. They also had to dedicate focused time to check financial logs. Some officers checked their subordinates’ financials sporadically, rather than reading every financial submission, so that they could regulate financial misconduct while still leaving time for the other parts of job and their role as a leader.

The impact of the consequences on the officers who received counseling for financial
misconduct remained uncertain. However, the participants took on the responsibility of being firm and drawing a red line for the subordinates who crossed it. With regard to the upper-left corner of Table 3, *Typology of Inappropriate Behavior*, the study finds that even the most obvious and externally sanctioned misconduct takes place in the organization and is difficult to contain. Financial misconduct is illegal and harmful to the integrity of the organization and its employees, yet the impact on the mission is not always obvious to employees. The factors of illegality and harm to integrity should prevent such behavior from taking place. CIA officers should have internalized legal norms as well as a paramount need for integrity and both should, independently from each other, prevent misconduct. The lack of direct impact on the mission should not provide an excuse for the behavior.
Harassment, Assault, and Discrimination: Historical Remnants Remain

I was one of those people where zero tolerance meant zero tolerance...sexual harassment was a zero-strike activity.

Assault and harassment, particularly sexual assault and harassment, were spoken to as redlines, and participants mentally connected these behaviors with another form of transgressive behavior, gender discrimination. Moreover, a peer-reviewed journal and personal memoir provided further information on issues with racial discrimination. Many participants had a Rawls-like approach to the issues, with justice being about fairness and ensuring opportunities for all employees to strive for higher positions. Despite the efforts officers described in enacting and encouraging fairness through punishment and consequences, the issues in harassment, assault, and discrimination remained a problem at the CIA.

In 2023 (Gazis, 2023), the US Senate and House Intelligence Committees contacted the CIA about complaints employees brought to Congress regarding its alleged mishandling of cases. In contacting the CIA, congressional committees reported the multiple allegations of sexual assault and harassment. Congress stated that the victims’ allegations were grossly mishandled within the CIA (Gazis, 2023). Allegations included lewd remarks about sexual fantasies at after-work happy hours, a supervisor telling a subordinate on her on her first day of work that they were “soulmates” and following up with sexual text messages, and a senior manager showing up at a subordinate’s house demanding sex at night with a firearm, among others (The Associated Press & ABC News, 2023). Congress called for an investigation into why the Agency has failed to address this issue over time.

The act of employees reporting to Congress highlighted the challenges the CIA faces in implementing an effective internal accountability process. Since the allegations, the CIA took
steps to address its handling of sexual assault and harassment allegations (CIA Taking Steps to Address Handling of Allegations of Sexual Assault and Harassment - CIA, n.d.). They appointed a new leader of the CIA’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office and changing its organizational structure and processes for addressing sexual assault and harassment incidents that includes establishing an internal task force, advised by outside experts. The allegations and the Agency’s response indicates there was a structural and cultural failure that prevented allegations from being sufficiently investigated to impose punishment and consequences for those guilty of the inappropriate and illegal behavior.

Participants reflections highlighted the well-known apprehension victims have in reporting such behaviors. The participants further recognized environmental factors that can enable proliferation of inappropriate social norms related to sexual harassment and assault. They discussed gender discrimination and their strong disapproval for a problem that remained to be solved into their tenure. When it came to addressing issues, some participants indicated feeling unease when it came to talking about the sexual harassment issue, yet they felt that communication early in an employee’s career was one way to instilling norms and prevent the inappropriate and damaging behavior. Some individuals explained that they utilized their own mediation skills gained through other experiences to effectively mediate when an issue started to arise. The officers took mediation as the first step in addressing issues in which there was yet a harmful outcome and not a clear intent to harm. Mediation aimed to resolve conflicts between employees and also served as a step towards implementing consequences.

Gender Discrimination at the CIA

The continuation of inappropriate behavior at the CIA seemed to be upheld, at least in part, from unchecked misconduct, both in terms of going unpunished and lacking social
consequences. The CIA’s history includes numerous contributions by women and racial minorities since its beginning as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. However, formal discrimination and discriminatory attitudes continue to influence the organization.

When the OSS was dissolved in 1945, numerous women had to relinquish their positions to the returning male soldiers. As the CIA was established, even when women came to the CIA as highly accomplished intelligence and operations officers’, their rank and salaries did not mirror their previous achievements in the same way it did for men (Van Puyvelde, 2021). A 1953 study (Van Puyvelde, 2021) found major gender biases in the organization, to include the mindset that women should not travel and assumptions that they would be more emotional and less objective than men. Despite the many recommendations made by the report to improve opportunities and utilization of women, CIA leadership opted against the immediate implementation of corrective policies. In the late 1980s, the Department of Labor started the Glass Ceiling initiative to investigate promotion barriers in the wider federal government and made recommendations to make improvements for women and minorities. Around the same time, a group of senior level women at the CIA demanded that the Director launch a new study on women at the CIA, which showed a glass ceiling existed for women and minorities. The trend in discrimination continued through 1994 when a group of women filed a class action suit against the CIA for patterns of discrimination, which resulted in back pay and promotions for 25 officers.

Behavior and Attitudes into the 2000s

Lasting cultural and structural change has failed to take root, as evidenced by continued
investigations, reports, and complaints. A 2012 investigation (Van Puyvelde, 2021) that found again that women’s careers at the CIA suffered from harassment, biases, and discrimination (Van Puyvelde, 2021). In 2023, a group of women reported to congress that the agency had discouraged women from complaining about sexual misconduct in the workplace (Harris, 2023). Although the CIA director acted on the 2023 complaint to Congress to initiate changes, one participant was dismayed that it was only done because there was outside pressure:

_In some press stories, it was almost as if CIA Director Burns was kind of lauded for how the Agency is handling this, except, if you read through the lines, it's actually not because of the Director, it's because female officers went to the Hill. So, the Agency didn't do the right thing just on its own._

From the news reports, he deduced that internal handling of the situation was likely inadequate, leading women to seek resolution outside the organization. Participants served as active voices against gender biases, but they remained concerned about the CIA’s organizational environment. The same participant who shared that it was female officers who advocated for themselves described the issues he saw and tried to affect during his tenure:

_Again, there's a promotion rates among female officers...it's bad. It hasn't gotten better. And so then, when you throw that, on top of sexual harassment issues, you're thinking like, ‘Okay, what's happening in this organization?’_

He continued to explain that women were incredibly effective operationally and held major
responsibilities in terms of the CIA’s most challenging cases. He noted that in every station he ran, female officers handled the most sensitive cases.

The officer was distressed by the issues women faced in their careers, including barriers to advancement and gender bias. Despite these obstacles, he emphasized their invaluable contributions to national security and the need for greater recognition and support for female officers within the CIA.

“Unsurprising” and Cultural Remnants

Not all participants experienced harassment, assault, or discrimination first-hand, however, several participants used the phrase, “not surprised” when discussing the topic of sexual harassment and assault. They were clearly not in shock at the public reporting of the issues exposed in the 2023 report to Congress. The officers recognized that these issues had been a recurring and persistent theme throughout the organization's history. Other officers conveyed similar perspectives, which were characterized by a lack of surprise, but a sense of uncertainty regarding how to address such a pervasive problem. One officer saw the problem personally, when a friend contacted him for support through their ordeal managing harassment in the building:

This person I knew years ago, hadn't heard from her, contacted me and spent four or five weeks just screaming about what she was going through in terms of harassment. It is more significant than we tell ourselves. It is, from small to big instances.

The participant’s remark underscored their awareness of a significant issue within the Agency. This issue manifested in both highly inappropriate conduct and less severe but still
harmful behaviors. It highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive solutions to address these issues effectively.

The CIA had a culture that tolerated excusing inappropriate behavior. In 2013, a former CIA officer argued in an opinion article that loose morals when it came to sexual behavior were part of the strength of the people working as case officers in the organization (Gerecht, 2013). The former officer opened the piece with a story about a case in which a senior instructor at the organization’s isolated training location was caught having sex with a student. The author explained the incident with the idea that relationships between an instructor and a student were equal to those between students. Among other short-sighted comments, there was no consideration to the power dynamic between instructor and student, in which the instructor had power through rank and authority. The instructor possessed the kind of authority capable of harming a student's career, pressuring, and manipulating someone who was new to the organization and held very little power or authority due to their student status and lower rank. The former officer deemed their article suitable for publication and, by connecting it to the research institute where they serve as a resident scholar, conveyed that the publication would enhance their standing as a researcher. The fact that such an opinion piece was written very recently indicates that the expressed ideas are not distant in the organization’s history.

**Fear of Reporting and Environmental Factors**

Participants highlight the pervasive fear of reporting harassment and assault within the organization, shedding light on an overlooked power dynamic not recognized in the "Randy Culture" article. Participants also emphasize how challenging environments, like war zones, can exacerbate inappropriate behavior, and they reflected on the organization’s response to this behavior, advocating for consistent ethical standards regardless of the operational context.
Male and female participants empathized with the fear people experienced in considering reporting incidents of assault and harassment. One participant understanding how assault and harassment was even more prevalent than what had been formally reported:

*I saw that come out in the press. I sadly think it's more pervasive than even what's out there because I think a lot of people are worried about reprisals. A lot of men or women, whichever side is getting harassed, is reluctant to come forward because they're worried about what can happen to them.*

It was clear to him that there were possible repercussions for reporting and victims were weighing the risks in coming forward. Another officer recognized the fear around using the system that had not gone away, up to the time he retired. This fear, compounded by concerns of potential reprisals and a lingering hesitancy to use the reporting system, underscored the complex and challenging nature of addressing these issues within the organization.

Challenging environments were explained as a reason that employees’ behavior could become inappropriate. One support officer experienced a war zone environment in which the basic needs of people were not being met. He saw the changes in behavior happen when the professional office environment was not there to at least regulate some of the worst behaviors and inclinations:

*There was some food, but nowhere near enough. So, we would ration, try to spread it out. And people would steal it, and people would catch them, and people were fist fighting over food. Would you ever think that staff officers would do that? No, but when you get to that type of*
environment, they do the same thing with the sexual harassment, they do and say things that you would never do or say in headquarters.

People said and did things without its appropriate crossing their mind. But really, you would never say some of those things in Northern Virginia. So why are you doing it here? That's the way the organization began to address the problem. The message was that the problem was about how the standards don't change. Just because you're here in the war zone countries, or wherever, doesn't mean that the rules are out the door. Now you can say whatever you want, you still have to treat people the same way you would if you were back in Washington, DC.

This participant's account highlighted the shift in behavior driven by changing environments and recognized the CIA's approach to addressing problematic conduct through communicating standards, which did not seem to have been consistent and clear enough to prevent re-occurring situations. Their reflection underscored the importance of upholding ethical standards regardless of the operational context.

Initial war zone trainings on sexual harassment and assault were not always helpful, according to another support officer. They saw the training improve over time, but thought that the initial messaging was poorly executed, and almost allowed for bad behavior that was not happening in their area:

They sent out a team from the HR office whoever it was that handled this stuff. I swear after they gave the class and everybody really, now understood what the bar was, where the unacceptable line, was. I think a lot of people realized they were nowhere near the bar. I think the rhetoric and the conversation got worse. Because people, were stopping well before the bar,
but the training put it down here. I think when they first rolled out the program, it was ham
handed. I think and they were kind of doing the right thing, but it was a mess. It evolved to get
better.

The participant witnessed somewhat swift action from HR in traveling to the war zone to set expectations of behavior through training. Unfortunately, the participant saw that his location had a decently high bar for behavior that exceeded what the HR training explained, thus giving people room to behave slightly worse than they had been. The participant recognized that the training did improve over time.

The war zone conditions appeared to exacerbate misconduct among employees in terms of harassment and assault. Participants did not view the harsher and more isolated environment as justification to the behavior, but they acknowledged that the organization needed to take more effective measures to address the problem so that they were prepared and less reactive to the issue.

The Conversations Shifted to the Wider Gender Discrimination Issue

There remained persisting challenges related to attitudes and behaviors towards women within the organization. While issues might not always escalate to the level of harassment, they remain a significant concern. Multiple male participants share their insights and experiences concerning these problems, shedding light on the complex dynamics at play. Through their candid discussions, we gain valuable insights into the broader context of gender discrimination, including the impact on promotions and the reluctance to report such issues due to potential reprisals. One case officer spoke of female colleagues explaining the root of the issues they
faced:

*I've had female officers tell me you have no idea the shit we got to put up with on a daily basis. It is not, ‘somebody grabbed my butt or made lewd comments,’ it’s that, ‘I am not a person or I am not a real officer because I am not a white male.’*

Another male participant witnessed his wife, who was a fellow officer, most likely be passed over for a promotion due to gender and allow potential reprisals to inhibit her from reporting it:

*I think my wife didn’t get promoted one time around. We were both were very well convinced it was because she was a female. I said, ‘You need to go say something,’ and she didn’t, like so many other people. They didn’t want to use that process because they’re afraid of getting labeled.*

The positive takeaway from what the men expressed was an indication that some conversations were happening among peers about gender discrimination. The officers were not trained or educated in cultural change and filled general leadership roles. As much as they expressed passion for improvements, they seemed to be at a loss for what else needed to be done for sustained change. Especially with DO participants, there was a general sense of being at a loss for impacting anything beyond what was in their immediate environment:

*We’ve got to get this right. As an institution...There's a billion reasons why it's bad... you*
have got to build a culture that doesn't allow for this. When you read the press reports of this, I think that that word 'culture' was used.

While not always escalating to harassment, these issues remain significant concerns. Male participants provided valuable insights by sharing their observations and experiences regarding gender discrimination, revealing a complex dynamic. Their accounts exposed the far-reaching impact of gender discrimination on factors like promotions and the reluctance to report due to potential reprisals. While these conversations among peers indicated a growing awareness of gender discrimination, participants, particularly those in leadership roles, expressed a sense of uncertainty about how to bring about sustained cultural change. There was a consensus that fostering a culture that rejects such behaviors is imperative for the organization's progress. The term 'culture' emerged as a key focus when addressing these issues.

**Challenges in Talking about the Issue**

Communication emerged as a theme in addressing these deeply ingrained challenges. Participants recognized the need for improved training and communication to establish stronger organizational standards against unethical behaviors. They contemplated the importance of instilling these values from the moment individuals joined the Agency, advocating for clearer expectations and more significant consequences for transgressions. Beneath these discussions lay an acknowledgment of an underlying cultural issue that ethical leaders grappled with when attempting to raise standards regarding harassment and assault. A female participant explained how the issue was difficult for people to communicate about in the Agency and recognized the lack of consequences likely contributed to the problem:
I had seen in the military that sexual assault was a really serious, serious offense. And even though I didn’t see it handled all the time, well in the military, I knew that if you could prove it, if people would go to Fort Leavenworth but I think the problem in the CIA is that I again, I think that it was overlooked. I really think people had a hard time in bringing it up.

The lack of communication about the issue was further explained by a male participant, who was passionate about improving the environment for all genders, yet even in discussing the issue in the interview, felt uncomfortable about his place in discussing it:

I always say, the weird thing is, like I feel weird as a male even talking about this.

Communication was a common theme in how to begin to address the issue. Another participant pulled from what they knew and recommended training and communication to instill stronger organizational standards against the unethical behaviors:

I think we need to do a better job at figuring out, how do we start talking about that from the moment people come in? ...I think there could be more done through onboarding programs about what the expectations are, and making some of the earlier punishments if it’s revealed, more serious so that people don’t continue...

The discussions emphasized the role of communication in addressing the deep-seated

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1 Fort Leavenworth is a military base that is home to a maximum-security prison that houses U.S. military members who were convicted of crimes or violations under the Uniform Code of Justice https://www.army.mil/article/268576/no_fail_mission_military_corrections_complex_undergoes_renovations_at_fort_leavenworth
challenges associated with sexual assault and harassment within the CIA. Throughout these conversations, it became evident that the issues at hand were not solely about policy changes but were deeply rooted in an underlying cultural challenge that ethical leaders faced when striving to elevate standards concerning harassment and assault. These challenges were epitomized by a female participant's acknowledgment of the issue's difficulty within the Agency and her recognition of the potential contribution of the lack of consequences to the problem.

**Successful Mediation Using Innate or Learned Skills**

Communication was needed, but there was not a clear sense that participants knew what needed to be said or how to approach issues of harassment, other than communicating that harassing behavior would not be tolerated. While it was evident that communication was necessary to tackle these deeply ingrained problems, there was not a clear consensus among participants on what needed to be said or how to effectively approach such sensitive issues.

One participant shared a compelling mediation experience involving a racially charged harassment issue that could have resulted in formal sanctions. In this case, a white woman took it upon herself to mediate between a white man and an Asian woman who had been subject to disparaging treatment:

*He allowed his people to disparage for work, you know in writing and instead of coming to help her or to change it, he was allowing this to happen. I mean, it was really it was bad news. I said I can do it. I can have this conversation...Give me a chance. I think I can fix it.*

*In the mediation, he was very defensive at first. I said, 'Please tell him how that made you feel. ’ She talked about how her hard work, her worries, her strong knowledge of the issue. And that*
guy crumbled in front of her. He started crying. He said, 'I had no idea what I was doing to you and I am so sorry. And I'm gonna make sure that I rectify this with my team.' And he said, ‘And I was wrong.’

This guy then you know sent me a note and said thank you for giving me the opportunity to fix that because he was very defensive at first.

The participant’s account revealed her willingness to take a risk and intervene in a situation outside the bounds of her job role but well within the purview of effective leadership. She demonstrated confidence in her ability to mediate a dispute that had the potential to escalate into a formal harassment complaint. Notably, this participant had previously confronted several injustices in her career, which likely contributed to her self-efficacy in mediating such a challenging situation. Another participant also spoke to taking on a mediation role to prevent potentially escalating situations, even likening the process to a form of intervention:

Maybe it's something as simple as ‘Well, you put your hand on my shoulder and I thought you were going to do something.’ Then, I would ask the officer, ‘Did you put the hand on that woman's shoulder?’ ‘Yes, I did. And it was an accident.’ Then I would literally bring in both of them, like marriage counseling, and said, Bill, please tell Karen. Literally, like an intervention.

He acknowledged that he remained accountable for following through on whether the mediation rectified the problem:
The participant took on the responsibility of mediating what he saw as the role a trained counselor would take on. Naturally, not all participants spoke to being strong and confident in sensitive interventions. One officer who had worked part of their career in the CIA’s learning and development offices expressed that there were courses available to support leaders’ ability to build trust to handle these types of issues. Although he spoke to a module that specifically dealt with building trust as a leader and used a scenario between himself and a subordinate, there were not examples of approaching some of the harder conversations that might have to take place whether trust had been built or not. Moreover, it was apparent that other participants did not have the opportunity to engage in these types of leadership and communication courses. The participants spoke to doing what was in their power, once they had positional power, but there was a general sense that many participants were at a loss for how else to fix the issues of harassment and discrimination on a larger organizational scale.

**Tensions: Where Does the Responsibility Fall?**

As many organizations implement mandated training about appropriate behavior, such as training against harassment and discrimination, there lies a tension in how to address the behavior in the real world, outside of the training modules. Some officers blamed the operational environment for the lowering of the standards of behavior. However, from recent and historical reports on harassment and discrimination, the behavior had been tolerated both in the field and at headquarters. There were differing opinions on the effectiveness of mandated training, with some seeing it as poorly planned and insufficient to maintain high ethical standards. The question
arose regarding leaders' responsibility in raising these standards and how they could better influence their environment, especially when they felt ill-equipped to address issues at an early stage.

Harassment, Assault, Discrimination Conclusion

The participants, regardless of gender, reported a lack of fairness negatively affecting those lower in the hierarchy, as well as anyone from a disadvantaged group. Participants of all genders refused to ignore the differences in fairness. They saw and heard about injustice some of their colleagues experienced and many also made efforts to address injustices. Over time, the levels of unfair treatment or harassment have improved, but these problems remain systematic until today.

What are the constraints on an organization-wide social contract that prioritizes fairness as a moral imperative? One must inquire whether there can be sustained legitimacy for the organization when its members hold irreconcilable differences regarding the morality of certain behaviors. Although there were no significant differences between the participants expressing support for fairness and justice, the observed cultural artifacts, like the Randy article, and prevalence of inappropriate behavior demonstrate a gap between ethical commitment and actual moral practice throughout the organization.

Much like financial misconduct, harassment and discrimination were illegal, yet participants varied in their comfort in talking about and addressing the problem. They spoke to the organization needing better training, better onboarding programs, and support outside of themselves as leaders to help fix the behavior. Participants did not speak to the need for financial misconduct to be “trained out of people” or better communicated as inappropriate, which indicates that harassment and discrimination, although also illegal, was something officers felt
unable to enforce themselves. Financial misconduct was perceived as being clear and factual, with the small infractions being easy to investigate, whereas harassment and discrimination was messy and interpersonal, thus harder for the participants have certainty in its enforcement.

Despite participants being authorized to administer justice through mechanisms enabled by the CIA’s hierarchical structure, according to Rawls, the principles of justice should be established among potential leaders and followers alike, “then the leaders would be obligated to protect them,” (McManus, 2018, p. 193). The Agency has taken on democratic debate-like initiatives to set, evaluate, and re-set goals related to fairness. For example, in 2012 they set up the Director Advisory Group (DAG) which collected data from employees on their experiences and worked on implementing changes through a top down and a grass roots approach (Van Puyvelde, 2021). The DAG women’s group, however, reported that harassment remained a problem, which was confirmed by participant insights. More people are needed in leadership roles who are willing to protect the initiatives using their authority to enact punishment and consequences.
Preventing More Work by Enforcing Small Things

‘Chief Operations,’ I was just the chief of all the problems. I didn’t do any operations.

Enforcing the small things was approached with the mindset that it was of service to the organization and beneficial to the leaders. Participants spoke to enforcing against small infractions with the aim to prevent larger infractions. As leaders, they would be responsible for managing those larger infractions. In speaking about their reasoning to enforce small things, they described themselves as stewards of the wider organization and responsible to its future generations. They wanted to instill good habits in others that would serve to build positive social norms. They approached the small things with the mentality of enforcement and serving as a role model. Their keen attention to detail held up the organization’s value of excellence and, in their more senior positions, they had the power to enforce it as they saw fit.

Excellence in Every Step…

When having positional power, the participants described holding others accountable when they saw attempts to cut corners and when they saw attitudes that had potential to be infectious. Operations officers particularly paid attention to pre-and post-operational activities that were supposed to be done, but were often neglected due to being viewed as less important.

One operations officer used colorful enforcement language of really making sure officers completed a pre-operation check with their reports officer:

Officers were supposed to check in with the reports officer before they went out to a meeting. Sometimes they didn’t go because they didn’t think they needed to, or they didn’t make the time, or maybe they just didn’t like the reports officers because they’re nitpicky and, ‘they make me combined three reports into one and they crushed my numbers’...their job, in other words. I
would crush people for that mercilessly. If they did it once, ok, if they did it again, I would actually call them back, ‘You’re not going to make your meeting, get back in here.’ I sort of enforced that with other people. I tried to operate in that way. So that everybody understood that at least that was my value.

The officer not only enforced the behavior among others, but tried to make sure he modeled it so that subordinates would know that checking in before a meeting was highly valued. “Crushing people mercilessly” was an aggressive stance on the small behaviors that he thought were necessary to ensure excellence in operations. He was not going to let standards drop and people were not going to cut corners. Throughout the interview, this officer explained his high standards for operational behavior, which came into play with what he enforced in his operational leadership role.

…Even When Things Did Not Go Excellently

Another operations officer explained how he would highlight his mistakes in communication traffic to headquarters to try to instill in people to report even the smaller details of their operations. At first, he thought he was role modeling correctly handling cases, until he made a mistake and realized he could role model disclosing errors properly in communication traffic. He felt the disclosure was crucial to do, especially if one’s operation involved a mistake:

_I actually handled some cases as a senior person and that was that was by design. Partly to show what handling the case correctly look like. One time, I screwed up something on an SDR and I came back and I wrote an extra three paragraphs in the cable about my screw up. And I had [another officer] come and see me later. He's like, ‘Why did you expose, as our boss,
something like that you did that you did so poorly?’ ...When you screw something up. You come back and, I would argue, you overachieve in showing that. ‘Hey, I did I didn't do this right.’ And I think everybody was absolutely stunned when I did that, but I felt it was important to do.

The participant used role modeling and communication to teach what he was trying to instill in other officers. The example shows that sometimes role modeling the desired behavior is not enough, sometimes, a verbal lesson is needed to explain the lesson and accompany the role modeling. Throughout the interviews, this officer had high standards when it came to people’s personal integrity, which he tried to instill in his operational leadership roles.

Watching the Attitudes

It was not just actions that leaders enforced, but also attitudes. A support officer described using his authority to remove someone from the unit because of the employee’s bad attitude, that the participant felt would be contagious to everyone else. The participant was leading in a war zone environment where he wanted to protect morale and likely did not have the bandwidth to address individual attitudes about the job. The environment was dangerous and life threatening. In this environment, with a high level of personal risk, the participant thought that it was not only important for someone to be able to fulfill their duty, but it was also important for people to regulate their attitude about the work:

Their expectations are not the same as other people’s. This guy was not happy with the conditions. We’re talking early in his tenure at the location. I talked to the boss and he said, ‘Write up a cable. We’ll say he's not welcome back. Ever. He's banned from the country.’ Because his attitude is infectious and it's bad. Everybody else is busting their butt and he wants
to be treated differently. No, we're not we're not doing that.

The participant saw the attitude early and worked with his boss to make a decision to address it quickly. He saw his enforcement stemming from his responsibility to the mission, which required people to work hard, together, in a high-risk environment. While the act to remove someone swiftly might not match the norms in a regular officer environment, the war zone context required in extremis leadership, in which there is a greater sense from subordinates that the leader influences their survival. The officer wrote to headquarters to ban the employee from returning to work there in order to not compromise everyone else’s ability to work towards the mission. His boss gave him the authority to enforce small things as needed.

**Lessons of Smoke and Fire: Pay Attention**

An officer who managed a large case of personal and security misconduct spoke to how there were small indications and rumors that should have served as an alarm to check on the unit. In the case, there were instances of sexual harassment, security violations, and officers having problems with alcohol. He encouraged others to report or investigate indications of problems before they develop into larger issues:

*There was a lack of oversight. I think what happened is we heard trickles, there's like, a whisper...when there’s smoke, there's fire. There were small little indications and people then they would say, 'Yeah, but I don't want to say anything.' Well, that's usually an indicator. It's probably far worse than then than meets the eye. They should have sent people out to investigate. Of course, though, they kept this all sort of closely held and all of a sudden, it blew up in their face.*
Instead of investigating early, the employees at the location kept quiet. The issues did not go away, however, it gave time and space for the behavior to worsen. In this instance, the behavior continued until there was a need for a major investigation that resulted in removal of senior leaders.

In another instance, a participant described how sometimes poor performance was a signal that there might be other issues with an employee. Documenting poor performance was not about nitpicking or being too hard on someone, but could serve to signal that there might be an issue. He discussed how he would address poor performance with the subordinate and then continue to document it, in case there were continued problems in the future:

_There are things like okay, you have a case officer who has not been successful on their tours, you kind of sit them down and say, ‘You're gonna get a poor performance review because you haven’t fulfilled the core function of your job, this won’t be career ending for you now. You're gonna go on your next tour, but this is going to be in your file, and this is this thing you got to work on?’ I think one of the things that the Agency is very poor on is writing up those performance reviews. Everyone tries to kind of paper things over, but it's much better to be to put these things out there, very honestly, because you don't want to neglect issues that will certainly fester later on._

He noted that it was an organizational problem to not be entirely honest in performance reviews. Even in some of the worst offenders, who were eventually fired for poor performance or inappropriate behavior, their reviews did not include their faults:
If we look back at officers who have been disciplined over the years for serious performance issues, with accountability boards, who were eventually terminated, you look back at their performance reviews, and none of the bad stuff was ever in there. A lot of this stuff goes undocumented and that, to me, was always an issue. We're not very good at accountability.

According to the participants, it was essential for leaders to report and record even seemingly minor issues, as they could potentially escalate into larger problems. There was a prevailing reluctance throughout the organization to officially document issues in performance reviews. While the initial hesitation to document may have stemmed from a leader's desire not to hinder someone's career unnecessarily, it had the unintended consequence that if a minor issue was resolved, the lack of documentation and transparency made it impossible to track and confirm the resolution of the issues.

For the Future and Everyday

Accountability for the small infractions was not for the sole purpose of immediate good attitudes and excellence in the operation. In their cognitive enforcement process, officers considered the future of the person whose behavior was not up to par. The officers considered what problems the employee might cause, if their behavior went unchecked and the employee gained more power:

This goes back to my very first job that the reason that very first boss I had that was such, that was so problematic to me. The reason he got in that position was because the evaluations that were written for him previously never highlighted his deficiencies and my feeling always was, if I
don't write a fair evaluation, a factual evaluation, I'm potentially causing some friend or colleague of mine down the road to have to deal with this. I got stuck in a bad position early in my career because no one addressed this guy's issues.

Through personal experience with an unchecked boss, the officer realized the power that CIA leaders had and how it could poorly affect the workforce. Their passion and ownership of the problem was driven by a past injustice and desire to prevent that in the future. Instead of hiding someone’s deficiency, the officer documented it in an evaluation so that it could be addressed and improved upon.

Another officer spoke to how the organization generally does not hold people accountable for being poor managers or leaders. He saw that people were rewarded for “managing upward” and did not see consequences when managers and leaders treated people poorly:

If the organization wants to improve, there must be accountability and consequences for that behavior. I’m not talking about making rules and regulations and the law, but consequences for people managing upwards kissing ass treating subordinates terribly. That kind of stuff. There are no consequences. It conveys the wrong example to officers and it just keeps perpetuating itself and that's what makes a lot of people unhappy.

Although their behavior was not illegal, it was affecting people’s well-being throughout the organization. He saw the poor behavior without consequences over and over through generations of officers and witnessed its impact many employees.
In explaining the impact that small infractions can cause, one officer summed up his view on the importance of holding people accountable and tracking inappropriate behavior when it is small and personnel are still junior:

*Almost like cancer. Bad ethics that starts as a small seed becomes something that really has the potential to be something very enterprise wide when someone gets more senior because you're in charge of more people and they will be taking your lead, good or bad depending on how you view ethics.*

In his experience, people with bad ethics can get into powerful positions and make the wider organization much worse. The officer’s view supported the idea that positional power at the CIA can have a big influence on the boarder environment and workforce. From his perspective, unethical leaders can create a generation of unethical employees to follow in their footsteps and continue the harm inappropriate behavior causes. He continued to explain this view that ethics was a daily practice:

*The hard thing about leadership and ethics and all that is that you have to re-earn it every day... evaluate your own personal ethics. ‘Am I living rightly?’ ...I know it sounds silly, but it's the small building blocks of ethics.*

He approached the small things with the idea of humility and checking in to ensure he was still acting rightly. Excellence can bring a pride and a sense of well-being that needs to be balanced with humility. While this officer had high personal standards, he also practiced looking
at himself to balance the confidence and power he had earned in his positions.

**Tensions: Will the Norms be Internalized?**

This section focused on the officer’s descriptions of regulating the small infractions, which may support an ethical environment by using consequences to shape norms. However, there is a risk that, without an employee identifying with the leader, the employee may not internalize the leader’s attempt to embed ethical norms through enforcement. Employees tend to model leaders with whom they connect and identify (Wang et al., 2021). If an employee who carried out a small infraction does not identify with the leader and dismisses supervisor’s criticisms as ignorance or ill-will and does not anticipate social sanctions from their peers, the enforcement will fail to serve as a sanction for the infraction (Cheng et al., 2021).

**Enforcing the Small Things Conclusion**

In this section, we saw the power the leaders at the CIA were given, over small issues, to reign using their own values as guidance. Officers removed people from the workplace, canceled subordinates’ operations for missing steps, and documented in evaluations issues with employees that could grow into larger problems. Although subordinate attitudes and behavior cutting corners were not illegal, officers invoked their power act against even slight infractions. They did so based on their own standards of excellence and the context in which they were leading. For some, their values and the context emphasized excellence in the operation, and for others, their values and the context emphasized excellence in attitude about the mission. The officers’ personal themes in attention to details were brought together by an overarching value of promoting best practices that they hoped to see more uniformly adopted throughout the organization.

Compared to other inappropriate behavior in Figure 1, small infractions, such as poor
performance, were not illegal, but seen by participants as necessary to enforce. Participants spoke to their perception that small infractions had the potential to reduce the organization’s integrity and reputation for excellence, thus their enforcement was related to a legacy larger than themselves. Compared to the other legal inappropriate behavior of adultery, participants exuded a great deal of ownership in regulating small infractions.
Adultery and Improper Relationships as a Red Flag

People often did not even know our last names were the same, didn’t make the connection that we were married. She had a picture of me at her desk. And he went over to meet with her to talk about a project. At one point, he couldn’t stand it anymore. He’s sitting at her desk and he says, ‘You know,’ and he points to the picture of me on her desk, ‘You know, he's married.’

Adjacent to topics of sexual harassment and discrimination, participants also commented on adultery and inappropriate relationships. These topics were not initially part of the interview’s scope, but emerged naturally based on the prevalence of such issues within the organization. The acts were not necessarily illegal, but viewed as improper, especially for an organization that lauded integrity as a core value. When improper relationships involved employees with different levels of power, one participant, in particular, voiced his disgust at that type of bad behavior and the damage it can do to the junior person’s future career.

Some senior male officers’ behavior is horrific. And then there's the females subordinate who goes along with it. That's always gonna stay with her in her career. It's incredibly unfair to that officer.

Viewed through the perspective of power, as discussed by Ciulla (2016), the participants’ aversion to adultery and inappropriate workplace relationships was not primarily about the ethics of engaging in sexual activity outside of a formal relationship. Instead, their concern centered on the misuse of power for personal benefits, often at the detriment of fellow employees, the workplace atmosphere, or government resources. Ethically, affairs revealed a lack of congruence between a leader’s personal and work life. Some ethicists argue that the ethical character of a
leader is fragmented based on context, while others believe that to be a moral leader, one must have integrity and thus have integrated both their personal and private life into a whole that exemplifies moral values, such as honesty, respect, and fairness (Ciulla, 2016).

If we define good leadership as being both ethical and effective, participants' concerns with adultery and inappropriate relationships were consistent with the idea that attaining success as a leader should not justify involvement in unethical conduct in their personal lives, thus missing the ethical part of leadership. When examining effectiveness, even if adultery is irrelevant to the job, it remains a problem if it distracts a leader from their obligations and can be seen as intertwined with leader effectiveness (Ciulla, 2018). Inappropriate relationships raised similar questions about the leader's overall character and their ability to carry out their jobs without being distracted.

There are many examples of leaders being viewed as successful in their careers, but also engaging in adultery. Adultery doesn't always hinder leaders from achieving career success, but it can jeopardize their perceived character. Infidelities have shown to be weapons of character assassination, causing the public to feel angry, embarrassed, or a sense of betrayal at the accused (Ciulla, 2016). People might prefer a leader who is privately unethical rather than publicly unethically (Ciulla, 2016), however, the best leader would be ethical in both contexts.

Workplace affairs give rise to worries regarding sound judgment, favoritism, and conflicts of interest (Ciulla, 2016). Participants regarded this lack of integrity as a cautionary sign for potential misconduct. This caution had been validated for some participants when an employee engaged in an affair subsequently faced investigations for other issues. Part of the role of a leader is maintaining a complex relationship of trust and obligation (Ciulla, 2016). Officers detailed how adultery and improper relationships impacted the mission environment and fell significantly
below their personal ethical standards. The extent of leaders’ responsibility in tackling the issues remained uncertain, and officers found themselves mostly unable to invoke illegality as a basis to address their concerns.

**Punishment for Adultery, Concerns About Integrity, and Government Resources**

Adulterous affairs were an issue that some participants did not take lightly. Participants highlighted the various ethical and practical challenges the affairs presented. One participant saw others at the organization take the initiative to break up an affair for the sake of the office environment and the officers’ reputations. Another officer described a situation in which an affair turned out to be a legitimate “red flag” for other inappropriate behavior. It was seen as a lack of integrity and even used government resources when the participant was in a position where she was put between the employee and his spouse.

One participant described an affair that was occurring in his office when he was a junior to mid-level employee. Both parties were separated and given the chance to build back their reputations:

*But you know, the individual at that point in time already had a reputation...and she wasn't the first one he had taken to the broom closet now. Mind you this at that point, that was 1989. This is late 80s. Boorish behavior then, but similar boorish behavior occurring into well into the 2000s.*

The participant offered the reason that it was the times of the 1980s where this kind of behavior was more prevalent, however recognized that similar incidents happened into the 2000s.
Another participant focused on the concern for a person’s integrity and described an ordeal of holding someone accountable for their affair. They saw it as a security issue because she felt that in an organization like the CIA, having a congruent character was supposed to run through your personal life and professional life:

_to me, that incongruence, how could they lie about their personal lives? Especially when we know the importance of our integrity. Having that integrity, to me, ran throughout everything. You couldn't have a personal life that didn't include integrity, and without your personal and professional life had to be in alignment._

Trust seemed to be an issue for the participant. She expected to work with people who had more integrity and congruence. It sparked a strong emotion against her personal standards and expectations for the workplace.

The participant experienced the employee’s spouse calling to ask where their spouse was located. The calls were not only uncomfortable for the participant, but were a use of government resources to coverup inappropriate behavior in their private life:

_and then this woman called me at three o’clock in the morning and said my husband’s not home, etc. I would go to my boss and say, ‘Listen, this guy's fooling around. And I think he is we need to send them home. To me, this is an ethical issue and it's a security issue. You need to get rid of this guy.’_

The demands of the case officer role, including late-night meetings and exposure to risky
situations, added complexity to concerns about partners' whereabouts, especially when the cause was an affair. Using government resources, such as the participant’s time, to cover up such personal matters, was problematic, as it diverted resources and created a stressful environment. The participant did not endorse the affair from an ethical standpoint and did not perceive it as her responsibility to provide a cover for his actions.

Much like the problems of affairs within the US presidency, it was not only the employee’s behavior that was a problem, but it was highly problematic to use the personnel and resources of the US government to cover up personal matters. Former presidents Kennedy, Nixon, and Clinton all used staff to attend to problems caused by their affairs (Ciulla, 2016). Using staff for coverups was an abuse of government resources, and engaging co-workers creates a stressful environment in which people are distracted from the work they are there to do (Ciulla, 2016).

I ended up having to back channel to the folks in DC and telling them, ‘This was a problem.’ When I had been told that I couldn't handle it anymore. I started to make notes of it in my own. I took personal memorandums every time that I saw a problem, and I brought it security, I brought it to leadership, but I was told not to not to do anything. And so, I was just making notes.

The participant handled the lack of accountability from Headquarters by taking personal memos of the behavior. The notes were later shown to be useful to an investigation into other improper behavior by the employee. As found in the study examining presidents’ private unethical behavior, it was usually linked to other types of unethical public behavior and was not compartmentalized to the affair only (Ciulla, 2016).
Before leaving for my next assignment, one of the leaders came to me and said, ‘Gosh, now there's an investigation on this guy. Do you have any notes?’ I said, ‘In fact, I do.’

The officer saw that affairs within the CIA were not isolated issues; they often had broader implications. Leadership had not taken action on the improper relationship that was causing stress for the participant, yet the participant was somewhat vindicated when larger problems proved to be under investigation with that same employee.

Accountability for these affairs often required unconventional methods, such as informing leadership through "back channels" or “breaking up” an ongoing and distracting office affair. The approaches did not necessarily lead to resolutions, and participants sometimes had to grapple with uncomfortable situations, such as receiving calls from spouses seeking information about their partners' whereabouts, which was viewed as an ethical and security issue.

Improper Relationships and Abuse of Power

Participants discussed their observations of inappropriate behavior within the CIA, particularly senior male officers displaying misconduct towards female subordinates. While the participants were junior-level employees, many felt unable to address these issues due to the seniority and influence of those involved. As they progressed in their careers and gained more senior positions, they recognized the need to combat such behavior, emphasizing that it could not be tolerated within the organization.

One participant described seeing the behavior and feeling disempowered to do anything about it until they reached more senior positions:

*Early on in my career, I saw really bad behavior by senior officers, mostly senior male officers,*
towards female subordinates. Doesn't mean I'm going to need to tell stories or anything like that, but there's plenty of older senior male DO leaders, who are kind of preying on the young female officers, and I thought that was abhorrent, but there's nothing you can do about it. As you rise up through the ranks, you realize, that's the kind of stuff that can't be tolerated.

The participant explained that even if it is a consensual relationship, there was longer term damage it could do to the junior officer’s career, such as discounting their achievements and being seen as chosen for roles based on favoritism. The participant expressed that as the CIA has evolved, the behavior has become less culturally acceptable, but remained present. Another participant had heard about inappropriate behavior and marked his own views, with no further inquiry.

Another participant sensed the wrongness of the inappropriate, but there was a lack of clarity on action:

I heard about people playing around...I heard about things that I felt were inappropriate. Now, that's consensual, but inappropriate...superiors and subordinates. Yes, I heard about things like that.

The participant was concerned about the negative repercussions for the CIA mission and the careers of those involved, but it was not illegal at that point. Broader implications for inappropriate relationships include its impact on team dynamics and perception of fairness. Other team members may perceive favoritism between a supervisor and subordinate, which can cause distrust, undermining the team’s harmony and ability to operate to its fullest potential. Perceived
favoritism from inappropriate relationships may cause other employees to distrust organizational processes, such as promotion, potentially weakening employee’s ability to trust and identify with the organization. Despite the potential broad implications, unlike financial misconduct, for which consequences for the behavior were backed by laws, consequences for inappropriate relationships were not outlined by law, nor to the participants’ knowledge, were they backed by rules or regulations.

**Tensions: Legality and Morality**

The absence of clear policies regarding adultery or inappropriate relationships in the organization created uncertainty, particularly concerning how these issues should be handled based on the ranks of those involved. While institutions like the military have established regulations and procedures for addressing such behaviors, the participants expressed diverse views on what was deemed formally acceptable and what warranted further investigation, taking into account security or resource considerations. The tension for these officers stemmed from their perception of the behavior as reflecting a lack of integrity, coupled with a sense of helplessness regarding potential actions. Moreover, the blending of personal and work-life in field assignments frequently led to personal matters spilling over into the workplace. The participants grappled with the dilemma of addressing improper relationships while respecting individuals' privacy. They highlighted the need to strike a balance between personal privacy and maintaining accountability in a workplace setting.

**Adultery and Improper Relationships Conclusion**

The emergent topic of improper relationships and adultery shed light on the ethical concerns on the behavior, emphasizing the need for stronger ethical frameworks and clearer reporting mechanisms to address these challenges effectively. Participants acknowledged that even
consensual relationships could harm the junior officer's career in the long term, leading to perceptions of favoritism and undermining their achievements. While there was a sense that such behavior has become less culturally acceptable within the CIA over time, participants still believed it persisted to some extent. The discussions echoed the ongoing debate surrounding the importance of leaders' personal questionable behavior, particularly regarding affairs. This debate often gains attention following public revelations of leaders' affairs, reflecting a historical backdrop within the CIA where figures like Allen Dulles, one of its early leaders, were known to be serial adulterers (Kinzer, 2012). Despite evolving norms, participants expressed concerns that such activities continued to disrupt the workplace without adequate sanctions.

Compared to other inappropriate behavior in Figure 1., adultery and inappropriate relationships were difficult to regulate because of the lack of clarity on their legality. While one participant saw adultery as a clear security issue, others saw that it was immoral, but felt there was nothing they could do about it. Officers could choose not to engage in the behavior themselves, but they had a hard time enforcing moral standards around adultery and inappropriate relationships among others. Poor performance was another behavior that was immoral, but not illegal. Participants were able to regulate poor performance through organizational processes, such as the performance reviews. Poor performance also directly affected the ability to accomplish the mission, whereas adultery and inappropriate relationships’ impact was indirect through relationships. Overall, the lack of guidance, written and unwritten, on how to address the issue impacted participant’s ability and willingness to enforce the need for appropriate relationships.
Discernment: The Process Towards Consequences

_I took personal memorandums every time that I saw a problem, and that I brought it to security...I also know that even in my role, I might not have known the whole story._

Discernment to Support Moral Decision Making

Participants exhibited a high level of discernment when it came to their role in promoting accountability and found it useful in ensuring a fair process for consequences and punishment. Discernment stems from the Latin root that means to separate or sift through (Benefiel, 2008). It is a concept based in philosophical theory and religious tradition that that relates to responsible decision making (Benefiel, 2008). Discerning requires cognitively processing multidimensional information that can contain ambiguities and uncertainties. Given that CIA officers are frequently assessing multidimensional information with ambiguities and uncertainty in their non-leadership roles in national security, it seemed natural that CIA leaders would find such patterns of assessment useful in the internal leadership context. Many participants described their processes as an accumulation of lessons learned, values, and the virtues of fairness and justice.

Discernment in leadership required committing to five principles that are: 1) Ensuring a reflective inner disposition and inner preparation, 2) Having patience in allowing viewpoints to surface 3) Working hard to gather information 4) Reflection, particularly paying attention to feelings of unease, agitation, or fear, and 5) Pausing near the conclusion to notice implications of a decision and continue to pay attention to reactions and outcomes (Benefiel, 2008). When recounting instances of holding someone accountable, participants regularly referred to inner preparation, fact gathering, and feelings that surfaced, while also implying a level of patience and follow on actions to manage the outcome. The most prevalent principle for the leaders was fact gathering, with the other principles of discernment noted or implied.
Reaching the point of holding someone accountable necessitated these leaders to fully shoulder the responsibilities and challenges inherent in leadership, which included actively seeking out and verifying the facts. When participants encountered questionable situations, performance problems, or matters requiring deeper scrutiny, they discussed subsequent actions they took as leaders that went beyond mere inquiry. Their actions encompassed allocating resources to comprehensively understand the situation, checking biases, and determining potential courses of action.

**Informally Identifying Options to Resolve and Issue**

In one case, a participant expressed a desire to gain deeper insights into resolving a particular challenging scenario in which she might have to hold someone accountable and decide on specific consequences or punishment. They began with leveraging their relationships to gather information on a hypothetical situation. This approach aimed to provide them with a clearer understanding of the steps involved and the available resources to effectively tackle the issue:

> Sometimes, I would make calls, I would wait until everybody else left to make a call. It's not recorded. There's no email about it. You can talk about the situation, you can sort of say, well, hypothetically, we've got an officer with this problem. I'm sure you've seen this before. They'd say, ‘Well, let me call Susan’...sometimes I would be able to work it out in advance so that I could see how it might progress. I really tried too hard to get the pitfalls.

The participant described wanting to be prepared for what it might take to hold someone accountable and avoid “pitfalls” in the process. Although the secrecy may sound sinister, the intent was to understand the regulations so that she did not have to commit to a certain path until
she had more information. She essentially used her connections to serve like an anonymous accountability helpline. The participant exercised patience with the notion that she did not want to commit to a process until she had more information. Pre-mature commitment was a known pitfall in business decisions (Benefiel, 2008). While there was often pressure on leaders to make decisions quickly, a decision made too early can cause failure.

**Allocating Resources to Gather Information**

Another officer spoke to a large misconduct case involving personal and security misconduct. He was responsible for investigating it. The case had potentially major consequences, to include the removal of high-level leaders. The participant elaborated on their approach and their readiness to allocate resources in order to gather all the necessary information, should the need for accountability arise:

*We had to gather all the facts. We had to send people out there. I didn’t do anything precipitously. If I'm going to do something as serious as pull leaders, leaders from the field, we had to send people out to go do interviews with everybody there.*

The officer knew that to enact a serious punishment, he had to run a thorough process and strived to attain a comprehensive understanding of the facts. He continued to explain the personnel resources he considered when gathering the information:

*And then sometimes we have to send out a second person, maybe somebody different and I would actually think about who I'm sending, are they senior enough to have seen this before and know how to walk through it?*
He knew he had to have confidence in the people he was sending and was willing to allocate valuable resources, like senior personnel, so that he could have confidence in the information they would gather and present:

_Sometimes, we would send different genders of leaders to go to the interviews. If I sent out a male officer first, and there were two or three female officers who had been subjected to the unwanted advances, they may be a little reticent to tell that male officer like what happened, for whatever reason._

He not only elicited information from multiple sources, but sent officers of different genders to gather information when he thought he might not be getting the full story. Once the fact gathering was complete, he began to formulate his response. Despite his diligent efforts to gather factual information impartially, he did not receive complete support for his choice to hold individuals accountable:

_So that was the punishment… I thought we ran a good deliberative process. I had people trying to convince me not to take this action because it would hurt that person’s career._

Despite facing opposition from others, the participant remained committed to implementing consequences. He saw getting it “right” as important to the wider organization and its future:
I thought that the damage to us as an institution was far worse if we didn't do something. Someone would say, ‘Let me get this right. You had leaders with [systemic personal problems, hostile work environment, and other issues] not held accountable?’ There's no way. In good conscience, I couldn't do that.

They viewed accountability as beneficial for the organization. And, as a principle in discernment, they took time to reflect on their own consciousness and response to the highly problematic behavior. The officer’s thought process expressed a self-sanction that prevented him from being swayed by others not to act. The participant could not, in good conscience, not hold people accountable.

Prepare Yourself, Do the Homework

Participants recognized the necessity of collecting facts because significant stakes were often involved when it came to imposing penalties and repercussions. While accountability through punishment and consequences was important, it had to be fair. They spoke to the responsibility of discernment as doing the work required of a leader. One participant explained a few of his thoughts on his preparation in the accountability process:

Tone of voice, being organized. You’re also not getting defensive, but also doing your homework. We had to make sure we had facts like because a lot of times allegations there's not something there.

The tone of voice and preparation aligned with the discernment principle that leaders should cultivate a reflective inner disposition. It was important that the officer organize himself. The
officer also acknowledged that he did not want to commit to an outcome too early. There were also instances of allegations that were unfounded and so fact gathering was necessary in order to make a call. The inner disposition and facts are important in avoiding tendencies people have in making in decisions that tend to remove fairness in the deliberation, such as making decisions based in self-interest and self-righteousness (Benefiel, 2008).

**Gathering Facts for Performance Issues**

When it came to accountability for work performance, and not ethical transgressions, participants still spoke to taking on the work of patiently gathering more information. One participant spoke to creating a dynamic in which the subordinate would have everything needed to perform better. The other participant gathered information on prior performance to check that he was not out of line for holding the officer accountable for their issues. Both approached the performance accountability as a longer-term evaluation to make a fair determination about what would be done with poor performance:

I would provide a work plan for the week and then check in every day and then checking in every half day. What I found is when you have a poor performer, they want to make it about you. They want to make it your fault. You haven't given them the skills or the resources or the training or and so we had to start with that every day that you know, did they have what they needed? They said yes. Okay, then go ahead. Come back to me if you need more.

I had counseled her a couple times on the way she interacted with other people in the office and I wrote it up because I learned my lesson early in my career...I had called [the subordinate’s] previous supervisors. They never put it in writing, but they were happy to let me know she was a
For one participant, the discernment was in providing all the resources needed to ensure the subordinate had the chance for better performance. They did not commit to the idea that there would be a consequence for the performance, but gave the person the opportunity to perform differently. In the discernment, the participant created a dynamic in which there would not be a strong counter argument to blame her if a performance consequence was deemed necessary. For the other participant, he called former supervisors to make sure the behavioral issue was a pattern and not something unique to the personnel or treatment in the office. He took to time to gather more information, which seemed to part of checking potential biases towards the subordinate.

Another participant was skilled in applying statistics to discern performance. For this participant, the statistics kept him away from a biased perspective on subordinates’ job performance. It prepared him to provide feedback, once he analyzed the statistics with other information available:

If I met with somebody, I always had statistics on how many meetings they had, how much overtime they worked, how many reports they wrote, how many developmental they had, what their meeting cycle was, the frequency their meetings. I carried all that around in my head. If I was in a station that was too big to carry it around in my head, I had a spreadsheet and I would never talk to anybody without having all that data at hand, as well as feedback from their manager, feedback from the reports officer and reading the comments on their reports from headquarters. I always did that, religiously. So I had data when I talked to them. If I had something, some encouragement to offer, or some critical feedback to offer, it was very clear
why and also what to do to make it better. You can’t really reduce most of these jobs in the DO to statistics. But you can illustrate everything with statistics. That was a practice I learned that became very important for me.

The officer collected and analyzed various statistics related to meetings, overtime, reports, and more, complementing this data with feedback from managers and reports officers. This practice allowed for clear and informed discussions with subordinates, whether offering encouragement or critical feedback. The participant emphasized that while not all aspects of these roles could be reduced to statistics, using data to illustrate points was a valuable practice. While other officers did not engage as mathematical of a discernment process, each used facts and gathered information so that they could best address subordinates’ performance.

**Tensions: Is Discernment Perceived as Taking Resources Away from the Mission?**

From the participants’ accounts, it is clear that discernment requires resources of time, attention, personnel, among others. The resources discernment takes creates tension in a mission-focused organization. Those same resources could be used towards directly mission-focused initiatives such as operations and skill building, rather than personnel issues that indirectly affect the mission. While the officers felt strongly and went “all in” on their fact gathering and discernment processes, the comments and concerns they heard from others showed a norm of letting things go for the sake of people’s careers and how accountability might disrupt the office environment. While the participants were able to see that the use of their own and the organization’s resources was for the longer legacy of the organization, the “easier way” would have been to ignore the issues and not dispense mental and physical resources to the personnel
problems.

**Discernment Conclusion**

Discernment played a pivotal role in the participants' leadership approach, guiding them in their efforts to hold individuals accountable while maintaining fairness and objectivity throughout the process. Leaders face daily pressures and hear many voices of people with various thoughts, opinions, and recommendations that they must discern, along with the facts of the cases (Benefiel, 2008). Without stating that they were using discernment, the participants described the various principles of discernment recommended for decision making. One participant discussed the use of statistics to evaluate job performance objectively, highlighting the value of data in decision-making. Others focused on providing subordinates with the necessary tools for improvement, patiently waiting for results, and considering the potential biases in their assessments. They described their approaches, such as conducting interviews, deploying different interviewers to gain diverse perspectives, and ensuring they had complete information before making significant decisions.

In terms of moral influences, applied discernment principles allowed the officers to tune out potential social sanctions they might feel for holding people accountable, when punishment and consequences might not have been socially-welcomed. The participants discussed how discernment encompassed several key principles, including inner preparation, patience, fact gathering, reflection on feelings, and continuous attention to decision implications and outcomes. The process allowed them to tune into their own personal standards. The officers showed a high level of commitment to fulfilling their social contract as leaders and committing to the universal principles of justice and fairness in gathering facts and slowing down decisions that would impact individuals.
In relation to Figure 1., the amount of discernment required was based on how much the inappropriate was interpersonal. For example, the participants that enforced financial misconduct only had to gather facts and evaluate data before contemplating punishment, whereas the participant involved in investigating security and harassment issues not only gathered facts, but paid attention to the gender of the person who was gathering facts so that the data was not impacted by personal comfort of the people interviewed.
Punishment and Consequences Conclusion

The concept of liability within accountability asks if the individual or organization faced consequences related to performance (Koppell, 2005). Participants went beyond just performance when it came to accountability and discussed consequences related to employee behaviors. Many factors affect where the CIA currently stands on what inappropriate behaviors remain normalized in parts of the organization. The organization’s history, its leaders, societal progress and lack of progress, the organization’s secretive “clan culture” inclinations, and its dispersion of employees throughout the world, among other factors, leave it with uneven social norms when it comes to behavior. Participants described how they experienced the norms and tried to use their power as leaders to socialize higher standards of behavior. Financial misconduct and employee performance issues were easiest to draw attention to and regulate, whereas the interpersonal offenses were more sensitive to address. Participants found themselves policing, as well as leading, satisfied with their impact on their teams, but perhaps less satisfied with the failure of other leaders to take on the efforts to enforce and reinforce higher behavioral standards across the organization. Participants reported themselves as responsible and left the question of how many other leaders in the organization held up themselves to the same level of responsibility when it came to imposing punishment and consequences for inappropriate behavior.

Up Next: Accountable to Others

Punishments and consequences put leaders in the role of being the so-called “bad guy or gal” by discerning and implementing consequences for inappropriate behavior. In creating a more positive dynamic in their relationship with subordinates, participants’ accountability descriptions included narratives on being accountable to others as a leader. They described how they learned
and practiced leadership, with some expressing that it came more easily than it did for others. They also highlighted a responsiveness they felt as leaders in the Agency to help subordinates find their fit in the organization. Participants felt the need to support others in finding the role where they could thrive based on their natural traits and abilities, which was seen as benefitting all parties, themselves included.
Section Three: Accountable to Others

*Leadership means being the one to make the hard decisions and if people don’t like it, you accept responsibility for it.*

Being accountable to others deals with the accountability concept of responsiveness (Koppell, 2005). An organization’s responsiveness encompasses meeting the demands and needs of constituents. Responsiveness is a customer-oriented approach, and in the realm of ethical leadership at the micro morality level, the most important customers are followers. CIA leaders must also be responsive to other customers, such as congress, the US military, and other stakeholders, however, following the focus of this book, responsiveness to subordinates is the area of interest. If leaders are responding to subordinate demands, their accountability is a function of consumer satisfaction.

Participants emphasized the importance of a social contract between leaders and subordinates in the CIA, which involved being a shield against higher management pressures, providing development opportunities, and being accountable for outcomes. Learning and practicing leadership were central themes, focusing on self-guided learning, adapting styles, and being accountable for their actions. Leaders aimed to strike a balance between service to teams and mission objectives, acknowledging the need for consistency and reliability. Finding the right fit for individuals within the CIA was vital, considering skills, personality, and job roles, and aligning with an ethics of care, recognizing the significance of relationships in ethical conduct. Balancing power and biases in supporting individuals to move within the organization was a challenge. Overall, the participants’ approached their social contract with subordinates as both transactional and transformational. The participants’ actions often had mutual benefit for the leader and for the subordinates and moved towards the goal of accomplishing the mission
(transactional). Transformational components included acts such as role modeling care for others, which participants hoped would influence subordinates to be more ethical leaders themselves. It also included acts that aimed to support subordinates’ motivation and ability to succeed, thus benefiting the leader’s ability to have a team that can accomplish the mission.

**Key Findings**

Participants took it upon themselves to learn how to lead. Without organizational leadership training during their tenure, they learned to lead through observing how their leaders impacted them and through their own trial and error while in leadership positions. Service, duty, and loyalty were the driving values behind their dedication to learning leadership, with loyalty coming with a tension that too much can lead to leaders covering up problematic outcomes to protect their subordinates. They saw that the “right” leadership practice often had combined positive outcomes for their subordinates, and the mission, and themselves. For instance, one leader made sure to greet personnel who were reporting from an operation late at night. He viewed being up to greet people as being respectful of his subordinates, making sure the operation was completed, and filling his own interest in hearing the details of the operation.

Finding the right fit was also approached as serving multiple purposes. Participants dedicated themselves to helping others find their place in the Agency because it benefited the employee, the organization, and the leader. Participants found that helping someone find a job where the requirements aligned with the employee’s skills helped the employee’s well-being. Participants saw or experienced the frustration that can come from being in a job that was not a good fit. Finding the right fit for employees benefited the Agency in accomplishing its mission and in sustaining resources. People in the right job for themselves would be more successful in accomplishing the mission if they were skilled at their job. Participants also explained how
Agency onboarding and training was costly, so if they could move someone to a better position, rather than fire them, they were potentially holding onto the investment the organization made in bringing an employee into the organization.

**Accountable as a Leader: Implied Social Contract with Subordinates**

Being accountable as a leader meant a social contract with subordinates in which the leader would pave the way for subordinates to accomplish the mission, which involved everything from ensuring resources to managing upwards to serve as a “shit umbrella” or “shield” to protect their teams from stress, pressure, or politics in the higher levels of management. Their social contract also included providing developmental “heat experience” opportunities to subordinates and being accountable for the outcomes if those heat experiences were not fully met. Their contract with subordinates was often unwritten, with one participant having a written leadership philosophy communicated to their team, and others creating their own unwritten contract. These commitments leaders created for themselves were based on their colliding experiences that provided insight as to how other organizations approach leadership and were influenced often by their own past experiences with leaders who had limited contracts with them as subordinates.

Responsiveness is the accountability concept explored in being accountable to others. Responsiveness is constituent-focused (Koppell, 2005) and in a leadership context, is aimed at meeting the the demands and needs of subordinates. Leaders are responsive if they meet those demands and needs of the people they are serving. The importance of the social contract is highlighted through officers dedicating substantial effort to acquire and apply leadership skills, assuming accountability for their subordinates' actions' outcomes, and actively developing individuals to enhance their own leadership capabilities and contributions to the mission.

**Not Entirely Servant Leadership and Other Approaches**
Participants highlighted the considerable time and effort required to learn and embody effective leadership, drawing from both personal experiences and on-the-job observations. They expressed a commitment to leadership practices, aligning their motivation for the mission with a dedication to supporting individuals. For these leaders, being accountable for leadership meant consistent reliability and a willingness to learn from both positive and negative experiences. They strived to strike a balance between being of service to their teams and achieving the mission's objectives, acknowledging that purely altruistic approaches, such as the Golden Rule or servant leadership, may not always be effective. As formal leadership training within the organization was limited, participants often engaged in self-guided learning, adapting their leadership styles as their roles evolved. Learning from previous bosses, both good and bad, was a common approach, emphasizing a desire to treat subordinates in the way they wished to be treated themselves. The participants navigated the challenges of leadership, aiming to create teams capable of collaboration, risk-taking, and successful mission accomplishment while grappling with the tension between commitment to the mission and potential ethical compromises within a clan culture organization.

Participants believed that leaders needed to absorb potential repercussions and put themselves on the line for their subordinates and the mission. They valued a social contract where leaders took ownership of problems resulting from authorized actions, distinguishing this approach from situations where subordinates acted independently without approval. A particular emphasis was placed on consistent accountability and support from leaders, stressing the need for leaders to consistently uphold their role and demonstrate ethical leadership. Overall, the theme underscored that leadership entails not only decision-making but also assuming accountability for results and fostering an environment of transparent communication and
continual improvement.

Participants claimed to work hard to right career fit for individuals within the CIA because some people in the organization were hired into a role that did not fit their strengths or preferences. They stressed the importance of placing individuals in positions where they could be most effective, aiming for a harmonious fit between skills, personality, and job roles. Their passion for finding the right fit was based in a social contract with the organization and balancing utilitarian needs with an ethics of care. In using resources to help people find their fit, they considered both organizational benefits and the well-being of the individual. Participants shared their experiences of switching roles or directorates within the CIA, highlighting instances where the organization facilitated these movements based on a recognition of a better fit for the individual. The emphasis was on understanding and responding to the unique needs and capabilities of each person to enhance their contribution to the mission. A tension officers had to balance was the amount of power they had to support people to move to other teams and the potential for biases to come into play in their recommendations.

Navigating Accountable to Others

The following is broken down into two subsections. The first consists of accounts of officers learning and practicing leadership, which focuses on experiences that shaped their learning and the practices they carried out from their leadership lessons. The second examines accounts of the officers prioritizing finding the right fit in the organization for themselves and their subordinates.
Accountable for Learning and Practicing Leadership

I wasn’t a very effective manager when I first started. I had to be aware of that. And I had to be open to understanding that I wasn’t very good to get to be what I was at the end of my career, which was pretty good.

Being a good leader took a career’s worth of time to learn, with some participants enthusiastically diving into the role by pulling leadership practices from their experiences outside of the Agency and others fully admitting that they were ineffective leaders in their early leadership positions. In speaking to their leadership styles, successes, and general stories, they all described a commitment to practicing leadership. When they combined their motivation for the mission with a motivation for supporting people, leaders described how showing up for people was showing up for the mission. They saw themselves as accountable for learning leadership, practicing it, and using their power to take responsibility for mistakes or risks. Participants expressed an importance for leaders to be consistent and reliable in their accountability to others.

There was a sense of approaching being accountable for learning and practicing leadership with the idea of “The Golden Rule” and inklings of servant leadership, yet neither in its fullest form fit the participants’ approaches. For example, “The Golden Rule,” which is to treat others how you wanted to be treated, was proven not to work in the case of one participant. For him, and others of a similar personality, he did not mind being given ultra-direct feedback with no consideration for how he might feel about the feedback. He applied “The Golden Rule” in communication with a subordinate and came to realize that although he did not mind being spoken to without consideration for his emotions, this was not the way in which others wanted to be spoken. His example showed that leaders had to learn to treat others how others wanted to be treated and expand into considering the emotions and preferences of others, not just their own.
Likewise, participants describe their duty and service akin to servant leadership and an ethic of service, yet acknowledged that it was not entirely altruistic. Many said that being of service to others made people more likely to operate at high levels, which also served them, as leaders, and served the mission. Fully servant leadership, which involves humility, valuing others over self, personal transformation of followers, and altruism, has been critiqued for being ineffectual or weak for navigating situations in which followers require instruction and direction (Salem-Tanner, 2018). Servant leadership’s priority being long term personal transformation of subordinates does not give room for immediate effective action that benefits the organization’s mission, which is necessary in the CIA.

Leaders formed their own methods of being accountable to learning and practicing leadership that encompassed being of service, having proper distance to allow for punishment and consequences, and ultimately enabling a team that can work together, take risks, and accomplish the mission. The tension from their style of building trust and loyalty is what all clan culture organizations grapple with, which is balancing the benefits of having a high commitment to the mission with the risks of pressure to unethically protect others.

Learning Leadership

Participants learned over time what it meant to be a leader. They had to hold themselves accountable to that position and to others they were serving. Officers approached learning leadership with the golden rule, a general drive to be good at their job, and using trial and error to become better leaders over time. Perhaps the inclination towards an independent learning approach to leadership was influenced by the organization's historical lack of extensive leadership training.

One operations officer noted his own leadership evolution happened as his job evolved. He
was not provided training to prepare him for the evolution or spur leadership considerations as he moved into new positions:

> As the job and responsibilities evolved. My values as a leader had to evolve. The organization had no leadership training until much later on.

Formal leadership training entered onto the scene at the CIA after most participants already completed multiple tours as managers and leaders. The officers had put themselves through their own on the job leadership training by taking notes on what it was like to work for their leaders:

> I learned from going to school on my bosses through the years, the shitty ones, I only had a few, and a lot of the really good ones. I noted the things that I liked and didn't like about them. Capturing all those mentally...and remembering those when I was in leadership position had to deal with a subordinate. Whether it was somebody that was great or somebody that was a problem child. Remembering how I wished I was treated.

The officer took mental notes and when he was in a situation as a leader, he would refer back to how he could approach a problem better than some of his past leaders. An operations officer spoke to how he decided to learn leadership because he liked to be good at everything, not because he was a natural leader:

> I'm not a natural at that leadership stuff. I really would rather work by myself. You get pushed into management; they ask you to do it. I wanted to be good at it. And I wasn't really
that good at it. I didn't really want to do it. But since it was my job, and I liked to be good at
everything, I did it. It was much easier for me to recruit assets than it was to manage Americans.
But I did get a lot better at it.

The operations officer spoke to exactly the issue the DO tended to have with their leaders -
they people recruited to work in the DO because they were people who could work by
themselves, yet when pushed into leadership roles, the DO expected them to flip a switch and be
skilled at leading and serving others. The lack of training and transition support left participants
with a trial-and-error way of learning leadership. An operations officer shared their experience of
discovering the need for leaders to set themselves apart from subordinates, especially socially:

On Friday or Saturday night, guess what you should do as a manager at 11? You should leave.
Don't stay until 12 or one or two and you can't go out to hanging out with all of your officers all
the time. You have to be accessible to them. But you're not one of the gals or guys. Because guess
what, you're gonna have to sometimes make some tough decisions, you're gonna have to
discipline people, you're gonna have to write them up for things send them home from an
overseas tour. If you've been hanging out being buddy buddy with everybody, that's gonna be a
lot harder.

He recalled a time when, as a leader, he had to incorporate the punishment and consequence
of accountability and experienced the difficulty in doing so when he did not give himself the
distance to make that accountability easier to enact:
In that first management job, I had some officers who were not performing well, but I've become too close to them and their families...when all of a sudden, I have to call them in and send them home. It becomes personally awkward.

The officer had to learn the balance of being available to subordinates and setting a distance that made it possible to hold people accountable. In some organizations, mentorship or leadership training reduces the amount of time spent learning by mistakes. However, in the CIA, there seemed to be a plethora of learning through leadership error. Another operations officer explained how he accidentally made a subordinate cry in his office while giving them feedback. Because the officer himself was someone who easily took direct feedback, unemotionally, he had to learn how to handle leading others who operated differently:

I regret the way I expressed that to that person. Sometimes the feeling part, the cues that you pick up from nonverbal communication, I just sometimes would miss it. And I did that in that conversation where that person cried in my office. It’s a failure for me. I did kind of feel as bad about that as I ever felt about anything. And I corrected myself. That was something I had to learn.

The participant demonstrated an exception to the golden rule because, in his case, how he was ok with being spoken to was not how someone else wanted to be spoken to. That was a lesson he had to learn on the job. Prior to the CIA incorporating leadership training, officers were left to learn leadership on their own. The participant learned through their own mistakes and incorporated lessons from the best and worst leaders they encountered. The same participant
described his style of leading that was based in human dignity:

*I was not a screamer. I did not throw things. I did not humiliate people. I did not call them names. I did not. Those were things that were done to me by managers, but I never liked it and I never thought it was an effective management tool.*

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment of learning what not to do from previous poor leaders:

*I found throughout my career, I learned more about what not to do from people than what to do. And from every good manager, you can learn, ‘this is how you do things.’ I had at least one or two managers I’d look at and say, ‘I’m never going to be like that’ or ‘That’s not the thing to do.’*

Some participants learned how to be better leaders by seeing how ineffective other leaders were. They learned from good and bad examples. They reflected on how poor leadership impacted them in more areas than just their job role. An officer described how poor leadership was distracting and bled into his life at home. Following a tense moment in which his boss was disrespectful towards the officer’s spouse, he recalled the toxicity not only in the engagement, but what the resolution meant about his boss:

*He wound up actually bullying another case officer... weirdly, he liked me more after that incident because I stood up to him. Just like, even more toxic, right?*
The participant then reflected on the leadership lessons he learned from that boss:

*I learned a lot of those negative lessons from him... I knew the effect that his toxic leadership had on me and it was very unpleasant. It’s about not giving somebody an unpleasant experience. It was distracting. I would be home at night, when I got my four hours of sleep, and what am I thinking about? I’m thinking about my boss, and that was a distraction. I didn’t want to do that. I should be thinking about my children, my wife or even my cases. It made me less productive. It was distracting and it was very unpleasant.*

For the participant, the boss’s disrespect and toxic behavior did not serve him or the mission because of how the experiences distracted him from his work. He never wanted to have such an effect on another employee where someone’s home life and work would be affected by him as a leader.

Participants took the contract of being a leader seriously and incorporated what they saw from other leaders and their own mistakes to become better leaders. Formal leadership training at the CIA only emerged after most participants had already served in managerial and leadership roles for several tours. Some participants embraced leadership not because they were natural leaders, but because they wanted to excel in all aspects of their jobs. They acknowledged that they had to learn and improve over time.

**Practicing Leadership**

Officers shared instances when they applied the leadership principles they had learned. Each participant highlighted the CIA's inclination for risk-taking and the necessity for accountability in leadership to sustain the Agency's risk-oriented work environment. There was a general
consensus that leadership at the CIA was unique in that leaders often did not have to motivate, but more often found themselves reigning in the commitment and passion for the mission among subordinates. Their stories demonstrated their own interest in going forward full force with their passion for the mission coming through in their leadership practices. The intensity of the operations and lack of leadership training begs the question of how officers were expected to take the time to reflect on and learn about how to lead. Regardless, leaders were clearly dedicated to practicing leadership in ways they thought best supported the people and the high operational tempo required of the mission.

Officers approached their actions with the social contact they felt between themselves as leaders and their subordinates. The contract combined with their personal interest in the mission, which further motivated their leadership behavior. They practiced supporting subordinates by using their presence to show support, working alongside subordinates, and taking the same risks they were asking others to take, among other practices. The overall sense was that ideal leadership could be almost entirely mission focused if teams were productive and harmonious:

*That's what your focus is as a leader, you’ve got to get the job done. And it's always, mission, mission, mission, but you can’t do the job by yourself. If people are productive, they feel good about it. They're motivated, they have harmony, then you’re going to succeed.*

Getting the job done, being effective, was always a leader’s number one focus and it wasn’t possible to do that by yourself. This operations officer viewed leaders as accountable to getting the job done with a harmonious team, and for him, harmony came from support his team in being productive. In creating harmony that would support accomplishing the mission, officers shared
what they practiced with their team. One officer shared how he would be the first person to greet people who were returning from a hazardous mission, no matter the hour they returned:

*It was very hazardous mission and I didn’t go. They came back, they helicoptered back at night, so it’d be less likely that the helicopter got shot at. They came in at three o’clock in the morning, and so I get up at 230 and walked out there to go over to greet them, because they had done a really good job and they all came back, which, which is a nice bonus. One of the [security] guys said to me, ‘How do you know to go to do that? Sir, we all love that you do stuff like that, but how do you know to do that?’*

When people asked him why he showed up when he did, he shared his personal interest in the mission and a desire to show his appreciation with an action instead of just words:

*I told him, ‘Well, I'm just doing it because I wanted to hear how they did and I wanted to let them know that what they did is important and the best way to do that is to get up at 230 in the morning and greet them when the helicopter lands.’*

For the officer, it was a practical thing to do. The officer continued to explain that he had experienced a leader who did not show up when the participant returned from a hazardous mission. Nevertheless, he did not base his actions entirely on his former boss not showing up:

*When I landed at that base, the Chief was not there. The Chief was sleeping. I wasn’t mad about it, but I did notice. And I'm the Chief now. I didn’t do that because of how I felt when he didn't*
go, that was just a standard thing that I did. But I wanted to demonstrate that kind of leading by example, and showing, not just talking about appreciation for the work, but showing it.

Ultimately, the officer had several reasons for personally welcoming everyone upon their return. He believed that his role as a leader extended beyond merely overseeing operations; it encompassed expressing genuine interest and gratitude, particularly when individuals were risking their lives for the mission. His main drive was to embody effective leadership and to obtain essential information promptly. While he aimed to set an example of leadership, this wasn't the primary intent behind his presence.

A support officer also spoke of practicing leadership by being there during intense times in a war zone. He saw that people were working into the night to continue their work. He focused on maintaining equality in the workload, even if he was the superior:

*I have to make sure the generators are maintained, so we would tell people, okay, your end of the day is midnight and get up at six and start again. But a lot of people would come back and still work till one or two in the morning. And of course, I always was going to make sure that I was doing that. It's not right for me to tell other people to do stuff and then have it better than everybody else. That's the first thing I would say is, lead by example.*

The behavior to stay up, rather than rest, could be seen as expending his own well-being, rather than preserving it for his leadership duties. However, from his perspective, it was the right thing to do because others would continue their work late into the night, regardless of when he tried to set the end of the workday, so he should do the same. The example speaks to what a few
participants noted about practicing leadership at the CIA; their job was almost never to “motivate the troops,” rather, practicing leadership had to do with reining people in:

*Almost everybody wanted to be there. It’s all about the mission. We were mission oriented. Let's drive ahead and let's get this done...For the most part, people were driven up for a purpose. So, it was really easy. It's really easy to be the coach of the baseball team. When you have a team of players that are good players and all want to be in the game, let's go, let's get it. I mean, at the most, you're pulling the reins back sometimes a little bit. Not having to push them.*

The distinction made meant that leaders could bypass the leadership lessons of motivating their team and instead learn to reign in and wrangle the energy and motivation often pulsing through their subordinates. Some participants found themselves deciding whether to practice leadership by reigning in the team or pushing forward into the nights with them. One participant described feeling compelled to create an environment where their teams could take risks. They sometimes practiced leadership through the risks they took themselves:

*My job as a leader was to create an environment where people were comfortable taking the risks we needed to take because the military, those guys were getting their legs blown off. So, if they're doing that, and they ask us a question like ‘Who are the senior [terrorist group leaders] and where is the recruiting taking place?’ I felt compelled to take risks to find those answers. And sometimes, we had to go into places that weren't safe to go into. And so, I would do that by going first.*
All the participants, whether support, operations, analysts, or administration, described risk taking that the work across the Agency entailed. They saw practicing leadership as being accountable for the risk taking that was part of the CIA’s work. The participants recognized necessity for taking risks and viewed the leadership agreement as a commitment to being responsible for the results of the risks they enabled. Ultimately, they bore the responsibility for the team's direction, decisions, and ultimate outcomes:

*I am part of the team. I'm no better and no smarter than anybody else on the team. Just ultimately, when the team makes a decision, I'm the one who has to own it.*

Owning the outcome was a key part of their leadership mentality that led to their accountability practices. The officers learned and practiced leadership by embracing accountability, demonstrating genuine interest in people and the mission, and managing the inherent risks involved. They strived to foster productive and harmonious teams while maintaining a strong focus on the mission's success. Several officers discussed practicing leadership by being present during intense times, even when it meant staying late with the team. They believed in leading by example and maintaining their own workload to demonstrate fairness and commitment.

**Paving the Way for Subordinates**

One specific theme in practicing leadership was the role of leaders to manage up and out to make sure subordinates had the clarity and resources they needed for the mission. Approaching leadership as part of social contract theory let leaders who were passionate about the mission, shift into leadership roles in which they may not have been directly engaged in the
operation, but were contracted to make the environment as amenable as possible to a successful operation. Participants expressed the shift to supporting subordinates rather than directly engaged in operations as more natural for those who had primarily worked in the Directorate of Support and less natural to those in the Directorate of Operations and Directorate of Analysis. The nature of support and logistics roles, being of service and contracted to support others, almost certainly provides the cognition that translates more easily to ethical and effective leadership than the roles of other directorates in which the collective cognition is more self-focused (DO) or deeply cognitively involved in subject analysis (DA).

One DO officer shared how many new DO leaders failed at leadership and needed to be told directly that the job was no longer about them, but was about enabling others:

*I used to tell people, we all fail at it. But tell people look, management, leadership, it’s not about you. It’s not a stepping stone for further promotion, though it is. But it’s a burden. And you’ve got to take on that burden, understanding that it’s about people, people who work for you and your job is to serve them, not them serving you. Because if you don’t, they’re gonna they know what you are and you’re not going to get the most out of them.*

The DO officer cognitively shifted his perspective on his role and retained the benefit to him and the organization that would come from taking on the burden to pave the way for others to operate to their fullest potential. In an example by another DO officer, he described his leadership when he was a mid-level manager. He supported an operation through surveillance so that a more junior officer could have the experience of the full operation. His boss’s had the same mentality, to support the operation by taking care of administrative work that headquarters
needed:

*I had one of the more junior people do it because I thought it was important for them to do that kind of work. I did the surveillance part on the street with with four or five other people... [after sharing the plan with his boss, the boss said] ‘And if you need anything have the team call me in and we'll talk about it tonight. Otherwise, you could tell me about it tomorrow’. And I said, Boss, ‘You know, I haven't even sent an email.’ He said, ‘Oh, don't worry about that. I'll take care of that. I'll call. I'll call the email.’*

The officer did his part to pave the way for a junior person to lead the operation and subsequently his boss paved the way for them to get started on the operation and not worry about the administrative work. The DO officer continued to explain the impact this had on the team:

*I don't think that really happens anymore, but it didn't really happen then either. This is about 20 years ago. And it fired us all up. And we got in front of the guy and then they followed up in [another city]. Our part of it was successful.*

With the excitement came also a realization that the DO officer did not see this kind of leadership behavior very often, despite its favorable operational outcome. One DA officer described his struggles with a boss who had failed to make a shift towards enabling others, despite his high-level supervisory position:

*One of his core values before he became a supervisor and then a manager was, ‘The only thing I*
care about is myself,’ and this is what he exuded. ‘The only thing I care about myself and my research, and moving the [analytic topics forward] ...No interest whatsoever in either supervision or management...Then, he's the managing supervisor of supervisors. He had no interest in management, supervision, or leadership and he made it explicit to individuals around him...Never had any management classes, never had any leadership classes and took his bullying style with him.

It seemed the DA also had issues with people being promoted into positional leadership positions without cognitively shifting into the enabling role that much of leadership required. At that time, due to the absence of training, the organization had limited chances to influence the transformation of leaders' perspectives. Nonetheless, support officers suggested that some segments of the Directorate of Support held the perspective that a leader's duty and obligation were to clear the path. One support officer explained what he used to tell people about their job in then DS, which ultimately explained what it meant to be a leader enabling subordinates:

*Even logistics compared to operations, we're not operations. And I would tell people the the DS all the time, if you want that, go do that. Compared to the Army, it's 'we're not the infantry.' We're the supporting arm, we're the supporting mechanism. It's our job to make sure that the operations people, and the other components, but primarily operations, has what they need in order to do their job.*

DS officers expressed paving the way for subordinates as a natural part of the leadership contract and it seemed more intuitive than how DO and even DA officers described their own
and others’ transitions to leadership positions. One support officer talked about how he paved the way for a subordinate’s idea, even though he thought it was a dumb idea:

*He came up with the idea that we should build [support infrastructure at a training location]. I thought it was a stupid idea. Honestly. I said to him ‘You know what? Write it up. Write up a proposal.’ He wrote it up. I helped him. I helped him church up what he wrote. Not that I was such a good writer at the time, but I helped him church it up. While I didn't agree with it, I pushed it forward. To this day, if you go down there, there's [the suggested support infrastructure]. That was over 30 years ago.*

The support officer had the option to obstruct the subordinate's idea from being realized. However, instead of doing so, he not only facilitated its progression but also assisted in enhancing the quality of the proposal. Unbeknownst to the participant at the time, his actions of enabling the subordinate's idea paved the path for a sustained approach to supporting training.

The support officer summarized his leadership contract to pave the way for subordinates:

*It comes back to, that's why we get paid the proverbial ‘big bucks.’ When you are in a leadership position, your job is to make the the work environment, make the way ahead on a project or an effort, as easy as possible for the people that are tasked with getting this job done. My job was to shovel the initial layer of snow out of the way so they can move faster down the lane.*

To him, being in a leadership role meant taking the initiative to remove obstacles and challenges, akin to clearing a path through the initial layer of snow so that his subordinates could
progress more efficiently. In the theme of this leadership philosophy being easy for those in support to take on, another support officer described the environment he tried to create in which subordinates could tell him how he might be able to support them in making their job more efficient:

*What I need you to do is you need to tell me what you see...And we always say, even when you're working logistics, people that are in warehouses, unloading trucks, if you see a better way to do something, you know your job better than people sitting in the main building.*

The “we” in his description were the leaders in the DS. He wanted subordinates to come forward with their ideas that he could administratively route and would allow people to work more efficiently. In addition to the support officers easing into the more enabling leadership role, participants described a sense of service in joining the Agency that likely helped them transition to be of service to their subordinates:

*That idea of patriotism and public service really meant something to me.*

*It was always about service to our nation, community, state, etc.*

*I also knew that public service was something I wanted to do.*

The idea of service was a reminder to serve their teams as well as serve in their larger role of a public servant. Participants highlighted their sense of service to the nation and the
community as a driving force in their public service careers, further emphasizing the value of service-oriented leadership.

Leadership, in the context of social contract theory, entailed passionate leaders transitioning into roles where they may not be directly involved in operations but were committed to creating an environment conducive to successful outcomes. This shift in mindset was crucial for maximizing the effectiveness of the team. While not entirely conclusive, this shift towards supporting subordinates rather than being directly engaged in operations appeared more natural for individuals primarily from the Directorate of Support and less so for those from the Directorate of Operations and Directorate of Analysis. The support and logistics roles, oriented towards service and support, seemed to align more easily with ethical and effective leadership compared to roles in other directorates, which often had more self-focused or deeply analytical cognitive demands.

**Using Their Power to Take the Hard Hits**

Subordinates not only required clarity and resources, but needed leaders who took responsibility if the operation did not go as planned. Officers upheld their responsibility towards subordinates and the imperative of taking calculated risks for the mission by strategically leveraging their own authority to absorb potential repercussions if things went awry. They went beyond just showing up as leaders of teams and team dynamics and discussed their belief that leaders were the ones who needed to put themselves on the line. They spoke about learning from leaders who did took responsibility for outcomes and how they opted to carry that part of the leadership contract forward in their own careers.

Taking the hard hits was important because one of the participants had worked for the other. Although they were interviewed separately, it was apparent that they both valued the social
contract leaders had with subordinates to take ownership of problems that resulted from autonomy they authorized to the subordinate. One support officer, referred to as “Tom” for the sake of this section, communicated his contract to subordinates ahead of problems. Tom told them to bring him any issues they saw so that he could handle people who might become upset by being regulated:

*I would also make sure that when I went out there and I talked to my [security] teams or the junior people, I said, ‘if you see something don't you be the bad guy. You tell me let me be the one they don't like.’ People get very angry about it. And I'm like, I don't care if they don't like me, I will go there and say I'm responsible here.*

As the leader, he thought it was his role to “be the bad guy” when it came to regulating others. He did not want the junior personnel to have a bad experience or weaken their own relationships with others. He simply communicated that he was willing to not be liked and that was his job as a leader. His former boss, an operations officers referred to as “Henry,” spoke similarly to using the power and authority he had earned so far to be the one to bring up a major issue to headquarters and the inspector general. The issue was about his own boss who had lied in communication to headquarters about an operation and had refused to change it. He and his subordinates were concerned with the lie. Henry took it upon himself to report it outside of the chain of command:

*I had several officers in the station come to me with a complaint and say, ‘I'm gonna report to the IG, I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna do that.’ And I said, ‘Don't, because your career can't*
handle it at this point. Mine can.’ So, I called up headquarters and talked to the grievance officer who I knew and I said, ‘What do I do?’ And she said that you don't do anything anymore because you already did it. Once you tell me I gotta take action and the IG was there in 48 hours.

This participant saw that his career and reputation could handle any backlash of potentially creating a major investigation where his boss’s career be disrupted. Instead of letting someone junior route up a problem, he took ownership of the problem and made the call to headquarters. He also had a relationship with the grievance officer that he could leverage and might have provided more insight to what would happen next.

In an interesting dynamic the two participants, Tom described what it was like to work for the above participant, Henry. The support officer, Tom, had a very bad outcome in one of his projects and explained how the responsibility was managed between himself and his ops officer boss, Henry:

So, I told Henry, my boss, I said, ‘I accept full responsibility. You can tell the President if he wants to fire me if he wants to, whatever, it's my fault. I'm responsible.’ And he said, ‘Listen, you have to try. You're focusing on one piece of a large program that failed, but look at all the other pieces of this program that were resounding successes. So yes, you tried and it failed. And things didn't go as planned with that small piece of the bigger program.’ I loved working for a boss like that. When I knew he had my back. He wasn't gonna throw me under the bus. He’s like, ‘don't screw up again. I mean, I know you did it. You had to do it, then. You told me about it, and I approved it. It's not like you went off on your own and were a loose cannon. But stuff is gonna happen not everything's gonna go right. So don't worry about it. I got you.’
In this account, Tom shared an incident for which he took full responsibility for his project that failed within a larger program. Tom expressed his willingness to face the consequences, even suggesting he could or should be fired. However, their boss, Henry, displayed strong support and reassurance, emphasizing that the failure was just one aspect of a broader successful program. This incident demonstrated leadership in which the boss owned the consequences due to his authorization. Henry did not see Tom as irresponsible, only experiencing a failure in a much larger picture. The story of Henry’s ownership adds additional validation to his above comments on his own leadership.

The support officer, Tom, told a story of his own ownership under a similar circumstance in which a subordinate’s plan that he authorized was not perfectly completed. In this case, Tom had tasked the subordinate with creating a runway at a temporary base. When some of the military officers who used the based complained about the runway, Tom stood up to the people complained about the design:

Others were complaining about what they said was the wrong side of the runway, because the planes had to land into the wind. When the plane landed, they had to taxi to the other side of the runway. And they were criticizing his work to him, not knowing who he was. I said, ‘Do you understand we had a goal here?’ I stepped up and said ‘I’m in charge of this program. If you want to criticize anybody, you criticize me, not him. Yeah, he was on the ground. I told him the mission. I told him when I needed him to do. He didn’t have time to do climate studies. And this is a tactical base to support an operation. We’re not building 100-year base here. So, you’ll taxi the plane to the other end of the runway, it’s not a big deal.’
Tom took ownership of the runway project and dared the military officers to criticize him. In the larger picture of the mission, Tom did not see the need to taxi as a big deal. He found it to be an inconvenience pilots would have to accept because the tempo of the mission did not allow for a full review and robust planning of a long-term base. Tom showed support for the subordinate by owning the problem. He did not view the military officers’ comments as helpful or critical feedback, but heard it has complaints by people who did not take into account the pace of operations that did not allow long term planning or convenience-based changes. If it was not a safety issue or something that would affect the mission, Tom did not think people should complain and especially did not think his subordinate should be held responsible for their complaints. However, while the behavior was supportive to his subordinate, without the perspective from the complaining personnel, it cannot be determined that Tom’s act was not a case of a leader being unreceptive to critique.

In speaking to his leadership philosophy, Henry, the operations officer emphasized the importance of having communication open for feedback and minimally emotional responses, in favor of calm, logical approaches to problems that he would own as the leader:

You cannot make your officers afraid of bringing problem to you. Because you know what's going on. You want to create an environment where people can come to you with a problem and say, look, I screwed up, okay, that's fine. What do we need? What do we fix it? How do we fix it? What do we need to do next time? I wanted to instill in people a calm, logical approach to everything to problems. Don't get emotional about it. Don't get angry about it. Don't yell don't blame. Try to understand learn from this and let's move on and try to fix the problem. I always
thought it important to maintain lines of communication.

Henry wanted his leadership practices to create an environment in which he heard what went wrong and could be part of addressing and fixing the problem. His calm, collected attitude came through in Tom’s earlier description of how Henry handled the support officer’s major mistake. Henry did not blame or yell and told Tom the important thing was not the make the same error again. Tom explained that he learned a lot from Henry and incorporated the lessons learned into his own leadership style that emphasized being responsible for the outcomes of projects and standing up for his subordinates.

A different support officer summed up her contract with subordinates to take the hard hits and take them with them if that’s what it came down to. She defined her leadership duty as being accountable to subordinates:

*I think there's accountability. I try to say that it's not just about them...I also have to be held accountable for them. They don't go down by themselves. Yeah, I go down with them.*

In these accounts from the officers, and across other interviews, there was a level of accountability for the outcome of what they authorized subordinates to take on, especially when things went wrong. Overall, these stories emphasized the idea that leadership encompasses not just making decisions but also assuming accountability for the results, whether they are favorable or unfavorable, and cultivating an atmosphere of transparent communication and ongoing enhancement. Excellence was not in everything being perfectly executed without mistakes, but excellence was found in effectively managing problems and supporting people to continue to
work hard towards the mission.

**Being Consistent**

Officers thought that consistency was a major part of practicing leadership. They not only expected leaders to support them, but to support them consistently. There is an element of proving that you are a leader, not only by positional power, but by your consistency in ethical leadership. One analyst spoke to the practice of proving she was reliable and wanting the same reliability and consistency from her leaders:

...it’s part of leadership, proving that you're reliable. I think that you are that you have earned the respect of, of not just your peers, but of your superiors or your bosses. And I think that that is also something that it took me a while to figure out over time it's not something where you're like, 'Okay, I've been here five years, I should be leading now.' It's, you know, the leadership is something that you have to take the initiative to do, you have to prove that you are a leader.

She did not see the positional role as automatically rewarding someone with being considered a leader. The practice was to act like a leader and earn that respect over time. Another participant described the deliberateness of practice required of a leader:

*It includes, you know, that integrity, personal integrity and showing up in the same way for people that they've come to expect. There's deliberateness, of deliberateness of constancy, reliability, dependability that what you see, today is going to be the same thing that you see tomorrow or in any given situation.*
It was important for subordinates to know what to expect from a leader on a daily basis. It made the leader reliable and dependable. One ops officer described how leaders benefited from being the reliable and consistent leader. Subordinates will appreciate it and it will be easier for them to take any bad news from above:

*There is a component of being honest and direct with your people. They will appreciate it...When you know that's bad news. But they will understand that you're not going to lie to them. You're not going to stab them in the back. You're not going to try to manipulate them, that they can trust you to an extent as far as people can trust management.*

The consistency built trust both ways and made it easier to deliver news to subordinates and still have their support. The same participant commented on how it was a daily duty to tell the truth to you subordinates and be clear if you don’t know something.

*It's the little things that day-to-day things where you have to demonstrate your ethics to people. Like I said, it is is about telling them the truth. It is telling them I don't know when you don't know so they can rely on you say yeah, you're not going to bullshit me you're not going to give me something. If you don't know, you're going to tell me that you don't know, and when you tell me something you do know, you tell me the facts.*

For participants, leaders needed to be consistent, reliable, and factual in their everyday leadership practices. Consistency was seen as a two-way street, where leaders needed to be
honest, direct, and transparent with their subordinates. This approach not only built trust but also made it easier for leaders to maintain their subordinates' support, even when delivering challenging news. The daily practice of demonstrating ethics through truthful communication was highlighted as a vital aspect of leadership.

**Tensions: Willing Leaders, Loyalty Versus Accountability**

The tensions in this section include first, that people are pushed into leadership roles for which they are not prepared, being neither natural leaders nor offered development through training. The second tension is that the loyalty developed between leaders and employees, particularly in “taking the hard hits” can move into excess loyalty and coverups of wrongdoing. There is a potential for the loyalty and accountability to others to shift into evading wider accountability should the errors be part of inappropriate operations or behavior.

The trial-and-error method of learning leadership could have significant consequences for subordinates, the mission, or even national security. The lack of a structured learning environment raised questions about the ethics of exposing individuals to potential harm due to leadership errors. Moreover, being placed in leadership positions without proper guidance or a desire to lead can lead to stress, burnout, and potentially ineffective leadership, posing risks to the mission and the team.

The examples of being accountable to others, particularly ‘taking the hard hits,’ show what could be called “loyalty” in the social contract between leadership and subordinates. Consistency leads to high levels of trust and a sense of security (Ciulla, 2018). Both loyalty and trust are major parts of a good relationship between leaders and followers. While the participant examples speak to the positive use of loyalty and trust, akin to family, the high commitment to mission, fellow members, and a family-like culture, among other values, is what defines an organization
as exhibiting “clan culture” (Koehn, EL Business Book, p 187).

Organizations with clan culture have ethical strengths, such as strong relationships between employees and high job satisfaction. They also have ethical weaknesses, which include employees not wanting to “out” each other, even when someone is acting in a harmful way. A strong sense of accountability between the leader and subordinate could easily fall into an excess of loyalty and discount of accountability to the US government and rule of law.

Participants spoke to holding the tension well and having a strong loyalty to the constitution, however, they described issues they saw or experienced with excess loyalty in the organization. One officer spoke to his inner monologue in figuring out what to do when a boss to which he felt contracted to be loyal asked him to do something that was clearly dishonest:

*That was probably, in my entire career, the biggest moral dilemma I faced. I owed my loyalty to the chief, but then the chief is asking me to do one of the things that I always believed was a serious ‘no, no’... when we say something, it's got to be true. And I was being asked to lie. The only thing the Agency has is its word, the truth.*

The officer then described his actions that countered his loyalty to his boss. He pulled from his loyalty to the larger organization, government, and the truth to take a stand against his boss. Another officer described seeing a team group up to lie for their boss. She witnessed the clan-like protection of subordinates her were willing to put their loyalty to their boss instead of the wider organization’s mission. She saw that the officer’s team got together and they made up a story to protect which him.

While the story ended up not doing any good, because the boss told the truth, it
demonstrated how some employees were willing to put their social contract between themselves and their leader over the social contract with the organization to seek and share the truth. An officer summarized how she was not sure the family-like influence was helpful or not helpful for the organization:

*I had the belief that they were definitely focused on building a family internally. Some would argue that Agency personnel could be clannish. I don't know. I understand the term, I understand why people would say it. I don't even know if it's a good or bad thing.*

It turned out, she spoke to exactly what literature on clan culture reveals, that there is tension in the family and clan dynamic in organizations that can be both good and bad. People in the organizations seem to have options of where their loyalty lies because there are times when an employee cannot please everyone. There will be dilemmas in which they will choose whether to be “disloyal” to either their team, their boss, the organization, or their duty as a public servant. An officer described the pathology of loyalty and accountability as a huge problem at the Agency:

*I know people who agreed with that argument and never said a word because of loyalty, because you don't bash the Agency we should all be in this you know, ‘All for one, one for all’ kinds of things. That's not a slogan, but how do you effectively enact accountability, where nobody wants to be the person to speak up? And that's a huge problem. Do I think that's pervasive at all levels of the agency? Absolutely not. Do I think that that still exists at the top of the agency? Sure.*
She continued to explain how she made sense of the link between accountability, loyalty, and how the long hours and commitment to the mission could lead to problematic loyalty:

*I think it's because there is a belief that you should be loyal. You're loyal to the Agency. So, anyone in the Agency you should also be loyal to, if somebody goes down, it can weaken the whole thing. There's that belief system in the organization. I think that's inherent there because you're stuck together during very trying times. Sometimes with that camaraderie you almost formed this brotherhood or this sisterhood. I think that's natural up to a point, but it should never become so normal that you are willing to ignore ethics and laws and human decency. To be loyal to the guy who was next to you when you wrote this PDB, just because he was there next to you, it's kind of crazy.*

The officer could make sense of why people might become hyper loyal and even be rewarded for their loyalty, but still saw some levels of loyalty as simply ridiculous not to catch. Officials were willing to share the dark side of being accountable to others, while also speaking passionately to how important the accountability to others as a leader was to enabling teams to accomplish the mission and take the risks they needed to take. Accountability was important for leaders to incorporate so they could enable people to take risks the CIA was supposed to take, yet learning and practicing that type of accountability in the right way required a balance that seemed to fall on individuals to regulate in themselves and act upon.

**Learning and Practicing Leadership Conclusion**

The participants’ learning and practicing of leadership show the potential benefits and risks of having a high level of accountability to others. The dedication to learn to be a leader,
despite possible lack of readiness, poses risks related to the adaptation to the roles and impact of errors on subordinates. Participants highlighted the practices of paving the way for subordinates to do their work. They also emphasized that as leaders, it was important to practice taking any “hard hits” and being ready to take responsibility for any risks taken. Consistency was also an important leadership practice participants about which participants spoke.

Risks that came with too much loyalty between leaders and subordinates or peers are marked in literature on “clan culture,” which the CIA expresses. The family-like culture within the organization can foster strong relationships and job satisfaction, but may also lead to employees hesitating to report harmful behavior. The section emphasizes the need for structured approaches to leadership development and the importance of fostering an environment where accountability is valued, without compromising ethics or the rule of law.
Accountable for Finding the Right Fit

_I never wanted to be somebody who would say that there was something wrong with the person...It was just not the right fit. You can easily be a fit somewhere else. And I'll help make that happen._

In addition to being accountable to providing “heat experiences” to develop subordinates, officers spoke to the importance of making sure people were in a position where they could be the most effective. A few officers shared their own experience moving to a new directorate early in their career. They either strongly advocated for themselves or their current leader accepted they were not in the right place and helped them move to a position that was a better fit. Their own experiences with switching positions likely contributed to their mindset that people did not necessarily need to be fired or removed from the Agency, if their early performance was not up to par. Instead, participants described dedicated resources to support other officers in moving to a role that would better serve their skills.

Finding the right fit for people was a social contract participants had with the organization and it was approached by a combination of ethical angles. Officers were accountable for placing people, as resources, in the best spots to accomplish the mission. It was costly for the organization to entirely replace someone who had gone through rigorous interviews, security screening, and sometimes training. In addition to the underlying utilitarian approach of moving people for the greatest good of the organization, there was an ethic of care, in which officers described feeling for the person who wasn’t finding success in their role. In an interesting alignment with how the CIA operates externally and internally in emphasizing human
intelligence collection and relations, the ethics of care is about recognizing that humans are inherently relational and interdependent beings. It emphasizes the significance of relationships, not just rules, in guiding ethical conduct.

One officer described the blended utilitarian and care motivation to support people in generally staying in the organization, which encompassed both the needs of people and the benefit to the Agency:

*I knew that the Agency, generally, respected families, respected the mission, and they knew that if we could get somebody through the hard time they were having right then, that person was going to be there for us later.*

The officers expressed a sincere desire for employees to attain a position where they could experience success, recognizing the potential long-term advantages for the organization by facilitating the growth of individuals into roles that matched their capabilities. With the long-term outcome, participants displayed responsiveness to the needs of others. In following their ethics of care, participants were attentive and sensitive to the unique circumstances of subordinates, recognizing their particular needs.

The ethics of care is a moral and ethical theory that emphasizes the importance of relationships, empathy, compassion, and care for others as central to ethical decision-making and actions. It is often contrasted with traditional ethical theories, such as deontology (duty-based ethics) and utilitarianism (consequence-based ethics), which focus on rules, principles, and overall outcomes. The ethics of care places a strong emphasis on understanding and responding to the needs, feelings, and experiences of individuals involved in a situation. The ethics of care
may be seen as impractical in situations where operational demands prioritize national security over individual or relational concerns. However, while the CIA is historically associated with a focus on the greater good from a geopolitical perspective, participants explained numerous instances in which, instead of writing people off, they showed a great deal of patience in figuring out what the person needed and helping them get to a better position.

**Finding Their Own Fit**

A number of the participants switched between jobs and directorates in their careers, with most making the move early in their tenure either upon discovering they were not very happy with the workplace, leaders seeing potential for them in a different area, or the mutuality of both. While the participant pool favored stories of officers who moved into the DO, it was apparent that the movement occurred throughout the directorates. One officer described the mutual dissatisfaction between him and the DA, with the view that his skills and personality were not in alignment with the DA:

*Then I worked in the Directorate of Analysis. I thought that was a natural place for me. It was not a good fit for them. They weren't a good fit for me. And I got pulled into the DO after about nine months. I spent my whole career on the DO. As an analyst, it was too much focused on process and editing for me...I was an okay writer. I'm a pretty good writer now. My memory of my frustration with the writing and editing process probably is more about me not being good enough writer.*

He continued to describe how the DA environment was just not right for him and he did not quite fit in. He tried to find a way to move to the DO himself, but it took a DO officer to
support the move over and took care of the administrative process to transition to the DO:

*I don't think they thought I was that great either. I was too loud...I don't remember how I met the chief of one of the DO divisions at the time. He was like, you gotta work with us. Prior to talking with the division chief, I had talked to the DO administrative staff about switching over to the DO and they said, ‘We don't have slots,’ and I talked to the DO personnel office, and they're like, ‘Well, you know, we have a lot of [language] speakers. It's not really that big a deal.’ Which is ridiculous. But anyway, and then when I met the Division Chief, he just did it.*

The participant’s examples showed how the internal movement required a leader to facilitate. The officer had tried to make the move himself, but was met with administrative hurdles. Another participant described his transition from the DA to the DO and how the movement to a better fit was facilitated by his own manager:

*I had gone on a whole bunch of TDYs and I was starting to kind of think that my career track was wrong. And so I went to my boss, my immediate boss and I said I wanted to switch over and he immediately said, ‘No problem.’ Which means I was a really crappy analyst.*

Typically, the directorate that held the officer wanted to hold on to their human resource, but when a leader saw that the officer was not a right fit, they facilitated the move. Another participant was pulled over and it was disappointment in his own leadership that gave him the internal push to make the move to another office:
I had a lot of technical kind of training. And they thought, ‘Oh, this guy can understand what bullets and guns are.’ I feel it was happenstance, almost. Anyway, that role put me in position to be working directly with the DO. Over time, they encouraged me to switch over [to a military-focused unit] despite my lack of prior military experience. Out of frustration with my leadership on the logistic side of the house, one day I went out to the DO chief and said, 'Now you're always trying to get me to switch over...I'm ready.' He picked the phone he called his boss and it was about a three-minute conversation. It was agreed that they would let me switch over to there.

This participant had the chance to explore working for a specific part of the DO and finally, when his own leadership frustrated him, he moved over. The move was easily facilitated by the DO leader. In another example, an officer who started off in the administrative work moved her way into analysis and then into learning and development by “looking around and talking to people”:

I was an administrative support person. Pretty quickly, I started just kind of looking around and talking to people and ended up applying for and getting junior analyst position in the on the analytic side. Within a year, I was one of the analysts. I was in a junior analyst position on the analytic side. I was there for a few years and decided what I really missed was the world of learning. I had a boss who ended up going over to what was the office of training and education, at the time, fairly small organization within the Agency. And he encouraged me to come over and I did that.

The officer made two moves and both involved informal communication, with the second
move being encouraged by a leader. Her transition was initiated by her own curiosity and networking with colleagues. This shows how individuals within the organization could explore different roles and career paths by proactively seeking opportunities and making connections, however, in the end, it required a leader's validation to confirm the change.

In these changes in career tracks, it is clear the leader has power to advocate for the movement, and likely against. Getting to the right fit takes more than the follower realizing their position isn’t where they can thrive, it almost requires a leader to support and advocate for the move.

**Supporting Others in Finding Their Fit**

Participants often took on the responsibility of helping people find the right fit. They felt accountable to the organization and to the person who was not finding success in their current position. One support officer had multiple stories of supporting people so that they could get on a better career track:

*I had one young guy work for me who was a bit of a problem child. He was it was a young kid. He was very immature, socially immature. Headquarters knew and I had counseled him...Headquarters told me I had to write a performance review for the kid that was gonna let them fire him because he was still in a trial period of probation. I guess he had a couple of nominal performance reviews already in there. My job was to write one and that they were gonna be able to use to get rid of them. And I refused. I said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘This he's not somebody needs to be thrown out. He's just a guy in the wrong job.’ And that's the performance review I wrote.*
The participant stood up to leadership who wanted to fire the young officer and wrote a performance review that recommended a better fit, instead of a review that would allow Headquarters to fire him. The participant explained that later, he felt he was confirmed right in being accountable for finding the right fit because a few years later, the young officer had found success:

*I ran into him a number of years later. He was still in logistics, but he was doing quite well. It was another one of those early wins that I was proud of. Proud that I pushed back on leadership that was telling me, you're gonna help us fire him. And I helped redirect him to something that was better for him and for the organization, ultimately.*

The participant took pride in retaining a valuable resource for the organization and felt validated by the success of the individual he believed deserved assistance. In another situation, the same support officer sensed that a subordinate was not happy on the team:

*There was one other guy that we hired., he came in and 9/11 had just happened. We were getting ready to go to war. I felt that we didn't live up to what his expectations were of the organization. I was Chief of the office; my deputy had also had a few conversations with this fella. He was a nice guy, educated college degree. Smart guy. Very successful. My deputy came to the same conclusion, that for some reason, we just weren't meeting his expectations. And I recommended to this guy that he consider resigning and going back to the company he was at previously, which would not have been a difficult move. Ultimately, that's the decision that he made. He went back. He stayed at his previous company for a little while. He wasn't happy there. My understanding*
was that he actually became a high school teacher.

The participant noted that it was a high intensity time period after 9/11 and he and his deputy took the time to talk to the subordinate. Both got the sense he was not happy being in the organization. They gave the subordinate their recommendation and let the subordinate make his own decision. Ultimately, the subordinate was likely not happy in his line of work, at all, and changed careers to be a teacher, which reassured the officer that what he was sensing had been accurate. The participant explained that in this case, recommending someone consider leaving was not in the best interested of the CIA because of the talent this person brought to the office.

*He had a lot of great skill sets that were of great utility and value to us in the office. But he just, he wasn’t, it wasn’t working.*

It likely took compassion to be able to see that someone with valuable skills and a track record of success was struggling in the organization and not try to convince them to stay. Having compassion and an ability to sense that something was not right, thus letting the person go, likely benefited the organization as well. If the participant had forced the mission on this subordinate and they had all gone to war, this person might have not been able to carry their weight in a time when everyone needed to be highly dedicated to the work. The participant used the ethics of care and a longer-term view of what was best for the organization to enable the subordinate to find their fit.

Another participant summarized the process of moving someone on to a better position for them. She emphasized the importance of communication in the process:
And there are times that you have to be able to figure out the way to communicate with somebody or coach somebody over time that it's not the right fit for them, at the time, and that they need to move on to a different team because they’re either not getting it, not getting with the program, or whatever. But I never wanted to be somebody who would say that there was something wrong with the person that couldn't get it. It was just not the right fit. My approach was, ‘You can easily be a fit somewhere else. And I'll help make that happen. But ultimately, this fit isn't right, and we're going to have to move you on.’

The officer stressed the importance of coaching and guiding individuals who might not be the right fit for their current role, rather than attributing their struggles to personal inadequacy. Participants in leadership roles felt a strong sense of responsibility towards helping individuals find the right fit within the organization, driven by their accountability to both the organization and the individuals struggling in their current positions. These instances highlight how leaders, motivated by empathy and organizational needs, played crucial roles in assisting individuals to discover their suitable positions.

When “Fit” Involves Personal Challenges

Officers spoke to maintaining their commitment to finding the right fit for others, even when it came to issues that were more complex than a subordinate not having the right skill set for the job. They interpreted their social contract with others and with the organization as encompassing using their resources to help people who might have needed more than extra time in training or a new role on a different team.

One career support officer described taking on a mentoring role in which she was sent
people who were struggling in training and having challenges not because of their skill set, but because of personal or other obstacles getting in the way. She took the time to learn about each person and the problems they were dealing with, then compassionately worked with them to figure out what they needed. She prided herself in a 100 percent success rate of helping people pass their training and continue in their career:

*The trainers would find the person who's having the biggest, hardest time and might not pass the program because their personalities or they thought too much of themselves, or whatever it was, and they would kind of pretty much say to me, 'We're sending this one, he or she has a problem.'*

The officer served in a mentor role for students who were having trouble in their training program. From discussion with the participant, it was unclear whether it was formal or informal. She was likely known for being able to support people and was either assigned to take on the people with problems or worked out an informal understanding with the trainers that she would take them. Once she worked with the subordinates, they had a great deal of success:

*The students would come back kind of changed. One hundred percent of the time, I was able to pull these people through. And it was because I took a lot of time working with them before, during, afterward work. Every day, I spent time in the morning saying, 'I want you to succeed.' That was the first thing they heard from me when they came through that door. And they knew they were on thin ice. I wanted them to succeed and that it wasn't going to be easy. We were mapping the plan for them out together. What skills they needed to get, what skills do they want to get, was there anything else that they could see that they wanted to do while they were there?
It wasn't just a slog they could also have some fun doing things.

She continued to explain how she made sure they were part of the family:

*I had them over to my home. I made sure that they know that family feeling was there too, so that they knew that they were going to be a part of the mission, that they were gonna have to rely on others, and get to know them, and what challenges they had in their own work. I tried to really treat people as family members and have respect for them and their family or family members.*

In managing people who were having personal issues, the officer aimed to support the emotional side of the workplace by showing and teaching them how to work with others. She offered respect to them that she hoped they could learn to reciprocate.

Another support officer found himself in a position in which someone likely needed professional medical or mental health support, in addition to support figuring out where they should be within the organization. The officer recommended to the subordinate that he go to the Office of Medical Services (OMS) and used his time to find out a way the subordinate could talk to a professional, that would not poorly affect the subordinate’s record:

*There was something wrong with this dude. I had recommended to him a couple of times to talk to OMS. I had talked to OMS psychologists a number of times about him and they said there's two ways this can go. He can voluntarily come to us, and nothing ever goes in his official record that somebody can see, or you can recommend...you can basically direct him that he has to go see the psychologists and then it becomes a matter of his personnel file.*
Although he was direct in acknowledging there was something wrong with the person, in this case, not just the fit, the officer still showed diligence, care, and compassion in being accountable to helping this subordinate with their situation. The officer educated himself on the routes of helping someone get professional support. He ultimately decided to have a hard conversation with the subordinate and made a recommendation:

"]It was another one of those, take a deep breath, call him in the office, sit him down. I said to him, ‘I think you’re in the wrong career track,’ is what I really felt for him. I said, ‘I think if you go talk to these people at OMS they can help you identify what may be a more appropriate career track for you, you will be happier and more more productive and promotable’. It took a few months and a number of conversations with him before he self-reported, I think is the terminology. So, I never had to do it. I didn't want to do that. Because that would have really stained his file.

The officer was glad the subordinate took the recommendation to seek help on his own, rather than impact his file. The unique situation required a great deal of patience and care, both applied to a scenario that did not directly involve the mission. It is possible, in both cases, that the time and resources spent on others was not necessarily what was best for the organization, but the officers felt the need to offer people the resources and support that was available. Ultimately, the officers felt for others and felt accountable for supporting them through these various challenges.

**Tensions: Power to Pick Teams and Potential for Bias**
A number of tensions arise when leaders hold themselves accountable to finding the right fit for people in the organization. Tensions include balancing the individual’s fit with organizational needs, a potential for misinterpretation or wrong judgment of an individual’s capabilities, including the subjectivity in fit assessment, dependency on leaderships’ advocacy for the role change, resource and cost concerns, and concerns about privacy and respecting an individual’s agency in their own career decisions. The movement also requires an individual to spend enough time in one position to determine that it is an issue of fit and not a lack of support, mentorship, or time to develop into their role.

The officers spoke to approaching subordinate’s having challenges in fit with compassion, concern, and a commitment to the organization's goals when assisting individuals in discovering their suitable roles. Nevertheless, in the absence of a leader’s self-awareness, officers possessing such authority might inadvertently exclude individuals from teams due to biases rather than a genuine mismatch between the individual and their roles. With the CIA having issues of gender and racial discrimination, it is important that officers have the ability and awareness to check their biases before moving someone along and labeling it as due to “fit.” The overall power to move people as a leader wished was not always applied ethically. For example, one officer described his boss using power to remove him from a position without a full explanation:

*He said, ‘You're not the right person for the job. I want you gone.’ And then I responded surprised, of course, because I had no idea it was coming. And I said, ‘Look, boss, you have you have to tell me what I'm doing that I did wrong, or that isn't what you want, or what did I do that you didn't want me to do?’ And he went, ‘I don’t have to tell you a damn thing. This is my division. You don't talk to me like that. That's why I said you're not the right person for this job.’*
Leaders had power that could be abused when it came to moving people on or off their team. The power to remove someone or send someone home could be used to discriminate or silence people who were too different from theirs or perhaps would be inclined to dissent against inappropriate directions.

The effort to find the right fit also begs the question of how much time and resources to expend on a single person and how a leader would know they have reached the appropriate limit. While the CIA commits to investing in people to screen them for employment and then train them for unique roles and operations, how does a leader interpret when enough resources have been applied to supporting someone in finding their fit? There is subjectivity in the decision to commit resources or not. From one of the participant’s examples, in which higher level leaders wanted to fire the young officer, the decision to stick with supporting the individual’s career growth in the organization depended on who was making the decision. The dependency on leadership might create an uneven distribution of opportunities and potentially hinder the progress of those without strong advocates.

Recommendations coming from leaders with positional authority are not always received as recommendations, but can be received as coming from a source of superior knowledge, as an instruction, or as a criticism of the person’s competence. Officers had to show care in their act to recommend. They spoke of running their thoughts by deputies and also reaching out to talk to administrative offices that could provide them with options of how to approach the issue. Without attention to biases, officers may unintentionally guide individuals based on personal preferences or assumptions, at best potentially hindering objective decision-making and at worst, being discriminative. Emphasizing that someone is not a good fit for a particular role can
potentially be misinterpreted as criticism or a judgment of an individual's abilities, even if it's intended to be about fit rather than competence. Lack of transparency or ineffective communication can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations, negatively impacting trust and morale.

Understanding and navigating these tensions is essential for effectively supporting individuals in finding their best fit within the organization while ensuring the broader goals and needs of the organization are met. Balancing these factors requires thoughtful consideration, self-awareness, and a holistic view of both individual and organizational needs.

**Finding the Right Fit Conclusion**

Like other leadership practices, finding the right fit was an “extra” service participants took on that was not dictated by their job description, but was what they interpreted as part of their social contract with subordinates. The relationship could be viewed as transactional, the leader had a relationship with the follower that would lead to mutual benefit (Sequeira, 2018). The leader helped the subordinate find the right fit and thus the subordinate was able to perform to meet the leader’s needs to accomplish the mission. The act of finding the right fit also had components of transformational leadership, in which the leader was morally challenged to care for the subordinate and find the right fit. The leader then challenged the subordinate in finding higher levels of motivation with a more aligned job.

Finding the right fit for people required broader knowledge of the organization, as well as a keen ability to understand the strengths and weaknesses of others, which took time, care, and effort. Like other participant decisions, finding the right fit for employees was the right thing to do because it met multiple ethical priorities. Finding the right fit met the ethic of care by supporting people in learning and growing in a role that was seen as best serving their skills. It
was utilitarian in that it maximized resources for the organization, and finding the right it served the participants’ self-interest because keeping someone who was struggling on their team tasked the leader’s attention and resources.
**Accountable to Others Conclusion**

In this section, participants described elevating their level of accountability beyond laws, rules, regulations, and appropriate behaviors and to being responsive to those of whom they lead. They described feeling responsible for learning leadership and applying their lessons learned. The attention to learning leadership seemed important for those who were not naturally team oriented. Identifying personal motivations for wanting to learn leadership was important, with one participant sharing that he simply liked being good at things. Not all leadership practices were entirely altruistic, again showing that quality leader behavior can come from various motivations, beyond solely being of service. Participants shared a mindset on finding the right fit for subordinates that might be unique to the CIA and other organizations that invest a great deal in their employees. A few participants experienced the value of being supported in finding their place in the organization where their natural disposition would help them thrive. Additional participants shared that they also helped others find their fit, applying resources and using their network to support those who may have entered the organization “misplaced.” The tension in their inclination to support subordinates’ movement to other roles being that unconscious biases could be excluding those who might actually fit, albeit in a different manner.

**Next up: Accountability Discussion**

After examining the evidence categorized in the themes of *Truth to Power, Punishment and Consequences*, and *Accountable to Others*, we move to discussing what the evidence means through the lens of the leadership and development theories. Also explored are the implications for leader development at the CIA and other organizations.
Part I. Accountability Discussion

Participants described the CIA as an organization with uneven accountability practices throughout, both uneven across the organization and vertically within the hierarchy. Social cognitive theory would explain that the uneven norms are likely due to a lack of uneven consequences for inappropriate behavior. While the participants described trying to implement consequences, many shared seeing lack of accountability, firsthand. Social cognitive theory explains moral development as the interplay between individual thought, self-sanction, and the network of social influences (Bandura, 2023). Participants in the study spoke to attempting to set standards against inappropriate behavior and speaking and enacting appropriate behavior themselves, however, their narratives indicate that a more complex approach would likely allow moral standards to more widely be normalized in the organization.

Setting Standards with Complexity Leadership Theory

An organization risks leader burnout by using standard bureaucratic methods to respond to a complex problem (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020), in this case, the complex problem the CIA faces of raising moral standards through accountability. The complexity leadership framework places leaders not as top-down managers and enforcers, but as people who can work together to elevate how the organization and larger system function through better adaptability. (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020). For accountability, the idea is that leader development and personal accountability for practicing leaders is not enough to change the system and is likely to lead to individual burnout.

The adaptive process is how a complex adaptive system (CAS) maintains adaptability through tension that motivates change. While systems and people can feel tension and return to the status quo without change or adaption, the idea is that eventually, the systems or people who are not able to adapt will fall out. For accountability and moral standards, complexity leadership
theory asks for enabling leaders create “conflicting” tension (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020, p. 111) in the organization by ideating about new solutions to the unstandardized norms. Those enabling leaders then have to connect, which requires facilitating and networking of leaders across the system. The goal is to create an adaptive space, safe from the mission and administrative demands of the organization. While the CIA likely has adaptive spaces for mission-focused innovation, the evidence from the participants begs the question of what the organization’s adaptive space looks like in acknowledging and creating tension to push ahead in moral development among the workforce. Without the acceptance of the complexity of the issue, leaders will end up being constant enforcers when what they are enforcing fails to be socialized at a grander, organizational scale.

**Social Cognitive Theory and Complexity: Individual Development**

Complexity theory and social cognitive theory both recognize the role of individuals in changing norms. Complexity theory asks for adaptive spaces to focus on innovative solutions that can be implemented across the network (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020). Social cognitive theory requires individuals to learn through consequences and further socialize norms through their reactions to behavior in the organization (Bandura, 2023). Both theories involve leaders taking accountability for their role as leaders. Both acknowledge that the leaders should see themselves as responsible for enabling standards. The development into that level of accountability and enabling identity almost certainly requires internalized norms, self and other understanding, and self-regulation. Self-development involves welcoming and grappling with tension inside oneself and raising one’s level of humility, emotional awareness, and regulation. The next section accepts that it takes individuals to change a system and examines themes in how participants explained self-development through their reflection on self and others.
PART II. SELF-DEVELOPMENT

*We all think we're good leaders, just like everybody thinks they're a good driver.*

Introduction

In the previous chapter, participants shared experiences that highlighted the need for the CIA as an organization to emphasize accountability in order to attain higher ethical standards. Those higher standards would support development of ethical norms for employees as future leaders, in particular as leaders are influential in creating ethical environments. Thus, developing strong ethical standards of future leaders can influence the CIA’s organization-wide internal ethical environment. Social cognitive theory supports the idea of using punishment and other consequences to establish accountability and ethical standards (Bandura, 2023). In addition, exemplary leaders who are honest, transparent, or considerate of others, are an important source of information for subordinates and become a person to be emulated, and thus able to influence ethical behavior (Brown et al., 2005). For exemplary leaders to emerge, self-development is essential to build awareness, humility, human dignity, and self-regulation. These attributes will make them more attractive and influential as ethical role models.

This chapter considers participant expressions of self-development, a topic that emerged in their reflections as crucial in connecting with others and moving people with care towards accomplishing the mission. Participants expressed self-development as on-going learning about the self and its relation to others. A major finding was the importance of the interpersonal experiences necessary for their own personal development in awareness and regulation. Participants reported learning through assessments that helped place their way of being within the context of others and gave direct feedback on how they were perceived as leaders. The human-centered aspect was further emphasized in expressions of humility, for which participant
reflection noted the positive feelings that humility created and as well as the fear and protection that vulnerability could evoke in others in a competitive environment. They learned through interactions with leaders who behaved with varying degrees of humility, sometimes learning the benefits of personal support in hard times from highly human-focused leaders. Human dignity was something that they thought was a minimum standard. Participant examples told the story that treating others with dignity was highly welcomed, but not always strongly held throughout the organization. Finally, participants described how they allowed others to support them when they knew their emotions were high or they were in a high stress environment in which they needed others to help them regulate.

Feedback, humility, and self-regulation interacted to support participants in embodying ethical leadership that could drive teams towards the mission while having care for people. Participants showed a general willingness to challenge themselves in self-development through learning what others thought of their way of being and behaving. Some participant’s willingness was communicated as an eagerness to understand how they were perceived and to address those blind spots. Their desire and motivations to increase their self-development included being passionate for a challenge, a love of learning, and their pragmatic dedication to be better leaders for the organization. Learning self-awareness was like a self-taught, on-the-job, psychology course that participants enrolled in to dedicate themselves to learning about the people with whom they worked and how to be a better influence in the organization. Case officers in the DO had learned through their training how to interact with global agents in the name of national security. The case officer job skills, although valuable in learning to role take, still left them with plenty to learn about how to interact with and understand their subordinates and colleagues. They recognized the need to soften enough to acknowledge the human elements in their work, while
staying firm in their support of the mission.

Figure 2. displays how concepts from participant interviews were catalyzed by a focus on self-development and ultimately led to self-regulation and internalized human dignity as a norm from which to self-regulate. Appendix C quantifies participants’ expressions of self-development themes. Having a focus on self-development, with a level of humility that allowed participants to be open to looking at themselves critically, led to introspection related to themselves and others. Learning and reflecting about themselves supported participants in reflecting and learning more about others, and vice versa. For example, all ten participants expressed understanding personality differences between themselves and others through their interactions with colleagues, with four participants describing differences using concepts from the Meyers Briggs Type personality assessment. The back and forth between self and other awareness contributed to learning humility and emotional awareness. Participants expressed humility in different ways, with nine participants explaining that their own infallibility as part of their leadership philosophy and eight participants telling stories in which they made errors.

Emotional awareness came through as an important part of self-development for leaders and interacted with their learning of self and other awareness. Participants spoke to recognizing their own emotional states, sometimes though listening to their own internal dialogue, and then they self-regulated or recognized the need to ask others to support them in regulating. Six participants described a time in which they heard and regulated their internal dialogue and five participants described a time in which they relied on others to help them regulate their emotions prior to communication or a personnel-related decision.

Self-regulation was strengthened through humility and emotional awareness. Integrating self-regulation with attention to humility and emotional awareness was found to be important for
leaders in stressful situations. Eight participants directly commented on the importance of maintaining human dignity of others, even times of stress, highlighting the importance of human dignity to be an internalized norm, a guidepost for their behavior, that is enacted even when leaders are depleted. The proposed initial step of focus on self-development may come naturally to some leaders and can be supported by assessments, training, coaching, and feedback, as well as other leaders role modeling humility. The interaction between the focus on self-development, self-awareness, and other awareness supported many participants in moving towards additional humility, emotional awareness, and self-regulation.

Figure 2. Focus on self-development as a catalyst for self and other awareness, humility, self-regulation, and normative human dignity.

Key Findings in Self-Development
Personal assessments and structured feedback were key tools participants used to obtain information on how they were perceived and how they could better interact with others. The Myers Briggs Indicator Type (MBTI), a personality assessment tool, emerged as providing common language at the CIA for employees to explain themselves and take account the preferences of others. The 360-degree feedback mechanism was acknowledged as a useful tool that the CIA used among leaders to develop self-awareness. Although participants described 360-degree feedback as generally beneficial, they had critiques to improve its implementation. Feedback was seen as a welcomed challenge to support self-improvement and was not taken as a critique on their core way of being or a threat to their career or status.

In engaging in their motivation, a sense of humility was conveyed, with participants expressing the importance of clarity and of acknowledging their own limitations with subordinates. For one participant, learning an aspect of humility happened in a moment of sudden realization in how subordinates perceived him. For others, they learned to engage with increased humility through their experience of feeling good when they were acknowledged and respected by leaders. For one participant, humility was key because treating people like humans was effective in supporting people to accomplish the mission and any treatment that began to be less than humane was ineffective towards that end. They felt that stress and an excessive focus on the mission were what often jeopardized the leader's acting in accordance with human dignity in mind.

In terms of agency, participants’ responsibility lay in monitoring and regulating emotions in both themselves and others. They engaged in role-taking to understand how people might be angry or suffering and relied on social support to help regulate when their emotions reached heightened states. Self-regulation was a social act, with one participant leaning heavily on his
deputy to regulate his messaging and another participant relying on family support to ensure she could maintain having capacity for others in a high-stress environment.

Understanding feedback about themselves, learning humility, and respecting human dignity seemed to feed into developing higher levels of self-regulation. Self-regulation was surprisingly not a solo endeavor. Times of stress and crisis tested participants’ ability to regulate. They communicated relying on others to check them when they could feel their emotions running high. Social support included participants’ peers, assistants, and family that they could call on to review the situation, help them sit with their emotions, and come down to a reasonable state.

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section offers a theoretical foundation that tracks the increasing enthusiasm for self-awareness within various fields, encompassing leadership research, public administration, and management. The ensuing part delves into participant viewpoints concerning self-assessment instruments, particularly the Myers’s Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and 360-degree feedback. This is succeeded by a segment dedicated to humility and human dignity, with instances of participants illustrating both innate and cultivated humility. The last section addresses emotional awareness and self-regulation, which played a pivotal role in how participants interacted with others within the organization.

**Theoretical Background: Self-awareness, Authentic Leadership, Agency, and Moral Identity**

Self-awareness has been increasingly recognized as a key component in leadership development (Carden et al., 2021) and a catalyst to turning leadership training and development into high levels of leader effectiveness (Seidle et al., 2016). Self-awareness arises when individuals are conscious of their own presence and the components that define their existence.
within the specific environment they engage with over time (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Self-awareness has emerged as a base level in the process of leadership development (Seidle et al., 2016). Evaluation though introspection combined with feedback can increase levels of self-awareness and motivation to make behavioral changes. Research confirms that it is important for leaders to understand and evaluate their identity, motivations, and core beliefs that influence their actions and decisions (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016). Moreover, leadership performance is almost certainly significantly impacted by the “combination of coaching, classroom instruction, feedback, and experiential training,” (Seidle et al., 2016, p. 603). It becomes vital for leaders to understand themselves in relation to others as they navigate leading teams and shaping the environment and direction of an organization. Social cognitive theory’s core properties of human agency are forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection and support the idea that people contribute to their own personal growth through these activities (Bandura, 2023).

Self-awareness is part of authentic leadership\(^2\) and authentic leadership has a number of components, such as positive psychological capital (confidence, optimism, hope and resiliency), positive moral perspective, self-awareness, self-regulation follower development, among others. Authentic leadership overlaps with ethical leadership’s in that both require examining one’s cognition around morality and ethics to develop a positive moral perspective. The ideal result of the examination in both authentic leadership and ethical leadership is that the leader is able to engage in and sustain ethical decision-making processes and moral actions from their resilience, capacity, and moral courage and encourage followers to do the same (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 324). The awareness is not a fixed endpoint; rather, it is an ongoing journey in which

\(^2\) It is possible that authentic leadership is simply highlighting a process that is based in more traditional leadership models, such as ethical leadership and serves to highlight the importance of self-awareness processes in those traditional models.
individuals continuously develop an understanding of their distinct abilities, strengths, life
purpose, core values, beliefs, and aspirations. The process encompasses a fundamental awareness
of one's own knowledge, experience, and skills (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Self-awareness, self-regulation, moral identity and ethical leadership come into play with
the idea that exerting self-control comes from a limited and shared resource (Joosten et al.,
2013). Awareness of one’s cognitive state can support leaders in knowing when to more
carefully manage their decisions from realization of when their mental resources are depleted.
Constant pressure in an organizational environment is likely to limit the mental energy needed to
self-regulate and act ethically, particularly a complex organizational environment in which
leaders are working through multiple complex choices and decisions throughout the day. People
who define themselves in terms of morality and have high moral identity will consume fewer
mental resources with their frequent decisions and therefore be less vulnerable to depletion
effecting their ethical behavior (Joosten et al., 2013), making those people more likely to
perform as ethical leaders. Moral identity is a “trainable” feature and ethical climates with ethical
top management can enhance moral identity among employees.

In terms of the agency it takes for people to act, three key concepts of human agency in
social cognitive theory are forethought, self-reactiveness/self-regulation, and self-reflection
(Bandura, 2023). Thinking towards future states and outcomes is part of forethought and serves
as a guide for behavior. For the long term, forethought involves considering values when
forming long term direction and meaning to one’s life. Self-reactiveness is also termed as “self-
evaluative reactions” and is the self-regulation part of human agency. It involves evaluating how
well their behaviors align with their standards. Self-reflection is the contemplative property of
agency in which people evaluate past and future activities. Self-reflection includes evaluating
one’s efficacy in their action, their thoughts, their values, and the morality of their pursuits (Bandura, 2023).

Figure 3. aggregates self-awareness concepts from the literature that support ethical leadership performance. Ongoing reflection, training, coaching, and engaging with human agency properties reinvigorate the journey towards ethical leadership and contribute to building an ethical climate. Reflection, coaching, training, and feedback help leaders develop self-awareness, which impacts leadership performance (Seidle et al., 2016) while forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection are moral development properties that contribute to leadership performance (Bandura, 2023). Self-regulation is enhanced by moral identity. Moral identity is supported by an ethical climate and serves as an important variable that can reduce the cognitive energy needed to make ethical decisions as a leader (Joosten et al., 2013). Leadership decisions and performance when supported by continued development allow for an ethical and authentic leadership journey in which there is continued evaluation of oneself and its relation to values, the organization, and others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Figure 3. Pathways to leadership development and ethical organizational improvement
Tensions in Self-Development

The participant examples of applying the MBTI and other assessments highlight a tension wherein individuals might overly rely on their personality type to explain their behavior, potentially resisting necessary changes for their roles. Leaders also grapple with the challenge of determining the most suitable development programs and assessments for their teams, often relying on external experts and their own leaders for guidance. The allocation of limited resources for 360 feedback, particularly for new leaders, poses an additional tension. The crucial question arises: How does an organization prioritize leaders for such developmental initiatives, especially in high-stakes environments like counterterrorism offices dealing with ongoing crises?

Despite emphasizing the importance of humility and dignity, participants occasionally revealed standards that bordered on arrogance. The participants' unwavering expectations of excellence, both from themselves and others, occasionally led to perceptions of those unable to meet these standards as inferior. This tension calls attention to the challenge of maintaining
respectful treatment even in intense circumstances, highlighting the need to avoid using pressure as justification for mistreatment. Leaders must carefully navigate these dilemmas, balancing human needs with professional obligations, and acknowledging that how they are perceived can significantly impact their effectiveness. Emotional regulation emerges as a crucial tool for leaders, aiding them in deciding when and how to engage with subordinates emotionally, adding an additional layer of complexity to the leadership landscape.

Navigating Part II. Self-Development

The presentation of evidence is organized into three main parts, Personality and Other Assessments, Humility and Human Dignity, and Emotional and Social Awareness and Learning. Personality and Other Assessments consists of participants’ perceptions of tools that supported their awareness and growth in understanding themselves and others. Humility and Human Dignity describes how participants found these concepts to be key to leadership effectiveness, but was sometimes forgotten in the CIA’s mission-focused environment. Emotional and Social Awareness and Learning provides evidence of participants’ learned capacity to hold the emotions of others in their leadership development and the importance of having support of others in their own emotional experiences.
Section One: Personality and Other Assessments for Self-Development

*Feedback is a gift is not something you need to run away from.*

Improved understanding of self-efficacy and self-awareness is key to individual growth and allows ethical leaders to empower themselves, their colleagues, and their organization (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016). The participants' openness to feedback indicated their humility and distinguished them from characteristics of arrogance, such as cognitively resisting receiving information about their own limitations (Cowan et al., 2019). The combination of self-awareness, along with the essential feedback required to achieve elevated levels of self-awareness, could arguably serve as the most crucial causal element in transforming a training and development program into enhanced levels of leadership proficiency (Seidle et al., 2016). Among the participants, personal assessments, structured feedback, and introspection were ways they improved their self-awareness and development as leaders.

**Key Findings in Assessments for Self-Development**

The CIA introduced participants to the MBTI personality assessment as a form of development and it served to help them better understand themselves and others. Some participants communicated that the MBTI was a key part of participants’ initial understanding of self and others and was supplemented, later in their careers, through 360-degree feedback, which offered critiques on their way of being as leaders and colleagues. Participants described a self-knowing using language from the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Participants were familiar with the types and the assessment seemed to be commonly used in the CIA during their tenure. Their reference to the MBTI was emergent in the interviews and multiple participants used their type as a tool to explain how they might conduct themselves in the interview. The 360 feedback was a welcomed challenge for the participants, who offered critiques on how it could
better serve others in the CIA, such as offering that it should be done earlier in one’s career and that anonymity for those giving the feedback should be better assured.

**Background on Myers Briggs Type Indicator**

The MBTI assessment tests for personal preferences towards one of two options in four different pairs. It takes the perspective that neither preference is better than the other (Randall et al., 2017). It uses single letters to symbolize each of the eight possible preferences, resulting in a total of 16 possible types. It assesses extroversion (E) versus introversion (I), sensing (S) versus intuition (N), thinking (T) versus feeling (F), and judging (J) versus perceiving (P). The assessment has been criticized for its results indicating that a person has a clear type, when the pairs exist on a spectrum (Bradford, 2018). While the single letter type results oversimplify the exact traits and measures, the assessment aims to identify differences in personality, rather than serve as a measurement of traits (Johnson, 2016).

**Background on 360-Degree Feedback**

In terms of building self-awareness, 360-degree feedback (360s) are designed to obtain perspectives from multiple sources in a person’s work environment and use that feedback to facilitate with the person under review for self-awareness, assessment, and development (Richardson, 2010). Raters are usually peers, supervisors, and subordinates of the person under review. Leaders who view themselves in a way that closely matches how others see them are typically considered more effective (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998). The 360 feedback is usually incorporated as part of a larger development program.
**MBTI: Common Language to Understand Self and Others**

*I may come across as an extrovert, but I'm not. I extrovert my introversion.*

Participants were comfortable using their MBTI type to explain who they were and better understand others, with four participants explicitly explaining their MBTI type or telling a story of how it helped them interpersonally. Their knowledge of the MBTI provided common language among CIA officers, analysts in particular, to discuss personality differences. In terms of working with others, the MBTI was a tool that allowed participants to understand that if others operate differently than themselves, their way of operating was not necessarily inferior. The ease of reference underscored the MBTI’s benefit of being a simple four-letter type based on pairs.

**Applying MBTI and Interest in Other Assessments**

Each participant who had been an analyst mentioned the MBTI in terms of how it helped them understand themselves and others and one participant who had been an operations officer touted its benefit in developing people and teams, along with the benefit of other leadership development programs. One participant, who was an analyst, described using his MBTI type to explain how he processed information. In his written leadership philosophy that he would provide subordinates, he described how he would explain his introversion and his non-linear way of thinking, which he did in a non-linear way:

*I wanted people to explicitly know who I was and my values. I gave them my Myers Briggs. I'm an ISTP. If you believe in Myers Briggs, I'm an Introverted Sensing Thinking Perceptive. I'm a “P” versus, Js, who are very linear thinkers. I'm a thinker that says, ‘I see a connection between A and D and D and Z and Z and F and F and L.’ If you show me a red crayon and then a green*
crayon, and ask me ‘What’s this?’ I say, ‘Oh, green or red, that reminds me, it’s almost Christmas…’

The participant used the Myers Briggs descriptions and language to inform people about how he might come across in a conversation. He was not scattered, but his thoughts did not always go in a usual linear progression, however, they still contained logic. Similarly, another participant, who was an analyst early in her career, used MBTI language to explain how she processed her thoughts out loud. She explained her tendencies at the beginning of the interview so that there was an awareness of how she may communicate in the discussion:

You need to know what Myers Briggs Type I am so I can explain why I’m kind of thinking out loud. The last time I took the instrument I was an ENTP. I’m pretty far over on the P side. My E/I is pretty close to the middle. And my S/N on any given day probably goes on either side of that as well. Sometimes, I am not even sure what I’m thinking until I start talking.

Another analyst described using the MBTI not only to understand herself, but to understand the people for whom she worked:

The organization makes you take the Myers Briggs tests and all these other psychological tests to see how you learn and all those things. I never understood why that was important, until trying to deal with management. You realize how they are, and realize, that is their personality. That's their management style. That's their leadership style. If I had known that before, I probably would have been a lot less stressed about my own job.
Although upon introduction to the assessment she did not understand the purpose of the assessment, she eventually used it to help her understand other people’s style of leading and working. The appreciation of the Myers Briggs and other assessments was not unique to the Directorate of Analysis. One operations officer thought the assessments were valuable and wanted the organization to take the learning further with more holistic programs to help teams and leaders understand each other. He described one program that his office funded and explained that not every office was willing to put resources towards the programs, so self-awareness and norms surrounding the programs were not homogenous throughout the organization:

*There's Myers Briggs. There's a whole series of other things that I think are useful. But those are episodic and they're not done wholesale. We actually used a more intense program in one of my last jobs. We had a person who oversaw talent management and she went out and found a company that did this sort of leadership assessment thing that would be done at the department levels to assess how the team functioned and worked together. All great things, and I think we actually learned from it, but we chose to do that and we had to pay for it because it was an outside contractor. Other mission centers were like, 'Wow, we're not going to spend money on that.' If you're not institutionalizing it, the way that people migrate through the ranks and migrate across directorates, I think you're gonna have problems as people go, they're not going to be ready for the jobs that they're thrust into.*

The officer believed there was value in the assessments and more in-depth development
programs, but was worried about how those were not intact institution-wide. He saw the discrepancy between officers as potentially making it harder on people moving to leadership positions who had not gone through a development program.

**Tension: Too Typed? Which is Best?**

A tension in the participant examples of applying the MBTI and interest in other assessments include that people could rely too fully on their type to explain their behavior and be resistant to making changes in their behavior or performance as needed for their role. Additionally, leaders were at the mercy of experts and their own leaders when identifying development programs and assessments would be best for their team and situation. In terms of over relying on type, an employee or leader could excuse their way out of incorporating developmental feedback if it did not align with their “type.” For example, a person who rates high in “perceiving” is likely to be open to completing tasks last minute (Randall et al., 2017). In certain scenarios, spontaneity can enable the integration of last-minute information into an intelligence briefing. However, in a team setting where one person's task completion affects others, a last-minute finish might not be advantageous. An employee with a "perceiving" preference who is advised to finish earlier may perceive this advice as counter to their MBTI preference and resist adapting to the task's requirements.

Leaders aiming to improve self-awareness and function within their team may not know which assessment would be most beneficial, other than ones they experienced in the course of their own careers. Relying on their own limited knowledge of assessments could result in using outdated or insufficient assessments for current issues. Participants also communicated the budget for personal and team development programs and tools were irregular across the organization and often based on the interest and willingness of higher-level leaders to initiate or
approve the programs or tools.

**MBTI Conclusion**

Participants incorporated MBTI language into their leadership philosophies and interactions with subordinates to clarify their natural inclinations, such as introversion, non-linear thinking, and thinking out loud. The MBTI was seen as a valuable tool for self-awareness and understanding others, allowing individuals to comprehend different leadership and management styles within the organization. However, the extent to which these assessments were utilized and supported varied across different offices and departments, raising concerns about institutional consistency and readiness for leadership roles among individuals who hadn't undergone such programs. Overall, MBTI played a significant role in promoting self-awareness and effective communication within the organization.
360-Degree and Other Feedback: Challenge Accepted

I made a point to send the 360 to people that I knew were not happy with me. I purposely had it sent to them.

The general consensus among participants was that 360-degree feedback had potential to be a valuable tool with more assurance of anonymity and its implementation earlier in one’s leadership career, so people have time to explore and correct their leadership behavior before it becomes a habit that’s hard to break. Six participants expressed interest in seeking feedback from the 360 and seven welcomed feedback through other means. Participants across directorates welcomed the chance to understand how they were viewed by others and challenge themselves to change or try to change. However, comments how colleagues denigrated or were skeptical about the 360-degree feedback served as evidence that it may not be seen as highly valuable across the organization’s leaders.

Participants who spoke to their experiences receiving feedback found peer appraisals to be particularly valuable and commented on how the honest feedback from peers is what gave them pause to reflect on their own way of being. If done with transparency, peer feedback was a high risk, high reward part of the 360 because peer feedback can be a threat the professional and personal relationship between peers and can be perceived as potentially disrupting cohesive teams that feel they are already functioning together well. Peer feedback holds significant potential because peers frequently collaborate closely, making them the most apt evaluators of one another’s performance (Peiperl, 2014). One drawback to peer feedback is that it can tend to be conservative if peers are mitigating risks to the relationship and worried about backlash for an honest review.

360-Degree Feedback: An Opportunity That Could be Improved
Participants expressed an eagerness to know more about themselves and walked away from the experience with something to think about, even if they had critiques about how the 360 was rolled out for them. One participant in the DO loved his experience with his assessment. He noted:

*I loved the 360. I thought it was a useful and interesting tool. There were two things that really, I loved, two things that hit me. One is, someone made a comment, ‘(Participant) thinks he's smarter than he really is,’ which I thought was quite funny. But you kind of sit back and say, ‘Okay, why would someone say that?’ And so maybe, you should adjust because, as a leader, you don’t have to be the smartest person in the room. In fact, it's better if everyone working under you is smarter. The other piece of feedback that I really took to heart, that I thought was kind of a zing, and I laugh, but this one was really good. They said, ‘(Participant) sometimes doesn’t understand the amount of respect that he has in the organization and he’s not careful in how he chooses some of his words.’ Meaning, I say too many flip comments. I was like, wow, that’s awesome and that’s probably spot on. I thought that comment was so valuable.*

The participant expressed a really positive and self-reflective experience with the feedback and although maybe everything wasn’t entirely groundbreaking, he found two things that he could really learn from and consider in how he lead going forward. With his positive experience and growth, he recognized not everyone was as enthusiastic about the 360 assessment. He also highlighted that it was the peer feedback that really impacted him:

*A lot of my colleagues in management kind of denigrate the 360-feedback stuff, but I thought that*
one really had some value to me. ‘Think before you open your mouth,’ and also the notion that ‘Hey, people are really watching you.’ It was my peers who gave that feedback, these are people at the same level.

He recognized the issues with the assessment and how it was managed, at least during his tenure, that might have limited its value. He had heard concerns from employees about participating and being linked through their employee ID to the feedback they provided:

*From what I recall, employees were skeptical because I think you had to put down your employee number. So, people always were skeptical about whether it actually was anonymous. I don't know if that's still the case...I thought it was really useful. But again, there's always skepticism on these things about whether it's just a bureaucratic exercise or not.*

Employees needed to trust that the feedback that they would provide would be anonymous, likely in fear of repercussions, whether by the leader under examination or somehow linked to them in their future promotions and career.

Another DO officer described how the assessment had potential, but in his experience, it needed to be more widely distributed to subordinates, peers, and supervisors or it didn’t have the right impact and was not really anonymous:

*I think conceptually, it sounded good. I think when they did those, I was supervising maybe four people. So, they're trying to do anonymous interviews with four people and when you get the feedback, you can tell who said what. Maybe it was good for senior level. I think that they*
should have made it for supervisors with, I don't know, more than 25 people, or something like that. If you only had a few people, I didn't think it was great, it was very okay. I don't think it had the desired effect for people that weren't supervising larger numbers.

He further explained that even the reflection part of the assessment with such a small pool did not provide a lot of depth for him to examine:

Somebody makes a comment because something’s fresh in their mind. Let’s say whoever was giving you the feedback asks you, ‘What do you think they meant by this?’ I’m like, ‘I know exactly what they meant by this. Three days ago, this happened and that’s what the comment is about.’

The 360 feedback experiences did not always live up to participant standards of valuable feedback. Additionally, one participant critiqued the timing of the feedback because, from what he saw, the 360 was given too late in someone’s career to have an impact of change:

They did this 360 thing. Our chief at the time was an older guy. He was probably five years from retirement and they made him go through that. I was one of the people he asked to do the evaluation of him. I started thinking about how a guy, that far into his career, set in his ways, is not going to change. I couldn't proceed giving feedback because it was too late. Stuff like that needs to be done earlier in someone's career. I felt it was too late in his career.

The participant did not think that his chief had asked for it willingly and did not see the
value in giving it to someone who was so close to retirement. The participant was very interested in getting a 360 for himself, but recognized that even he might be too set in his ways to make any major changes in his leadership practices:

*I tried for four years to get the 360 feedback. I wanted to hear from people on how I could improve. As a leader, I am sure I was kind of set in my ways. Even if I made changes that they recommended, my guess is they probably wouldn't last because I'd revert to my comfort zone, I suppose.*

Despite the discussions about the 360’s limitations, participants still had a great deal of interest in what the assessment could provide, if the limitations were addressed. Three participants from different directorates shared their enthusiasm for the 360:

*It's really important, we should be doing more of it. Because I think a lot of leaders don't really know how they're viewed.*

*It was starting as I was leaving. I would have done that. I would have been very interested to see that.*

*I did that multiple times and I think that is a good thing.*

The participants expressed a keen interest in understanding how their peers, subordinates, and supervisors perceived them. They viewed 360-degree feedback as a valuable tool that could
offer insights to enhance their approach to work, leadership, and overall demeanor. They emphasized the significance of anonymity and a diverse pool of evaluators. Based on their experiences, they believed that feedback should be sought early in one's leadership tenure, as they saw greater potential for positive change based on the feedback received during that period. The process of the CIA 360-review for participants appeared to be known to be for developmental purposes, rather than for selection or performance-related promotions, which likely reduces tension about giving and receiving feedback (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998). The CIA’s implementation was perhaps presented at the CIA as for developmental purposes only or was conducted when participants had already attained senior leadership positions, reducing the perceived career risks associated with 360-reviews.

**Other Opportunities to Obtain Feedback About Oneself**

Participants took a proactive approach in seeking developmental feedback, with seven participants discussing their appreciation for getting honest feedback as leaders. While the 360-degree feedback offered a formal assessment process, some officers favored more direct and personal means. Some officers described asking for developmental feedback from others on a regular basis and emphasized how it was important to them to hear feedback. Although less anonymous than a 360, participants told of at least attempting to understand more about how they were perceived through meetings, check-ins, or simply asking for how they could be better. One officer regularly asked for feedback during meetings:

*In my last position, we would have periodic inquiries with the team, the classic stuff, what's working, what's not working? What could I do better? What do you wish I would never do again, that kind of thing. I did that on a fairly regular basis.*
Another participant who had been a case officer said that what people thought about him was important for him as a leader. He described using his skills set that focused on making sure others were comfortable to help him get feedback on how he was doing as a leader and check in on how others were doing:

One of the things that helped me focus was, and it sounds shallow, but what do people think about me? Not, do they like me sense of the word because it's that's immaterial. But do people, as you climb the ladder and you go into management, even with your peers, do they view me as good at my job? A good leader? Somebody they can trust and rely on? As I moved up, I would ask people, 'Is everything okay? Am I doing this right? Are you comfortable here? How do you feel?' I was using my skill set the way we should be using our skill set, sort of indirectly. If people said, 'Well this is not working,' it would be for me a time to be like, 'Okay, let me see what I can do.'

He described his use of his case officer skill set as a tool for connecting with people who he worked with. He wanted people to be comfortable giving him feedback on how he was being perceived in his leadership role. He thought it was important to hear from his peers, in particular. In describing how self-reflection was important to him in being ethical, he commented on how it’s easy to lose sight of what you’re doing. It was important not only for leaders to ask for feedback from others, but to have regular feedback and reflection discussions with themselves, even if they did not have a lengthy amount of time to set aside for reflection:
You can start losing sight of what you're doing and why you're doing it, it becomes all about you. There's not a lot of time to take out of the day to sit down and say, ‘Okay, am I doing this right?’ You think about it as you're working. ‘Am I doing this right?’ I found that feedback from people was extraordinarily helpful in making any mid-course corrections I needed to make. It gave me an understanding and I asked myself, based on their feedback, ‘Am I going in the right direction? Or not?’

The participant found that feedback combined with his own reflection were ways to check in to make sure his beliefs about himself were aligned with what others thought of him. One participant commented on the ability to get feedback through one’s own reflection. She had helped developed a leadership development program in the CIA came to the realization of how important introspection was as she was developing the program. She thought the feedback from one’s own feelings was important to consider. As someone in the leadership development space, she thought people really needed to get in touch with themselves to support the right action through listening to themselves:

*I think that people need to listen to their souls. I think your body's going to tell you when something's not right. And I think people need to learn to hear it. Which is the introspection part of it. And then be willing to act on it.*

From her perspective, in terms of ethical leadership in the organization, the CIA leadership development programs needed to incorporate introspection so that leaders could practice and feel an awareness within them, their own feedback to themselves, particularly to help them identify
when something was not right.

Overall, regular engagement in conversations, meetings, and check-ins allowed for a continuous understanding of how participants were perceived in their roles. The desire to grasp how one is viewed by colleagues and subordinates was not merely a quest for likability but an endeavor to ensure effectiveness, build trust, and ultimately become better leaders. It underscored the importance of real-time feedback and self-reflection in navigating the intricate dynamics of leadership within the intelligence community.

**Tension: When to Initiate Feedback and For Whom**

If 360 feedback really is best to receive early in one’s leadership experiences, how does an organization decide which new leaders receive the attention with limited resources? Additionally, the feedback required the resource of time, so how does an organization with an intense mission balance the need for 360 training, especially in offices that are regularly working in crisis situations, such as offices focused on counterterrorism or involved in supporting real-time operations? Deciding how to allocate resources and taking the time for proper implementation required a long view. Organization leaders had to be confident that the development that would come from the experiences would benefit the organization.

**360-Degree Feedback Conclusion**

In the realm of self-development, participants reported generally positive experiences with 360-degree feedback. Participants within the CIA acknowledged its potential as a valuable resource for enhancing leadership capabilities. Participants across various directorates expressed eagerness to gain insights into how they were perceived by others and to challenge themselves for growth and improvement. Some officers further advocated for regular solicitation of developmental feedback, underscoring its importance in understanding their professional impact.
and fostering continuous self-improvement. Concerns about 360-degree feedback were raised regarding anonymity and the timing of these assessments. Participants emphasized the need for stronger assurance of anonymity to encourage candid and honest feedback. Additionally, many believed that conducting the 360 assessment earlier in a leader's career would be more beneficial, allowing individuals ample time to explore and amend their leadership behaviors before they become ingrained habits.

Section Two: Humility and Human Dignity

As a leader, in the ethical sense, you've got to be humble. You have to understand: It is not about me, I am not the center of the universe, I am not infallible.

While humility can be beneficial for leaders, it might not be an innate trait; nevertheless, to excel in top leadership positions, achieving a balance between humility and professional determination is almost certainly necessary (Collins, 2001). Leaders who thrive at the highest levels are able to balance having a strong resolve to do what is necessary for long-term results with a calm determination that inspires based on standards, not necessarily charisma. They are able to look at themselves and their role in bad results and bad luck while giving their team credit others for success and good luck. It is likely that under quality circumstances, such as increased self-awareness, coaching, and other factors, a high quality, driven, humble leader can be developed (Collins, 2001). Humility builds high follower trust and commitment (Caldwell et al., 2017). It combines self-awareness, openness to learning, and recognition of the abilities of others. Successful humble leaders are able to redirect their own ego and self-interest towards
building teams to support an organization’s mission (Collins, 2005).

The CIA’s focus on mission and the organization’s core value of excellence made the organizational environment ripe for confidence to turn into arrogance. Arrogance is observed as the denigration of others, belief of superiority, failure to consider others’ perspectives, resistance to information about one’s limits, and overestimation or distortion of one’s abilities (Cowan et al., 2019). Excellence meant acute attention to detail along with an expectation and reputation of success. To be arrogant is to have an inflated assessment of one’s or an organization’s competence resulting in excess self-assuredness and an attitude of superiority over others (Cowan et al., 2019). Seeing oneself as excellent could easily morph into the overconfidence of arrogance. Humility was one way to keep arrogance at bay because humility meant having an accurate assessment of one’s abilities and understanding the importance of other members of the organization (Cowan et al., 2019). The participants conveyed a sense of confidence gained through their years of experience on the job, while also displaying and understanding the importance of humility through their discussions of lessons learned in humility.

In terms of ethical leadership, humility addresses the power sharing between leaders and followers and keeps leaders from seeing followers as “sled dogs” who put in the work at the decision of the leader (Ward, 2023, p. 273). When a leader possesses humility, they recognize that their followers share common qualities and have the potential to exhibit leadership qualities in their respective roles. Both the leader and the follower are then able to be active, empowered, and courageous in their actions to support the organization’s purpose and serve as forces of moral accountability.

Key Findings of Humility and Human Dignity in the Workplace

The significance of humility as a foundational aspect of effective leadership emerged
subtly, but profoundly from the narratives shared by the participants. While humility wasn't always explicitly highlighted in their stated leadership philosophies, the participants' accounts and emphasized stories shed light on its pivotal role in their approach to leadership. Nine participants described how being a leader required one to be humble and eight told stories of their own falliability. The essential quality of humility was challenged in the high-pressure, national security context of the CIA, where humility was not universally recognized or valued and could even be viewed as a weakness.

Participants emphasized the importance of treating subordinates and colleagues with respect, particularly during high-pressure situations. They acknowledged the necessity of providing feedback constructively, maintaining a dignified approach even when addressing shortcomings. Eight participants commented on the importance of leaving people with their dignity, even in times of stress and eight spoke to experiencing a leader of theirs treating them or a colleague without the baseline respect a human and fellow employee deserves. Additionally, one participant spoke of their experience in upholding the dignity of individuals overseas, viewing their interactions as partnerships based on respect and shared risk rather than a power and control dynamic. The concepts of humility and human dignity challenged the perception of CIA case officers as heroes, instead placing value on the contributions and risks taken by those they work with who are providing crucial information.
Natural and Learned Humility

You are your standards. How you interact with others is always on display. It's not just the decisions that you make, nor just what you verbally say, nor what you write down, but how you treat people.

Humility and being humble were not always directly stated as being an important part of the participant’s leadership philosophy, however, the way participants spoke and the stories they emphasized showed that humility was an important aspect of leadership to them. Embracing humility posed challenges, given the high-pressure, national security context within the CIA, where humility might not always be embraced as a valuable trait and could even be viewed as a weakness. Nonetheless, the participants shared how incorporating humility into their leadership approach, including fostering an environment where their team and peers understood they didn't possess all the answers, proved advantageous in achieving mission objectives and might eventually be recognized and rewarded.

Natural Humility

The participants' natural display of humility during interviews was evident in instances of being thoughtful in their choice of words, recognition of diverse viewpoints, and avoidance of asserting dominance. For example, a few participants described wanting to choose their words carefully or questioning their own view to acknowledge other ways to interpret the situation, beyond their own perspective. In these demonstrations of humility, they spoke in a way that demonstrated modesty and that they were not necessarily more right than others.

One former analyst, in speaking about how she stepped into a leadership and teaching role through becoming the expert in an analytic technique talked about supporting her team in becoming more structured using that particular technique. In describing the situation, she took
time with her wording so that she did not sound dismissive of the team. She implied that she was not smarter than others on the team, she just had more time to practice and focus on the technique that would be valuable for others as well:

*I'm looking for a word because I'm afraid I'm going to sound dismissive. I don't mean to express it as, ‘I was so good at this and they were not,’ because that's not it. I was trying to help facilitate structured analytic practices that would be rigorous, for people who were not used to actually doing those things. It's not that I was particularly good at it, but when you will have the chance to focus on a skill, it gives you the opportunity to lead in that skill.*

The analyst described leading her team with humility that recognized that she was not better than others. Her story about her leadership opportunity was one of modesty, even in choosing the words of how to tell it. Another participant, who was a support officer, reflected on the story he had just told about deciding not to confront a peer about a personnel decision the peer made with which he did not agree. He noted that maybe it was for the better of the relationship or maybe he actually had a lack of courage to confront the peer:

*I decided, and maybe this was my lack of courage here, that there wasn't any value in in telling him I didn't agree with that. That was his decision.*

The participant chose to leave it open as to whether he was entirely right or not in his behavior. His experience, rank, and passion for leadership did not mean that he was always right or courageous in every decision. A case officer spoke similarly about not always having been
right. Even with the leadership principles he teaches, he admitted learning those principles were important, but does not speak as if he perfected them:

*I was never perfect at all, in any way. I think I learned over time. I got much better at it at the end of my career, but when I run around and talk about these things, I’m not preaching that I was great at it.*

The case officer was passionate about leadership and improving leadership at the CIA, however, he did not claim to have been the greatest at leadership or that he always had all the right answers. The humility came in how he described needing to learn to be a better leader and admitting his leadership was not flawless, or close to it.

Another participant who was a case officer described a level of humility in his work by managing potential pride and framing his work as partnership. The way he viewed his work with people overseas reporting to the CIA was that those people are the ones who deserved the glory of any success:

*I love the people and so I had positive experiences everywhere I was. It was one of my favorite parts of the job. You really get to have intimate relationships with people when you recruit them. I love that. I didn't regard that as the puppet master thing. I regarded it more as a partnership. I used to get guys, when I would recruit them, I would get them to where they wanted to do it. Not for me. I would just build whatever intellectual edifice that they needed to get them to do it. I viewed that as a partnership thing, not as a power thing. Because really, how can you view it that way? We’re not taking the risk. I had some personal risk there, but for the most part, the rest
of it, they're the ones taking the risk. So, I really felt like the glory goes to them.

His breakdown of how he viewed his role went into breaking the “hero myth” that the CIA case officers were the heroes when it came to national security. The way he saw it, it was the people providing information that took the risks and who deserved the accolades, not the case officers. Another officer described how he aimed to be a humble leader by sharing credit for achievements. He explained:

*Anytime I talked about my mistakes, I used the pronoun I, because I'm responsible for those mistakes. Anytime I talked about the successes, it was ‘we,’ the team or the individuals who actually worked for me that actually accomplish things...It takes the whole team of what everybody has accomplished. But when the things didn’t go well, if I say ‘Well, this contractor did that,’ or ‘this liaison service screwed me...’ if I start making excuses, I'm not accountable for the leadership. I had the mindset that, ‘I’ll accept it, I’ll explain what happened, and I'm going to accept full responsibility for the things that didn't go right.’*

At one point in his career, he clashed with a leader who did not see humility the same way he did. This leader took his explanations in the literal sense that the participant was the one screwing up and his team was successful, despite the errors he explained as his own fault:

*I had to deal with a manager who did not understand how I was communicating. I’d see him every morning for the morning meeting. He didn’t have a lot of direct interaction with me, I assumed that I didn’t have to tell him what I’m doing because he can see what we were doing. I*
figured he’d assume that I’m doing my job. Well, that was an assumption. That was not a good assumption. What happened was, I would go to the meeting, and I’d tell the boss, ‘My chief of personnel did this successfully,’ or ‘My chief of finance did this really well,’ which I thought was the right thing to do, give credit where it was due. When something went wrong, I would say, ‘I overestimated something,’ or ‘I made this mistake,’ He assumed that I was the one that was making all the mistakes and the rest of my team was doing all the great stuff. He gave both of my deputy chiefs rewards. He was happy with all of my branch chiefs, but he wanted me removed.

The participant had no idea he was being seen as a problem, when he was simply trying to give credit and communicate his team’s accomplishments with humility. It posed a problem for how his performance was viewed and demonstrated that the humble style was not understood across the organization.

Participants exhibited humility in their language and behavior during interviews, reflecting their recognition of diverse viewpoints and a desire not to assert dominance. They chose their words carefully and questioned their perspectives, demonstrating modesty and a reluctance to appear superior to others. Humility for the participants involved active listening, modesty, and a willingness to learn from others while avoiding the display of arrogance or dominance.

**Learning to Engage with Humility**

Humility was not something that came naturally to all participants, and perhaps represented how humility was not a natural way of being to all humans, but had to be learned or remembered and practiced. Participants shared that how, especially as leaders, it was important to know and let others know that they were not the smartest person in the room. It was also
important to participants to communicate their willingness to see another perspective and have subordinates offer input or corrections. Sharing that type of humble mentality was part of sharing their positional power as a leader. They aimed to learn and hoped their humility would allow others to lead and contribute, if they had a better way.

One participant who had worked both in support and operations admitted he had been intimidated when he moved into new jobs of which he was on the cusp of being ready. Particularly in those jobs, he felt it was important to let people know that leadership power was shared and he was not “all knowing,” he needed others to contribute:

*I was intimidated going into some of the jobs I had. I knew I could handle it, but I was a little intimidated because I didn't feel like I knew all of it. Which went to some of my leadership philosophy which is, just because I'm the boss doesn't mean the smartest guy in the office.*

The participant described a specific example of when a leader’s humility was not well-communicated and how it affected a team’s willingness to participate in developing how the operation would run. One of the leaders he worked with was incredibly intelligent, but people did not like working for him because they felt like their input was not welcomed:

*A lot of people couldn't stand working for him. Super intelligent guy. If he gave you an operational requirement as a tasking, he’d always already thought about it a lot. He was an operations guy his whole career. He'd always thought about how he would do it and what he would do. He would task it to you, or to someone, or a group of people. As they would give him updates, if they weren’t following what in his mind, what he thought you should be doing, he*
wouldn’t approve. He was a pain to deal with.

The participant described how the leader gave off a lack of humility and the sense that he was all knowing, thus team members felt limited in owning their part of their work. They did not enjoy working for this person. The participant chose to learn from the leader’s perceived desire to be involved in the entire process of operational planning, rather than being part of the process of finding the right way to do things. The participant learned he had to communicate humility when tasking subordinates and asking question so that they felt ownership in developing the operation:

I tried to be cognizant of how I interacted when someone’s briefing me on a plan, an operational plan that I had tasked them with...I was careful in how I asked questions and got them to clarify things to me, because I didn’t want them to go away with the idea that I was telling them how to do things, unless there was a reason I had to tell them to do it differently. And I would sometimes I say, ‘Look, I’m not telling you what to do, but here's a thought from my experience, and this is why I would try XYZ...’ and characterize it as best I could. Player-coach mentality, but I had to be careful that they knew when I was in player mode and when it was in coach mode.

The participant balanced when he needed to be directive as a leader and when he wanted to get others’ input on how best to approach things. He communicated it with the subordinates instead of letting them guess in which mentality he was approaching the tasking for them. He took on the responsibility of guiding the planning so that subordinates could accomplish things based on the best way for them to do things, not on the way that the participant would do them.
His learning of humility and communication was evolved from more than viewing the impact of the less than humble leader to ensure he was more humble from the start of his leadership tenure. He learned through an interpersonal moment in which he caught himself being perceived as giving orders, when he was really trying to be part of the planning process. His intent was to be giving out ideas, however, he realized that he was being perceived like the other leader, being entirely directive:

*No wonder they're looking at me so funny. I'm sitting around the table with my people and I'm in charge. I'm the boss and we're talking about a plan. They all get these horrible faces. It was like I had the epiphany. ‘Oh, I know what's going on here. They think I'm telling them what to do.’ It was a sudden realization…and the epiphany was the moment I came to understand that boss, who was the guy that so many people didn't like.*

Through a moment of reflection on his subordinates’ unsaid reactions to him, he came to understand that subordinates were perceiving him just as as they perceived the directive boss for whom no one like working. The participant knew from that moment that he had to make changes in how he interacted with his team so show that he was humble and not trying to be “all knowing” and directive. That moment of interpersonal introspection opened him up to a different way of relating and communicating with his subordinates. He also felt an affinity and understanding for the boss that no one like to work with. He thought that maybe that boss also was just brainstorming ideas, but because of the lack of a communicated humility, that was not how others experienced meeting with him. The example showed that it was likely subordinates learned to expect a limited level of humility when it came to superiors respecting their own ideas...
for carrying out operations and planning.

Two other participants talked about how they learned to admit when they were wrong and that the admission did not negatively impact how they were perceived as leaders. One participant described acknowledging when she was out of character and apologizing for it, while the other spoke to acknowledging when she was wrong in her analysis. Both used acknowledgement as a means to strengthen relationships and show ownership of their behavior or analysis:

_I grew to the point where I am to this day. I will act out of character for what I want to act like and go back to the team, the person, or whoever, to say, I am so sorry about that. That was inappropriate. I shouldn't have behaved that way. I should have said, whatever it was I should have said. Acknowledgement also speaks to the owning of the behavior. I say it to my kids, I say to the staff, I said it to senior leaders. I say to my friends. We can't get away from it. We're all human, we can't do it all perfectly._

The participant knew that she not infallible and knowing this, she practiced apologizing if her behavior was not her best. She did not excuse the behavior, but had come to the point where she could openly admit when she contributed to the problem. One of the participants who was an analyst described how she learned to acknowledge when she was wrong on something analytic as a way to diffuse tension and improve relationships with others:

_Acknowledging when you have screwed up…I didn't do that for a while, not because I was trying to be a jerk, but because it never occurred to me. It diffuses tension on your team to occasionally say, ‘You know what, you are right about this thing…I didn't have all the facts, or I hadn't_
thought it through,’ or ‘I was just wrong. You have more experience on this. I should have given more credence to what you were saying.’ I started doing that somewhere around, maybe three or four years into my CIA experience, because very few people were doing it, and somebody had done it with me. I remember how I felt when somebody acknowledged that I was right and they were not. It was a senior colleague on my team, I can't remember what the issue was, and I f I did, I probably couldn't say it out loud anyway. But I remember how that made me feel. He did it when it mattered. It was in front of the PDB briefer or something. It made a huge impression on me. So, I tried to do that for other people. My colleagues seemed to appreciate it.

The participant remembered how it felt to have someone admit they were wrong to her and wanted to carry that forward for other people. Her way of showing humility by admitting she was wrong was not, however, welcomed by her boss, who thought it made people uncomfortable:

*My team chief pulls me into his office and said, ‘Hey, I need you to stop doing something.’ And I was like, ‘Okay, what?’ He’s like, ‘You gotta stop apologizing to people when you're wrong.’ I'm like, ‘Wait, what? What did you just say? Do I need more coffee. What did you say to me?’ And he's like, ‘It makes people uncomfortable.’ And I'm like, ‘No, I don't think it does.’ He said again, ‘Well. I think it makes people uncomfortable.’ And I'm like, ‘Have they said that? Has anyone said it makes them uncomfortable?’ He replies, ‘Well, no, but I can tell that it makes people uncomfortable.’*

Her boss was uncomfortable with what she saw as showing humility, but what he perhaps
perceived as showing weakness or vulnerability. The analyst continued to explain what she thought was going on with her boss’s discomfort in her behavior and how it was easy in a high stress environment to ignore humility and vulnerability:

*He is trying to tell me, ‘What I'm seeing you doing is making us feel vulnerable.’ That's what he was basically saying, and they didn't like it because they would have to respond to me. In some cases, I think in his mind was, ‘Oh crap, we might have to start doing this. If she's gonna be honest enough to apologize when she's wrong, then maybe we have to do the same thing.’*

*National security positions, those jobs are very high stress. They're very tense. I think there might be a tendency to think, ‘Well, I don't have to be vulnerable. I don't have to apologize.’ I wasn't going to these people and crying and begging for forgiveness. It was just an acknowledgement that they were right and I wasn’t, but I think that's part of being a leader, honestly.*

It remains possible that her boss had other intentions in questioning her way of interacting. For instance, another reason he might have addressed her apology could have been intended to protect her from being perceived as weak in the high stress national security realm, in which humility was not always seen as a strength. However, she reported feeling in control of her humility that was simply a brief acknowledgement and thought that it was the right thing to do, especially as a leader:

*Be willing to step back, be a little humble and not always be arrogant and in people's faces. I think that is a part of leadership. Not all the time, but it's certainly a part of it.*
From her perspective, national security, as a field could use a little more humility in leadership and she did her job to role model what she thought made up a good leader. It was not a need to constantly be completely humble, but a leader had to balance excellence, arrogance, and humility. She also reported how the way she related to people with humility was rewarded. As a junior officer, GS-11, she was asked to serve in a briefing stint for the National Security Council, a role that would normally be filled by a more senior person. The issue manager told her that she was offered the position because she got along well with everyone. This reasoning for a coveted role confirmed for her that if you behave with humility and treat people well, it will eventually get noticed and rewarded.

Other instances of humility when it came to relationships between CIA officers included another participant describing how he messed up an email communication and put his subordinate in an awkward position. In the scenario, the subordinate had emailed him, in confidence, about a problem she was having with another team. The participant addressed the problem by including her email in communication with the supervisor of the other team, a person for which the subordinate had a friendly relationship, but did not want to be intertwined with her complaint about the team. The participant said it was important to him to remain open when the subordinate asked to discuss what had happened. He ended up apologizing to the subordinate and thanking the subordinate for having the courage to bring that to his attention. He was able to see that he made a mistake and was glad his mistake did not damage the relationship.

**Holding Multiple Truths About a Person, the Agency, the Country**

There were multiple expressions of being able to hold multiple truths about a colleague, the organization, and the US as a country and its national security initiatives. Participants
expressed a calm understanding that two or more things could be true. A few participants shared this capacity to hold multiple truths about how they felt and what they recognized in their supervisors. One participant, who was an analyst, shared an ongoing respectful relationship, that was also full of disagreements:

*We didn't always agree 100% You know, but we could agree to disagree, and agree to disagree without becoming disagreeable.*

Another participant, who was a support officer, shared a similar type of understanding about two of his supervisors. The participant got along well with one supervisor, but was not impressed with his leadership skills. The participant viewed the other supervisor as having limited leadership skills, but being very good at their work:

*The guy that was there as the chief when I first got there, a great guy. Not much of a leader, but a really nice guy. He rotated out the number two guy took over who had absolutely no leadership skills. He was technically very good at his job, but had no leadership skills.*

There was recognition in both bosses of what the participant experiences as their strengths and weaknesses. Another participant, who was a case officer, shared his hate of his former supervisor with the recognition that the supervisor taught him the most about his job. In an interesting take on humility, and in attempt to share how much disregard he had for this former supervisor, the participant shared he did not really care if this former supervisor had died. However, the participant had some level of respect for the skills the supervisor taught him, and
also would hope his family was ok in the event of this person’s death:

_I learned a lot of lessons from that boss, who was a toxic, horrible person, but an excellent case officer. That guy taught me how to get intel early, how to have an intel strategy going into the first meeting. He would drill me. I had so many recruitments in that tour because I had more intel, I had better numbers and he taught me all of that. They sort of teach you that in training, but not the way he taught me because he’s sitting there talking to me about every meeting. I learned the most about how to be an effective Case Officer of any single person from him. And I hated him. If you called me on the phone, and told me, this is going to be terrible, but I’m just gonna I’m just trying to be real with you. If you told me he was dead, I liked his wife and his kids, my first thought would be sympathy for them. My last thought would be about this guy._

Other participants reflected on the Agency and the US as a whole. They expressed a willingness to recognize the good with the bad. In explaining her thoughts on ethical leadership to her, one participant, who was an analyst, shared that she thinks the US is the greatest country and admits that the US does not always act like it:

_Part of ethical leadership involves some humility. The thing that you represent or the thing that you're doing at the time isn't the greatest it's not always gonna be the greatest. I believe America is the greatest country in the world, but the reality is we haven't always acted like it. Other countries have suffered because of that._

Another analyst shared a similar ability to love the US and also admit that it has a lot of
problems:

Every time I traveled even when I traveled to Europe, I always came back and said that I was born and raised the United States of America. We have the freedom to do and say things here that even in the best democracies they may not have. Sometimes you get in debate with people, they are asking, ‘Do you really think the US is that great, in all of our problems?’ You look, we got all kinds of problems. I've yet to see a place better than the United States of America.

Still other participants from other directorates shared their critiques of the Agency, but held a strong passion for service and pride in their work. They described areas where the organization needed to make improvements, but the awareness of faults did not serve to entirely change their view of the organization. Participants seemed able to regulate what bothered them about a person, the organization, or the US and hold what was challenging with what they appreciated.

Tension: Excellence and Arrogance

Although participants spoke to the importance of humility and dignity, there were hints that their high standards for themselves and others sometimes reached into arrogance. The participants’ expectation of excellence was clear in how participants talked about their work experiences and what they expected from others. They held themselves to high standards in behavior and performance and expected much of the same from others. The small hints of arrogance were evidenced by comments of seeing others who could not meet their expectations as less than. One officer described his inner dialogue when others were not up to standards in an instance in which others should have been holding people accountable, but failed to do so:
Then I get involved, which I wouldn't ordinarily. But I said, ‘Alright, here's what we're doing because you guys clearly are incompetent and didn't do it.’

The participant expected excellence that he did not see from the others, he notably saw himself as superior, and, in this case, perhaps he was rightfully above others in terms of being able to clearly address an issue. Another officer noted his own self-regulation of his arrogance and superiority when a subordinate brought an idea. He ended up approving the idea, but his initial inner dialogue was not humble:

*He came up with the idea to build a new support mechanism. I thought it was a stupid idea.*

The participant thought it was stupid, but helped the subordinate document the idea and move it forward. In the end, the participant was glad he self-regulated his arrogance and supported the subordinate in the pitch because it ended up being a successful new way of doing things. In his self-regulation, he relied on others above him who would hear the idea and make a determination about the idea’s potential.

An operations officer was transparent in sharing that he knew he was not the easiest person to work with, and indicated that he had softened as he aged, but the success in his career and commitment to excellence influenced his movement into arrogance during his career:

*I’m better now that I’m an old man and a grandfather and all these other things, but I was a very...*
stubborn, arrogant person. I would say it was the work and having a bit of success, I wouldn't say I was intolerable. But I was difficult. I was difficult because I felt like you just couldn't cut corners and you couldn't compromise and you couldn't cut and especially you couldn't compromise on those principles. Honesty, ethics and hard work...I was very impatient with people that wanted to cut corners on any of those, specially to third one.

The participant had high standards for the workplace and his success and ability to meet those standards sometimes left little room for others to not be as capable to achieve what he could. Among the participants that commented on arrogance or with indications of arrogance, inner dialogue served as a sign of when excellence might be turning to arrogance. Self-awareness for the participants involved recognizing when their expectations for excellence may be going too far. One participant regulated his own arrogance by pushing an idea through and the other participant showed a decision point in which he could decide to regulate his arrogance in how to spoke to people involved in the problem, even if in the end the right thing to do was to take charge himself.

**Natural and Learned Humility Conclusion**

The instances of natural humility exhibited by the participants during interviews demonstrated their inclination to choose words carefully, acknowledge different perspectives, and not assert superiority. They exemplified a modest approach, emphasizing their leadership through facilitation and partnership rather than dominance. This humility was not confined to their words but extended to their actions, acknowledging imperfections and demonstrating the ability to admit mistakes, fostering an environment where team members felt empowered to contribute their insights and expertise. Moreover, participants shared their journey in learning
and practicing humility as an essential leadership quality. They recognized that being a leader didn't imply having all the answers or being the smartest person in the room. It required acknowledging one's limitations, valuing diverse perspectives, and showing vulnerability by admitting when they were wrong. They described instances where they consciously communicated humility by seeking input, owning their behavior, and diffusing tension within the team.

Despite the challenges and the potential discomfort it may cause in high-stress national security roles, the participants believed that humility was integral to effective leadership. They expressed a desire to break away from a culture that often resisted vulnerability and embraced a balance of excellence, humility, and respect in their leadership approach. Ultimately, their stories illustrated that humility was not just a virtuous trait but a valuable attribute that contributed to their success as leaders within the CIA, fostering better relationships, collaboration, and overall effectiveness in fulfilling their roles.
Human Dignity: Required at a Minimum

That humiliation taught me a lot about leadership.

Human dignity is recognizing a basic worth or status that belongs to all persons equally, and which grounds fundamental moral duties of rights (Dignity, 2023). Six participants spoke directly to recognizing human dignity and the right for people to be treated respectfully. They touched on the importance of human dignity when it came to giving feedback to subordinates and when it came to supporting officers outside of the normal job duties. Human dignity was seen as a subtle aspect important to being an ethical leader the CIA, showing its significance in promoting a culture of respect, kindness, and collaboration in the challenging world of national security operations. Balancing the mission's imperatives with the preservation of human dignity remained a continual challenge, necessitating ongoing dialogue and reflection within the organization. Four participants illustrated instances where leaders transcended their job roles to demonstrate care and support for the well-being of their team members beyond professional obligations. These acts emphasized a sense of familial concern within the organization, countering the competitive and intense atmosphere prevalent in some areas of the CIA.

Respecting the Dignity of Others

Participants mentioned maintaining the dignity of others while serving as a leader and had clearly encountered instances in which their own dignity, or that of others, was not respected. The participants described the need to be firm with people and provide accountability and feedback, and that at the same time, it was vital for leaders to ensure that person walked away with their dignity. One case officer described how he knew it was important to give clear feedback when subordinates had shortcomings, but he knew it had to be done professionally and allow the subordinate their dignity:
You can be honest with them that they have shortcomings, but you always have to leave them with their dignity. There’s no berating is no raised voices. You’re not in partaking personal attacks.

An analyst echoed the feeling that, even when leaders were under high pressure, they needed to treat people with respect. The analyst described seeing a leader who did not treat people well, in part because of the pressure the leader and his team was under. The participant did not see that as an excuse for treating people poorly:

Especially at a time when we were under tremendous pressure from Congress to find out a lot of unknowns. You can't curse at people and bully people just for the heck of it, just because you can, or because you think people are not worthy of your standard. If they’re not doing something right, yes, give them feedback. They're adults, but, treat them with respect as adults. Don’t treat them like they are on a leash.

The participant witnessed instances in which leaders had lost their connection with human dignity. The participant wanted people to be treated as humans and with respect, even in high pressure situations. He stated that he saw instances when the emphasis on mission overrode the baseline of maintaining human dignity:

I saw ethical leadership lapses at the Agency, when mission overrode everything else. It overrode how people were treated. It overrode what people thought they could get away with. As
long as it was in the name of the mission...I've seen in every directorate of the organization where mission was the overriding human values.

The analyst emphasized how he felt that the organization-wide focus on mission is what led to treating people poorly and general inappropriate behavior by leaders. A case officer described how he sometimes raised his voice under pressure, but kept his demeanor respectful and without humiliation to subordinates:

I was never rude. I never raised my voice. Well, that's not true. I was not a screamer. I did not throw things. I did not humiliate people. I did not call them names. I did not. Those were things that were done to me by managers. I never liked it and I never thought it was an effective management tool.

The participant admitted he sometimes raised his voice, but even if he had a raised voice, he allowed people to keep their dignity and refused to partake in the humiliation that he experienced from other leaders. For the case officer, leaving people with their dignity was pragmatic because screaming and humiliating people was not an effective way of getting people to work to their fullest potential towards the mission. The analyst and case officer experiences of bosses who would humiliate others indicated that there were leaders who did not respect employee’s human dignity in both directorates.

In a story of a leader fully embracing the humility of others, one participant explained how a CIA leader of his went beyond their job duties to care for him as a human, not just a case officer. His boss realized the participant needed more support than the participant thought he
needed himself. His superior went beyond his job role to be sure the participant had proper support he needed when dealing with traumatic stress. His boss arranged almost an intervention with people who cared about the participant and knew what he had gone through. The participant described what his boss did as unforgettable. He made sure to carry forward the value of really taking care of people as people, not just as employees:

*I came back and I had a really terrible case of post-traumatic stress. When I would go in front of the Agency they’re like, ‘How you feel?’ and I’m like, ‘I’m great,’ but I was having terrible nightmares...My boss found out that I was really suffering and put together an event off site with people close to me who understood and wanted to support me...He really cared about his people.*

The officer continued to remark on what his boss’s actions meant about the organization. He felt it was such an odd place with a zero-sum mentality in some senses, and then a real family feel and care in another sense.

*The Agency is such a strange place. It's an organization where there certainly there's some parts of it, particularly where I worked in the DO, with a kind of zero-sum mentality, but then there's other times where people really band together. You can have that sense, it's such a silly kind of title, but that sense of family that really great elite units have. That's what my boss taught me. To care for your people.*

The participant felt that truly elite units have a level of support that goes beyond work and into a sense of family values. The CIA as an organization, he thought, had some rough and
competitive parts, but with good leaders, like his boss, also had a family sense to take care of each other as human beings.

Another participant shared the tension an employee brought to her. The more senior employee was grappling with balancing his loyalty to take care of his parents as COVID was approaching with the intensity and need for him to be in his job. With global travel potentially coming to a halt, the options about staying in place to work and leave take care of parents was not as flexible were not as flexible as they might be under normal circumstances and required a decision. The participant described the employee approaching her, stating his knowing that she would be able to help him communicate to higher level leaders his predicament and the decision he needed to make to leave:

_COVID was hitting and he was shaking because he had one of those jobs where he was not going home. There were people who were going home, but not that guy. He came into my office and said, ‘I know you know how to fix this.’ And I said, ‘I do.’ He said, ‘My parents are ill and there is nobody to take care of them. And with COVID they will not even be able to eat, my mom has dementia, my father has long term health issues.’ He said, ‘They will not be able to take care of themselves. I cannot live with myself here, but I know I need to be here. I know I need to do this job.’ He said, ‘Leaving may cost me my career, but I need to, I have to go home. I have to go to take care of these people.’_

The participant explained her part in supporting him in getting his message across to his leaders and being strong in the decision he made for himself, based on the human dignity his parents deserved:
I said, ‘You're right, you do need to go home, we know.’ I coached him on the way that to bring it up, how to display the situation so that everybody within the command chain knew he had to go and how to describe it, so it did not hurt him in his career. It didn't look like I had anything to do with it. Nobody knew that he had come to me about it. But I helped him line it up. So, he went home and I saw him after, I was sitting outside in the cafeteria area. I was talking to somebody else, and he waited. This man was senior to me for sure. He waited and he came over to me and he said, ‘I just want to thank you because my mom passed, but my parents survived because I got out of there.’ He said, ‘and now I'm on my way in a new leadership position to a country that I've always wanted to go.’ I may not have agreed with that guy all the time, but I gave him my best and support him how I could.

The example provides the human dignity angle in the employee knowing he needs to care for his parents, even if it cost him his career. It also displayed the human dignity the participant acknowledged in the other officer by supporting that person in their very human needs to care for their parents. The decision for him to leave may have gone against the best interest of the organization, in the immediate sense, but could not be ignored in the human sense.

**Tensions: Human Dignity Under Pressure, Balancing Mission Needs with Employee Support**

One tension lies in maintaining respectful and humane treatment of individuals even when facing intense circumstances. It underscores the importance of not using pressure as an excuse for mistreating people. Leaders often face dilemmas in accommodating such human needs while fulfilling their professional obligations, and these tensions require careful consideration. The
intensity of the mission can cause people in the organization to lose their perspective on how they should treat others. Participants shared examples of their own leaders yelling at them and leaders generally not treating others with dignity, which was evidence that the minimum expectation of being treated with basic human dignity was not an organization-wide norm. The nature of the work of the CIA, which includes lying to and manipulating others, possibly makes it easier for inhuman treatment to perpetuate in how employees treat each other and thus leave people less than dignified.

The CIA, like many organizations, often has short-term operational requirements and objectives that demand immediate attention and action. These may include mission-critical tasks, intelligence gathering, or responding to urgent national security concerns. Leaders are under pressure to meet these short-term needs and often face intense situations that require a rapid response. On the other hand, leaders also recognize the importance of providing long-term support and care for their employees. This support encompasses the physical and emotional well-being of team members, allowing them to lead fulfilling and balanced lives. The tension arises from the need to balance these competing demands. Leaders must decide when to prioritize the immediate needs of the organization, such as completing a mission or responding to a crisis, and when to consider the long-term well-being of their employees. This decision-making process is complex and requires careful consideration, as neglecting the long-term support of employees can lead to burnout, reduced morale, and attrition, ultimately undermining the organization's effectiveness. Therefore, ethical leadership in this context involves making thoughtful choices that harmonize short-term goals with a commitment to sustaining and supporting the workforce in the long run.

Human Dignity Conclusion
The evidence sheds light on the intricate dynamics within the CIA, demonstrating the challenging balance between the mission's demands and respecting human dignity. The participants emphasized the need to maintain the dignity of others while leading and the responsibility to ensure that individuals are treated with respect, even in high-pressure situations. The section also portrays leaders who went beyond their job roles to support the well-being of their team members, considering them as human beings, not just employees. Participants portrayed human dignity as a subtle yet critical aspect of ethical leadership, highlighting the transformative power of empathy, kindness, and collaboration within the CIA.

The ability to balance the CIA's mission imperatives with preserving human dignity is described as an ongoing challenge, requiring constant care and reflection within the organization. The message underscores that ethical leadership involves caring for people's well-being, acknowledging their dignity, and fostering a sense of familial concern within the organization, despite the competitive and intense nature of national security operations. The overarching external objective of the CIA, involving actions that often required asking individuals to engage in activities against their own countries, introduces a moral dimension that challenges the preservation of human dignity. Internally, the organization has faced criticism for demanding long hours and relentless dedication from its officers, potentially overlooking the humane treatment they deserve. However, amidst these complexities, participants highlighted the significance of recognizing and upholding human dignity within the organization.
Section Three: Emotional and Social Awareness and Learning

How could I have done this better? Not from a point of self-flagellation and excessive self-criticism, but in the sense of, what could I have done differently to make that conversation more successful? Or this outcome more successful? Or my interactions more impactful?

Part of leadership is managing emotions, even if emotional intelligence measurements have not been officially confirmed as an accurate measure of leadership capabilities (Antonakis et al., 2009). The theme of learning emotional awareness and regulation emerged among participants in their discussions about leadership. Six participants described a time in which they regulated their internal dialogue to adjust their larger attitude or behavior and five participants described a time when they leaned on others to help them regulate or check their emotions when it came to communication or an important decision. Social and emotional learning encompasses the various models of emotional intelligence, which generally include developing self-management abilities and relationship skills (Howe, 2008). Emotional intelligence is specifically defined as the capacity to identify and manage emotions within ourselves and those around us. Some scholars include intrapersonal intelligence as part of emotional intelligence, while other emotional intelligence models keep the abilities separate (Howe, 2008). Emotional intelligence has its own measurements to indicate one’s skills in various domains. Participants did not partake in an emotional intelligence assessment in the study, however they provided evidence of their own social and emotional learning through their leadership careers at the CIA.

Key Findings in Emotional and Social Awareness and Learning

Emotional awareness and self-regulation were not a solo activities, but were learned and enhanced with the support of others. Participants’ journey toward becoming proficient leaders included managing their emotions, getting support from others, and engaging in internal
dialogues. Self-regulation was presented as a mitigating factor that helped differentiate between participants engaging in constructive and destructive leadership. Emotional regulation played a critical role for participants in maintaining composure and making rational decisions in high-pressure situations. They communicated how they were mindful of their emotions, and learned to be more aware of how their attitudes influences others, especially as they became more senior. They aimed to communicate with others transparently and empathetically, ensuring their messages to members of the organization were true to themselves and aligned with the organizational values.
Emotional Awareness and Regulation

When people get really angry their emotions start to take over. They don’t think clearly, they don’t make good decisions.

Emotional awareness stands as a cornerstone in leadership, influencing how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to their own emotions and those of others. (Goleman, 2001). The journey towards becoming an effective leader often entails recognizing the significance of emotional self-awareness and embracing the art of self-regulation. Especially in demanding roles, self-regulation can be the mitigating factor between constructive and destructive leadership (Collins & Jackson, 2015). The participants’ reflections on their own emotional awareness and regulation sheds light on the pivotal role emotions and attitudes played in their development as leaders. The experiences presented here highlight the transformative power of emotional awareness on the path to ethical leadership. The participants detailed the process of recognizing their emotions and managing their internal discourse, a vital aspect of evolving into proficient leaders. Their self-regulation encompassed recognizing and fine-tuning their perspectives on topics like work-life balance, in addition to strategic messaging that necessitated allowing time for acknowledging emotions and carefully reviewing communications before disseminating them organization-wide. Participants clearly noticed instances where their higher-ups failed to exercise emotional self-regulation, adjust their attitudes, or consider the implications of their actions.

Perceptions and Ensuring Capacity for Self-Regulation

Participants described how they checked themselves and leaned on others to help them regulate in times of stress. The communal nature of learning and exhibiting emotional regulation was obvious in that it was not mastered alone, but learned and enacted with the support of others. Officers learned to regulate their own emotions, which helped them understand and have the
capacity to hold the emotions of others. Times of stress were particular situations that required emotional regulation.

One participant told of a boss who seemed unregulated during a crisis situation and appeared to let his emotions take over, putting himself in front of the team by leaving the situation. The participant was surprised at the boss’s decision not to be the last one out. The participant was left to figure things out during a crisis situation. The incident demonstrated a lack of, or care for, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and perception that shocked the participant:

_He came back to the office, went into his office, grabbed his briefcase and came into my office and said, ‘There’s gonna be a demonstration. The building is closing. Everybody’s gonna go home. Make sure everybody goes home.’ And he walked out the door. I was just looking at him like, whoa, what he doing? As a leader, you’re supposed to be the last one out. And he was the first one out._

The participant’s boss did not communicate the reason he was the first one to leave, which left the participant doubting his leadership, seeing him as fleeing in a time of crisis, and a lack of awareness of how others would see his actions. The leader left the interpretation of his actions and attitude up to the subordinates, which was not a positive interpretation. The lack of self-regulation in the boss appeared to result in poor interpersonal emotional intelligence and communication.

Another participant described a moment in which he realized he needed to shift his internal attitude and interpersonal relations as a leader. He observed himself and realized that his negative attitude towards employee activities was not serving as a good leadership example. He
adjusted his internal dialogue and how he related to others about certain types of mental and physical care practices that national security personnel had begun to take part in:

_I remember there were a whole bunch of folks on the US compound, they're doing yoga. I totally believe in all this stuff now, my entire mindset has changed on this stuff, but I remember at that time, I didn't have such a good attitude. I asked someone, 'Who are those people?' And they're like, 'Well, I'm a senior officer at headquarters, those are members of your teams.' They were doing yoga, as well as some Navy SEALs there, and I said to myself, 'Alright, I better shut up with my stupid mocking comment, because that stuff's really important._'

The participant had to check in with his attitude and cognition about those type of activities in order to be supportive of others taking care of themselves in such a way, the benefits of which that he later learned more about. Another officer described his need to be mindful of his anger while serving in a senior position during a time of crisis in the US government:

_I was very mindful. I remember the morning of January 6. I was driving to work and I was so angry. I was angry for our nation, for what was being done, setting aside the politics. I was just angry at what was happening. I had a great deputy at the time. It was a very senior analyst, who was a great writer. I took my first cut at writing a message the moment I walked into the office. I closed my door, I told my deputy, 'Look, I don't want to be disturbed for the next half hour.' I was just typing, wrote my three paragraphs saying, 'This act is unconscionable...' And again, I left out the politics. I looked at it and gave it to my deputy who says, 'You can't send this, but here's what you can send.' He edited a bit made it a little tighter because I was angry._
The participant knew he was angry and, in that awareness, had someone else review and edit his message before it went out. He knew, with his anger, he needed time to write things out, without being disturbed. He communicated what he needed to the people in his office, which was that he specifically needed 30 minutes to process and write. Another story by the same participant indicated that by understanding his own anger, he was able to acknowledge and hold other people’s anger during a different crisis situation during which he was a key leader. During COVID, he explained how people were very angry and afraid and he had to be mindful of their emotions:

_I never wanted to turn off someone who was angry because, look, if they did have a family or little kids, this was the early COVID days, people were dying. I had friends that died. Other people died, family members died or got really sick, maybe had long COVID and still have it. If you were living abroad and you weren't getting vaccinations, and you had, let's say little kids, you were scared. I had to be mindful of that._

He continued to acknowledge how he was perceived by many people during that time when the organization was in the early stages of distributing COVID resources and was struggling, much like many countries and organizations were also struggling at the time. In this instance, he described role taking to understanding what people might have been experiencing:

_I was a pretty unpopular guy during COVID. There's an expression, ‘where you stand on issues depends on where you sit.’ If you are overseas, you may believe that Washington was dragging_
its feet and not getting vaccinations out to families. I had people who said that I should resign on the spot because, ‘You're trying to kill my family.’ My reaction was never anger. I would send a polite note back, but I wouldn't get into an argument and say, ‘Well, we're doing the best we can here.’ They were suffering. I always felt compelled to send something back. And I actually welcomed the feedback.

He worked to understand the emotions that people were experiencing and show compassion or acknowledgement, rather than defensiveness. The participant dealt with two major crises while in a senior leadership position and had to manage his own emotions as well as be attuned to the emotions others were experiencing in those crises. He felt compelled to communicate with others, in the January 6th case, to set the tone and facts from the top, and in the COVID case, to communicate that people had been heard.

Another participant who was a support officer described how she enhanced her own capacity to self-regulate and support others, particularly during stressful assignments in the war zones. Time to herself and leaning on her family when she was stressed was what helped her to be more regulated and with the capacity to support others:

*I took time alone, especially when I was in the war zone. I would ask others how to best get through the leadership assignments in the war zones. They always said, ‘You’ll be giving so much to others, make sure that you take time for yourself.’ During the assignment, I would exercise early in the morning, so that I could still be there before anybody else. I took time to do that for my own well-being. I also knew that if I was suffering, I could reach out to my family. I would reach out to my kids, my husband, they sort of supported my grounding.*
The participant shared what she did to regulate her own emotions and who she relied on to help her manage her stress. She took the time alone to decompress from the work environment stress and allowed her family to support her when she was unable to manage it on her own.

Tension: Deciding When to Care About Perception

How others perceived the leader and how to manage that perception, as a leader, was an important part of development. Emotionally regulating helped officers decide when and how to engage with subordinates emotionally. In one participant’s experience, he was working hard to address COVID with the workforce, but was perceived as not doing his job well. Instead of becoming defensive in his communication back to employees, he saw that acknowledging the experiences of others would be a major part of his communication to them. He felt that the organization’s transparency about facts and supplies was not effective in fully addressing what employees overseas were experiencing. He felt that giving anger or frustration back would not have been effective leadership. He did not try to over correct how others perceived him, but acknowledged their perception. Another officer knew that time alone and relying on family was what would help her have the capacity to support others, however, there was a possibility that others could perceive her time to herself and communicating with her family as selfish. It was likely that she would benefit from communicating her own regulation to counter a misperception.

In another example, a participant saw a leader who left a crisis first with no explanation, he did not address emotions or perceptions and this caused a negative view of his leadership capabilities. Deciding when and how to address perception or possible perception was a tension leaders held.

Emotional Awareness and Regulation Conclusion
Emotional awareness, self-regulation, and attitudinal adjustments play a vital role in effective leadership. Leaders recognized the need to navigate their emotions, particularly in challenging situations, and engage in internal dialogues that promote better responses and decisions. It was evident that self-awareness played a crucial role, enabling leaders to anticipate the impact of their actions and messages on their teams and the broader organization. The importance of transparent and empathetic communication, aligned with an understanding of the larger social and organizational context, emerged as a cornerstone of effective leadership. These insights collectively highlight that an adept leader isn't just mindful of their own emotions and attitudes but is also perceptive of how their behavior influences the perception and well-being of others.
Part II. Self-Development Discussion

Considering that examining ethical leadership at the CIA’s top levels is a bit of a “least-likely” case for ethics, due to the organization’s reliance on unethical behavior (lying, manipulating) to pursue its ends, the emergent self-development evidence is a unique finding. The self-development theme indicates that there are people at the top levels of the organization who are reflecting on their behavior, its impact on others, and cycling through interactive and reflective processes that have potential to build their levels of humility and ability to self-regulate towards human dignity. The challenges to self-development were identified in the organization's emphasis on the mission and the pursuit of excellence. Despite the organizational definition of excellence including self-awareness, its operational implementation likely often bordered on arrogance. Contributing to ethical leadership literature are the examples of how leaders described themselves cognitively self-regulating through internal dialogue and realization of strong emotions. This can lead to the development of frameworks or models that illustrate how leaders cognitively approach ethical issues, offering a deeper understanding of the underlying thought processes. Understanding how leaders regulate their thoughts and emotions in ethical situations also supports the creation of targeted interventions aimed at improving ethical decision-making skills and self-regulation abilities. For example, introspective internal dialogue towards self-awareness tends to be effective by reflecting on one’s confidence level that they are right, rather than their question of “why” they think what they do (Eurich, 2018). Expanding on the existing body of self-awareness literature, the results suggest that humility serves as a catalyst for incorporating lessons in leadership development. It highlights humility as a trait that an organization should potentially prioritize when allocating resources for the development of its leaders. The findings also contribute to self-awareness literature by providing empirical work on
self-awareness at the top levels of a government organization.

**Challenges: Mission, Arrogance, Definition Excellence**

At the CIA, one force competing with a focus on self-development was the mission. Much like the tension participants described in putting time and resources into proper accountability, participants recognized that the CIA environment, in which the mission was widely viewed as the top priority, made focusing on self-development difficult. The mission focus could override time for reflection and deplete leaders from having the mental resources to maintain human dignity. Self-control, which helps people treat others with respect in times of stress, requires mental energy that has a limited availability (Joosten et al., 2013). There are a number of factors that CIA leaders face that also deplete the self-control energy resource, including stress and being required to make multiple choices and decisions (Joosten et al., 2013).

In addition to mission challenging self-development, balancing the pursuit of excellence with humility emerged as a crucial consideration in fostering ethical leadership within the CIA. The relationship between humility, arrogance, and the CIA’s core value of excellence was explored, revealing potential complications arising from arrogance in interpersonal interactions. Arrogance, often linked to narcissistic traits, contrasts with excellence, defined by the CIA as delivering high-quality performance with self-awareness and a commitment to learning. Ground-level interpretations of excellence, however, sometimes incorporated arrogant elements lacking humility and empathy. Participants acknowledged challenges in maintaining humility amid the CIA’s mission-focused environment, where the urgency of the mission could override reflection and deplete leaders' mental resources for upholding human dignity.

Humility was at odds with arrogance and was likely complicated by the CIA’s core value of excellence. With arrogance being a likely root cause of most interpersonal issues (Cowan et
al., 2019), incorporating humility to challenge arrogance had potential to improve an organization’s daily employee interactions and further its long-term ethical leadership development. Research on arrogance has rarely been separated from being studied with narcissism and thus arrogance has been defined along with narcissistic personality disorder as including characteristics such as exaggerating talent, lacking empathy, and expecting to be recognized as superior (Cowan et al., 2019). Excellence is being of extremely high quality (Excellence Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary, n.d.) with a level of superiority at the root of the word that transcends into excellency and status (Excellency Definition & Meaning | Britannica Dictionary, n.d.). Both arrogance and excellence deal with superiority, with excellence being actually superior and arrogance a feeling of superiority that was not accurate and included a lack of empathy. The mitigating factor between arrogance and excellence being humility’s perspective taking and aligned image of self and how other see them. Arrogance meant there was a limited ability or willingness for perspective taking (Cowan et al., 2019).

The CIA’s organizational definition of excellence included aspects of humility, such as learning, however, the ground-level employee implementation of excellences seemed to lean into arrogance, indicating an area of correction needed within the organization. Embedding excellence in an organization or team has been described as evoking a shared perception of high performance, supporting that high performance, and consistently being persistent in working through challenges (Armstrong et al., 2022). Excellence has been explained as implemented through attention to certain strategy pillars (Harrington, 2005), and academic literature seems to leave the definition of excellence as a value open for organizations to define for themselves based on their own context (Armstrong et al., 2022). The CIA described their core value of excellence in a humble manner, “We bring the best of our diverse backgrounds and expertise to
everything we do. We are self-aware, reflecting on our performance and learning from it. We strive to give all officers the tools, experiences, and leadership they need to excel,” (Mission and Vision - CIA, n.d.) However, remarks from participants suggested that, at the operational level, the definition of excellence among CIA employees sometimes included elements of arrogance, marked by a deficiency in humility and empathy. The ground-level interpretation of excellence, diverging from the CIA’s overarching definition, became evident in participants’ narratives of their own lapses in humility, their remarks tinged with arrogance (albeit possibly accurate in asserting their own superiority at times), and their observations of other leaders mistreating their subordinates.

Contributions to Ethical Leadership Studies

This section that aggregates CIA leaders’ perspectives on and examples of self-development adds to ethical leaderships’ examination of ethical decision-making and orienting towards interpersonal humanity and moderation of oneself. In looking at how to develop ethical leaders though considering how they approach self-development practices, not just how measure for ethical leaders. This section on self-development contributes to addressing how leaders described themselves growing towards being human-centered leaders and how they described what they were cognitively balancing to decide on their behavior.

Respecting human dignity is a fundamental aspect of ethical leadership, demonstrated through ethically acceptable actions and interpersonal relationships, rooted in care and fairness (Treviño et al., 2006; Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders are expected to promote normatively ethical conduct through accountability, decision-making, and communication, with the current self-development theme examining leaders’ decision-making through how they described their own cognition when it came to their mindsets, decisions, and behavior. Ethical leadership
involves being oriented towards humanity, justice, sustainability, and moderation (Eisenbeiss, 2012) and self-development is part of orienting towards humanity and towards moderation. Humane orientation entails treating others with dignity and respect, while moderation orientation encompasses a leader's self-control, emotional regulation, and finding a balance between mission interests and social responsibility towards subordinates (Eisenbeiss, 2012).

The instances where leaders perceived themselves engaging in cognitive self-regulation underscore the importance of prioritizing the cultivation of humility and self-regulation within decision models for ethical leadership. Additionally, these examples advocate for reinforcing leadership training to meet the requirements of ethical leadership. This involves emphasizing a humane approach and moderation through self-development, which can be supported by understanding what motivated participants to shift their behaviors towards humility and moderation. For example, participants explained how the MBTI supported their understanding of others through learning about and reflecting on differences in personal preferences, thus they found themselves operating interpersonally with perceived increased effectiveness, which, in turn, bolstered the application of the lessons derived from their MBTI experiences. A participant's account of recognizing their mistakes by reflecting on the emotions they felt when someone else admitted an error exemplified how they acquired the ability to practice and demonstrate humility. This instance could serve as a valuable reflective exercise that has the potential to assist leaders in adopting behaviors similar to those of their role models that elicited positive emotions. In a polar emotional experience, some participants expressed the desire to preserve others' dignity after observing or encountering leaders who failed to do so. Their reflection on a negative emotion from a leader offers potential reflective exercise that would serve as motivation for leaders to self-develop towards internalized human dignity.
Contributions to Self-Awareness Studies

Humility emerged as a crucial factor in the initial willingness and ability to prioritize self-development. Additionally, humility played a pivotal role in advanced self-regulation, involving the acceptance of one's fallibility and the readiness to seek support from others for emotional regulation. Participants emphasized that their dedication to self-development was facilitated by a certain innate humility, acquired by some and fostered by humble leaders. Studies show that humble leaders contribute to empowering, engaging, ethical, and innovative environments (Chandler et al., 2023). Participants stressed how humility played a pivotal role in their self-development journey, aiding in self-regulation and internalizing a norm of human dignity. Recognizing the vital role of humility for both individual employees and the organization, the findings suggest the need to explore ways to support leaders in embracing feedback with humility, rather than dismissing it, and understanding the factors that encourage humility among leaders and future leaders in their choice to pursue self-development.

Research on leadership training and development has not directly recognized the role of humility in being able to engage in self-development (Seidle et al., 2016; Eurich, 2018) although it does state the importance of engaging with others’ perspectives (Eurich, 2018). Nor does social cognitive theory recognize humility as a central concept, although it describes aspects of humility in explaining the importance of self-regulation, self-reflection, and the capacity for individuals to learn from their own experiences and observations (Bandura, 2023). Leader humility is a characteristic that enables a willingness to accurately view oneself, an ability to appreciate the strengths of others, and an openness to learning new ideas and integrating feedback (Chandler et al., 2023). Being humble enough to engage in self-development led to participants learning more about self and other awareness, opportunities for increased humility
and emotional awareness, and ultimately self-regulation. Self-regulation, with attention to humility and emotional regulation, supported moving towards the internalized norm to act in respect to human dignity.

Participants mentioned a less acknowledged element of self-regulation within the literature on self-awareness. This aspect involved seeking assistance from others to regulate their emotions when they recognized that their emotional state might be challenging to manage independently. With self-awareness literature focusing internally on the leader (Seidle et al., 2016), the participant’s experiences in seeking others to support regulation speaks to the relational aspect of leadership and the importance of holistic development of one’s environment and relationships, to include identifying who, inside or outside of the workplace, has the capacity to support the leader in times of being overwhelmed.

Leader humility has been characterized as either expressed and perceived during interpersonal interactions or as something that is a long-term stable leadership trait (Chandler et al., 2023). Humility appeared to be impactful for participants, whether leaders expressed it when needed, or it was enacted as a leader’s permanent way of being. Participant interviews indicated that humility was something that can grow within a leader and practiced in moments, with the hope that if it is not already, humility becomes an internalized baseline state to which leaders can return. Self-development required ongoing introspection, supported by humility and opportunities for learning about human preferences and feedback. In the interviews, self-development was expressed in playing a role in developing into more human-centered leaders, who could navigate interpersonal dynamics. Self-development also supported participants in leading with transparency and care, which makes leaders more likely to be attractive for followers to emulate. Focusing on self-development put participants on the path to practicing
self-regulation, which ideally regulates towards internalizing the norm of human dignity. Thus, self-development benefited the CIA by supporting employees’ ability to hold and navigate complex interpersonal issues, developing more attractive and influential leaders, and elevating norms of how people in the organization would be treated.

**Up next: Communication as a Practice of Self-Development**

To develop ethical leaders, organizations seem to fall responsible for comprehending the necessity of leaders’ participation in self-development and fostering the humility required for such engagement throughout their career progression. Integrating feedback, cultivating humility, upholding human dignity, and recognizing emotional states to facilitate self and other regulation are fundamental aspects of communication. Communication serves as a platform to enact self-development lessons. Leaders able to understand their own emotions, values, and biases, supports authentic communication. By being aware of emotional states, leaders can manage their reactions and responses effectively, preventing the escalation of conflicts or misunderstandings. Self-development practices help leaders recognize how their words and actions may be perceived by their team members, fostering better interpersonal relationships.

The upcoming third part will delve into how leaders manage crucial conversations amidst the high-tempo environment, drawing connections between self-development, humility, and effective communication. The tension between the mission's urgency and the need for thoughtful dialogue will be explored, emphasizing the delicate balance leaders must strike to maintain both operational effectiveness and interpersonal effectiveness and respect.
PART III. COMMUNICATION: FEEDBACK AND LEADERSHIP LESSONS

I didn’t shy away from hard conversations. I had them. I had them and I tried to be as respectful as I could.

Introduction

The previous chapter explored how expanding self and other-awareness, humility, concerns for human dignity, and self-regulation allowed participants to connect with others in the organization. Participants reported having greater personal influence by being transparent and caring, including advancing ethical standards, thus an attractive person to emulate. This chapter focuses on the role of communication in advancing ethical standards. Leader communication is central to leader effectiveness (Liu et al., 2023). It involves verbal communication, textual communication, and embodied signals, whether intentional or unintentional. Leader communication reveals information about the leader and affects others. It involves a message from the sender and the interpretation of the message by the receiver.

Communication for the participants emerged in the themes of preparing for hard conversations (primarily performance feedback), how they approached giving feedback, and the impact of communicated leadership lessons. Participants grappled with the emotional impact feedback could have on others and described themselves mentally and physically preparing for conversations. Techniques such as engaging in self-talk for mental preparedness and relying on notes for physical readiness were articulated as integral components of their preparatory approaches. Communication, in some cases, was described as serving to enhance relationships through building trust between people and teams.

Key Findings in Communication

Communication within the themes of feedback and leadership lessons entailed aspects of
accountability and self-awareness, with key conversations being held face-to-face, often one-on-one, and almost always in private. For performance and disciplinary issues, communication served to initiate accountability in the form of holding the subordinate accountable and the leader holding themselves accountable for having the conversation and preparing for the emotional implications of it. Key aspects of communicating feedback were described as being prepared, direct, clear, honest, and empathetic. In examples of the communication of leadership lessons, the participants’ stories showed the participants’ responsive and some of their leaders’ responsiveness to the organization’s need for better leaders. They used communication to draw attention to role modeled behavior so that it could be retained, practiced, and emphasized as important to enact.

Feedback conversations exemplified accountability concepts of responsibility as well as responsiveness (Koppell, 2005). Liability and responsibility were apparent in the focus participants had on communicating feedback on behavior and performance. Leaders aimed to hold others responsible for behavior and performance using clear, direct, and sometimes documented communication. Responsiveness took form in leaders acknowledging the emotional aspect of communication, particularly emotions that feedback may evoke. Participants shared a number of different practices when it came to having hard conversations, to include preparing for the conversation, paying attention to their delivery, reminding themselves of why they needed to have the conversation, among other considerations, such as sharing positive feedback along with negative.

Formal and informal feedback were both discussed, with formal being routine feedback set by the organization’s performance review cycle and informal being feedback that the participants felt was needed along the way. They initiated informal feedback using their own developed
system and schedule. Feedback was broken down as being based on an issues in performance or a disciplinary issue, and some participants shared how they prepared differently depending on the issue. Participants shared how they would organize the communication direction of the feedback session. One participant noted that disciplinary feedback probably needed more one-way communication from the leader to the person with the disciplinary issue. Performance feedback was described as involving two-way communication, with varying levels of control or guidance. One participant used the performance feedback opportunities to check in on how the subordinate was doing in their life and open up to hear of reasons behind any less than stellar performance while another used two-way to guide the subordinate towards realizing or verbalizing their own performance challenges.

Communication as an interactive practice is linked to self-awareness through the maintenance of humility and human dignity in providing feedback to others, aspects of humility, and maintaining human dignity. In their preparation for feedback conversations, participants described various ways of organizing themselves in what they would say, with eight participants noting the importance of being direct. There was a general sense that they wanted to give the subordinate a chance to see or correct a blindspot in behavior or performance. Humility came through in intent behind the communication and the means of communicating. Five participants expressed a level of humility in wanting to make sure it was understood that feedback was to change performance or behavior, and even if the feedback content was personal, the delivery and purpose of feedback was professional. Participants described preparing for feedback conversations and four participants specifically acknowledged that it was normal for subordinates to experience and emotional reactions to receiving feedback and that they, as the leader, had to be prepared for the emotional aspect of feedback. Appendix D has the total
expressions of the communication themes, by participant. Eight out of ten participants emphasized that feedback should be direct. Six participants included positive feedback with negative feedback.

Figure 4. displays the different characteristics of feedback and the choices participants described in which direction the communication would generally go for the session.

Figure 4. Feedback type and feedback issue along with primary communication direction options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Type</th>
<th>Feedback Issue</th>
<th>Primary Communication Direction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>One-way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Disciplinary</td>
<td>Guided/Controlled Two-way</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two-way</td>
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**Ethical Leadership and Communication**

Two-way communication was a key component of ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005) as was being human-centered (Eisenbeiss, 2012). There were indications that performance feedback served as a way for participants to have one-on-one conversations with subordinates in which there was space for the leader to hear from the subordinate as well as the tell the subordinate their observations and needed improvements. Five participants highlighted hearing from the subordinate in their feedback technique. One participant explained balancing the need to be directive and instructor when it came to more serious feedback, such as behavior issues, during which he tended to remove the two-way communication in favor of being authoritative about appropriate behavior. In terms of care, five participants mentioned they would provide positive feedback along with the negative feedback of what needed to change. This seemed to
serve their dual goals of care and effectiveness, with some participants recognizing that including positive feedback likely made the other feedback more likely to be heard and implemented. Likewise, managing emotions was part of the process of caring for people and was part of supporting people in processing what was being said.

Passing on leadership lessons to subordinates indicated sharing a sense of legacy with the person sharing the lesson, which is one of the personal inclinations that aligns with moral judgement (Rest, 1986). Four participants showed that there was a sense of passing on information and situating people towards opportunities and legacy in explaining the leadership lessons they passed on to others. Five participants described a leadership lesson imparted on them that was impactful as they continued in their career. One participant example demonstrated the passing on a direct lesson in embedding ethics, with his leader sharing why he repeated his human-centered values every meeting. Other lessons were focused on raising one’s standards in accountability, encouraging application to higher levels of leadership among those who perhaps were not culturally inclined, drawing attention to role modeling, obtaining feedback from everyone, opening people up to learning opportunities, and a lesson in acknowledging positive performance in subordinates. Verbally communicated leadership lessons can serve to place a subordinate into imagining themselves in the larger context of the organization (Rest, 1986), thus has potential to stimulate moral judgement within the subordinate, whether specific to ethics or important behavior. Talking with subordinates about lessons served as a way for a leader to embed their own inclination towards moral judgement with another employee, stimulating or hoping to stimulate reflection.

Theories and Research on Feedback and Leader Communication

Communication is how leaders share who they are and what they want from their
subordinates. Their communication affects subordinate behavior, moods, and performance, which aggregates to affect organizations (Liu et al., 2023). Communication serves as a means to draw attention to a desired behavior, which is the first step in social cognitive theory’s explanation of observational learning (Bandura, 2023). How things are communicated makes a difference. Face-to-face communication, for example, allows for layering multiple ways to convey a message that include tone, body language, and two-way observation of a conversation’s development (Jensen et al., 2018). Communication of things like leadership lessons can instill a sense of legacy, which is an inclination that can positively influence moral judgement (Rest, 1986). Some leadership theories, including ethical leadership theory, identify communication as central in leader effectiveness (Liu et al., 2023). It is a key way that leaders share their values, expectations, and express their emotions. Ethical leaders are expected to draw attention to ethical standards through explicitly communicating about them (Brown et al., 2005). Privately or “stoically” carrying out ethical actions may be insufficient to draw attention to ethical conduct (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Two-way communication (Brown et al., 2005) and being human-centered (Eisenbeiss, 2012) are key components of ethical leadership.

According to social cognitive theory, observational learning requires not only viewing a modeled behavior, but paying attention to it (Bandura, 2023). Attention is the first cognitive process in observational learning, while retention is the second. Being able to physically reproduce the behavior and having motivation to do so are the follow-on observational learning processes. Not only does communication serve to enhance observational learning, but social cognitive theory implies that exposure to effective communicators as role models can enhance an individual's communication skills. Observing others successfully communicate messages, navigate social situations, and manage interpersonal relationships can influence one's own
communication behavior. In terms of social cognitive theory and performance feedback, experimental findings emphasize that self-regulatory processes greatly contributed to motivation to achieve a performance goal (Bandura, 2023; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Studies also indicate that receiver characteristics in self-efficacy play a role in determining feedback’s impact and effectiveness in changing performance (Karl et al., 1993; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Creating subgoals and having a measurable standard with which to compare performance were likely to be helpful in enhancing self-perception of efficacy and intrinsic interest in obtaining a goal (Bandura, 2023). Distant goals that were too far in the future to serve as progress markers would not support growing self-perception of efficacy (Bandura, 2023). Likewise, in being less effective, unfavorable social comparison has been shown to have adverse effects on achieving goals.

Complexity leadership theory highlights individual level actions that are part of enhancing interactions, interdependencies, and tensions that catalyze adaptive leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Communication plays a role in interactions that strengthen links between people in the network. Fostering interdependencies includes aligning information to be relevant to network actors and fostering coordinated efforts. Tension at the individual level involves recognizing opportunities to use tension to foster productive discussions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). While the CIA remained a fairly hierarchical organization when it came to its structure, there were opportunities for leaders in the organization to catalyze adaptive leadership through how they communicated feedback and leadership lessons. For example, the interviews revealed examples of a peer’s questioning creating an opportunity of the participant to engage in a productive discussion about feedback processes. In another example, directorate of analysis managers aimed to enhance interdependencies at the lower levels through team-support, rather than manager
Research findings on performance feedback have been inconsistent and many, contradictory (Heine, 2023). While this study does not examine the outcome of the participants’ feedback mechanisms, it is interesting to note what the research literature finds about feedback and its effectiveness. A literature review conducted on performance feedback research between 1998 and 2018 analyzed multiple performance feedback characteristics examined in the research and calculated the effect size for the characteristics, which included the feedback combinations, feedback source, medium, privacy, frequency, and immediacy (Sleiman et al., 2020). The feedback characteristics that yielded the most substantial effect sizes across all applications were: combining feedback, antecedents, and behavioral consequences, self-generated feedback as the source, graph/table, verbal, and written, as the medium, feedback that was individual, daily and weekly (for frequency), immediate, for immediacy, and positive in nature (Sleiman et al., 2020). The supervisor-subordinate role was also found to play an important role in performance feedback as was the receiver’s orientation towards learning goals instead of performance goals, per previous studies (Heine, 2023).

**Tensions in Leadership Communication**

Leaders grapple with various tensions as they prepare for important conversations. One significant tension revolves around the power dynamic, with a need for leaders to contemplate the appropriate level of positional power to wield based on the specific scenario. They must navigate the delicate balance between offering an individual multiple chances for growth and making informed judgments about their potential. Leaders face the challenge of determining when their corrective feedback is non-negotiable and when it is more beneficial to approach the situation with curiosity, seeking a deeper understanding of an individual's performance or
behavior. Participants described levels of two-way communication, with some being more controlled or directed by the leader. The dynamic decision-making process when it comes to delivering feedback highlights the complexity leaders face in managing power dynamics, assessing growth potential, and fostering constructive communication.

Navigating Part III. Communication

The presentation of evidence is organized into three main parts, Preparing for Conversations, Feedback Process, Risks, and Approaches, and Communicating Leadership Lessons. Preparing for Conversations encompasses an analysis of the participant’s descriptions of getting ready to have hard conversations with subordinates. Feedback Process, Risks, and Approaches describes specific techniques participants used to communicate in feedback sessions and shares some of their overall approaches and philosophies to giving feedback. Communicating Leadership Lessons provides evidence of the impact that verbal communication that draws attention to leader role modeling has on subordinate development.
Section One: Hard Conversations: Preparation and Approach

*I think he didn't know how to express it. He had no leadership skills and his interpersonal skills were garbage. He had no training in leadership. I don't think he knew how to have a conversation.*

Participants were in agreement that some conversations were difficult and remained difficult, no matter how many times you had them. The hard conversations they described often entailing giving feedback to subordinates. They were conversations in which the participants, as leaders, needed to address a concern, issue, or behavior with the subordinate that could be hard for the subordinate to emotionally manage, such as addressing a subordinate’s performance or behavioral issue. The participants’ examples focused on performance feedback, however, they also spoke to their considerations in disciplinary conversations, sharing that their demeanor and approach may need to be different depending on the feedback context. While performance conversations could be less directive and resemble true two-way communication or guided two-way communication between the leader and subordinate, participants described authorizing themselves to be more authoritative and using one-way, leader to subordinate, communication direction when it came to disciplinary conversations.

There were plenty of reasons for leaders to avoid the harder conversations, to include wanting to be liked, not wanting to manage someone else’s emotional response, or a general interpersonal discomfort. Despite the challenges, the participants concluded that having these conversations was the right thing to do for the subordinate, for the organization, and was also part of their social contract as a leader. The participants worked to overcome the discomfort of these kinds of conversations by adequately preparing for them. Some had detailed preparation, such as note cards, while others described their emotional preparation, or a simple deep breath
they took when they knew they had to address something difficult. The process did not stop with the conversation. Some participants highlighted the documentation they created to affirm mutual understanding conversation and support accountability for change.

Figure 5 shows what participant shared about preparing for performance feedback, delivering it, their other considerations, and their rationale for holding the conversation.

**Figure 5.** Considerations described for conversations about performance feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Delivery</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Other considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note cards, notes</td>
<td>Closed door</td>
<td>For the greater good</td>
<td>Signed agreement at the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured opening</td>
<td>One-way communication</td>
<td>For the good of the organization</td>
<td>Positive with negative feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep breath</td>
<td>Two-way communication</td>
<td>I am paid to do this (accountable by role)</td>
<td>Clear way forward, next steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for others’ emotions</td>
<td>Controlled/guided two way-communication</td>
<td>Be right to self/God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empathetic, but direct</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separating personal from professional</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Preparing for Performance Feedback Sessions**

A total of five officers talked about their preparation techniques for hard conversations. The below examples focus on the methods and cognition that participants explained about having a feedback conversation with a subordinate. A common theme was taking time to planning before the conversation, with some participants paying attention to preparing the structure of the conversation, another participant focusing on preparing for emotional responses, and one participant sharing what he learned from a conversation in which he did not consider the emotional response before he went into a conversation.

One officer described his note card technique he used when preparing to talk to a subordinate about an important issue, like something disciplinary. He would prepare the notes and also provide the person the opportunity to talk, if it was a case in which that would be appropriate:
I created notes to myself I wrote a three by five card or whatever. I'm very structured when I do it. I let the person of course have an opportunity to talk. But ultimately, it depends on the type of conversation. If it's disciplinary, I will absolutely let them talk, but I'm not going to sit there for hours and let them just sort of go, 'I'm being screwed over.' I'm going to be sure it's pretty direct.

Another participant described how it was the leader’s responsibility to have those hard conversations. He referred to someone with a repeated performance or behavioral issues as a “problem child” and knew it was his role to take a deep breath and talk to them about whatever problem was going on:

I used to say we would earn our keep as leaders when we had that one problem child and had to talk to them. I would take that deep breath and have them come sit in the office and have that conversation with them. We didn't have a lot of people that needed that. Sometimes they were just people that were in the wrong career track or in the wrong piece of the business and need to be redirected.

The participant didn’t see the hard conversation as always disciplinary, but part of counseling employees. He explained how he prepared to counsel someone for their performance:

What I would do is I would make notes for my counseling session, I would work off the notes and we would talk I'd write a document afterwards. And I would have I would have the counselee read the document, then I would write afterwards and capture the conversation. I’d have them sign it and I would sign. I'd give them a copy and I'd keep a copy. There should never be an
evaluation that the counselee is less than 110% in on.

The participant wanted to be sure he was prepared for the conversation with notes. He also shared that he documented things as the session went. At the end of the counseling session, he had the subordinate sign an agreement to confirm that the counseling session and steps to take going forward were understood between him and the person being counseled.

Another participant blended being empathetic to the individual with the importance of acting in the best interest of the organization. He described how it was not difficult to counsel someone, but it did take planning and preparation, particularly emotional preparation:

I never found those conversations that difficult. They required more planning. The hardest thing is to sit across from somebody in person and tell them they're not doing a good job. The human nature interaction part of it makes it hard, I think I've had both men and women cry. I've had someone jump at me sort of angrily. I think it's always best, for them to come to my office, close the door. Tell them, 'Here's what we're going to talk about.' Preparation was to some extent, being empathetic, 'I understand that this is going to be difficult for you,' but not too empathetic because then you're just going to just fail at it and not know you're right by God. You've got you got to be empathetic, but you also got to be corporate and say this is good for the Agency.

For him, the preparation was in the emotional side of providing performance feedback. Just because it was difficult though, didn’t mean it should not be done. For one participant, counseling conversations were hard because he wanted to be a nice guy that people liked:
I know every time I had to do it through my career with subordinates, I would call them into my office and before they would walk in, I would always remind myself, ‘Okay, this is what you’re getting paid for.’ I had to remind myself to be stern, direct, clear. It was uncomfortable because I just I wanted to be a nice guy.

His preparation was in reminders to himself that he had to do this, he had to have this conversation. He then reminded himself of what he thought was important in situations in which he was counseling someone for an issue or their poor performance, being stern, direct, and clear.

One participant shared a mistake he made once in giving feedback to a subordinate from being unprepared and what he learned. In the situation, a subordinate was failing to meet the performance standards despite the hours they were working:

I had somebody come to my office and I was giving them feedback. They told me what was happening for them, their performance. I told them, ‘This is what you need to do. You need to have this many reports, we need to see a couple reports per month.’ They replied, ‘Well, I’m working all these hours.’ They had their timesheets, and they showed me how much overtime and I said, ‘That’s excellent. Now we know how many hours you need to work to fail. Let’s think about either more hours or working differently, so you can succeed.’ My memory is, I said it just like that. They started crying. I didn’t want to make anybody cry. I said I was sorry about expressing it in a way that made them upset. I stepped out and gave them a few minutes and we reconvened. I’m telling you that story, not because I’m proud that I made somebody upset in the workplace, but because I regret the way I expressed that to that person.
He explained that he was not trying to be funny, he just was not prepared for an emotional reaction from his flippant way of giving feedback. He reflected on what he should have done differently:

I probably would have thought that feedback was funny if someone said it to me, but I wasn't trying to be funny. Me, personally, I probably would have kind of laughed inside, but I certainly wouldn't been hurt by it. Because if I was failing, I would have known that. I hopefully wouldn't have allowed that to happen, but that was not the way to phrase it. ‘I understand you're working hard. You're not getting the results. Let's think about how we can tweak your pattern of life, your organization, your prioritization, and the way you work with your colleagues to get the output that you need for the input you're putting in, which is pretty good.’ That's what I should have said, not some clever stupid hurtful thing about ‘We know how many hours you need to work to fail.’

This participant's candid reflection showed that while unintentional, the flippant remark highlighted the importance of delivering feedback with sensitivity and empathy, focusing on constructive solutions rather than inadvertently causing emotional distress. This anecdote underscores the significance of maintaining a supportive and respectful approach when guiding subordinates toward improved performance and professional growth.

Participants prepared themselves differently for the conversations, perhaps taking time to focus on their weakness or tendencies that might come up in a hard conversation. For example, one participant initially reported the conversations were not difficult and then explained that the
hardest part for him was remembering to be empathetic. A common theme for this participant throughout the interview was using his case officer skills to support him as a leader, for example, he referenced how hard conversations were akin to ending the relationship with a foreign asset, it was a difficult conversation, but necessary to confront the issue. While his case officer skills supported engaging in a hard conversation, as a case officer working with an asset, he likely did not need to engage with as much empathy as he might with a subordinate, with whom he would continue to work. Another participant shared that he wanted to let the subordinate talk, even in a disciplinary conversation, but shared how he knew he had to take back the control of the conversation, if the subordinate was in a defensive mindset. This participant shared that over the course of his career, that he had to learn to give people less chances, indicating that for him, the more challenging parts of hard conversations was being less empathetic and giving people less time to grovel or defend themselves. There was no “right way” to prepare for a conversation, but seemed that preparation would need to be adjusted to the individual leader. Preparing for the hard conversations required an awareness of one’s weakness or tendencies as a leader which might diminish the conversation’s impact.

Informally Gathering Feedback to Initiate Conversations and Change

Participants shared their general philosophies about feedback, both gathering feedback from others and giving it out. Two participants focused on how they gathered feedback informally that would help them improve team dynamics or how a unit functioned. Another laid out how ideally, a conversation should go and how he aimed to guide the conversation so that it was two-way in nature, but also direct and relevant to the issue at hand. Eight participants in total described the importance of feedback, whether performance or disciplinary, being direct and five participants cited how they would be sure to include positive feedback along with the negative
Another participant who was a case officer discussed how he informally walked around to understand what was going on in the team. He used what he gained from the walk arounds to address any performance or behavioral issues:

*It's as simple as the walking around philosophy. Two to three times a day, you get up and walk around, you talk to the people, find out what's going on. I found it very effective. The officers would tell me, we've got a problem. Here's the problem. And in one case, one of the senior managers in the office had just about pissed off all the case officers. So, I went down, sat down with the guy and said 'Look, you're a great case officer, but you were really, you're pissing people off, here's what you're doing wrong. Here's what you need to do.' And he took it very well and everybody else took it very well. And I think we kept it on a professional level.*

His feedback still included the elements of directness and included reinforcing what was going well with positive. The participant highlighted the effectiveness of a leadership approach called the "walking around philosophy." It involves leaders proactively engaging with their team members two to three times a day to stay informed about what's happening and to address any issues. In this instance, the leader resolved a problem where a senior manager was causing discontent among the case officers. By having a candid and constructive conversation, the leader provided feedback on the issue, offered guidance for improvement, and ultimately maintained a professional and productive work environment.

To receive feedback, one case officer, who also learned to give subordinates feedback, described his technique in asking everyone for their input in exit interviews so that he could then address
I used to do exit interviews with people who would come through the base. And so if colleagues were free, they would come, I would ask them to come. And so, for example, we had people who would come in to paint our vehicles with. So, I had an exit interview with the painters, the vehicle painter. ‘How were you treated? How was the chow? Did you understand your mission? Did you have everything here that you need?’ I asked everybody the same questions. ‘Did you feel like you were treated with respect?’ Sometimes we would get critical feedback and we would implement change.

He described how one of his colleagues was surprised by his willingness to question everyone. He then explained that behind the questioning was an intention to communicate that everyone who came to work on the base was valued and deserved respect:

Once, after that meeting, we were at lunch and he said to me, I can’t believe you interviewed the vehicle painters. I said, ‘Well, why would I not interview them if I’m interviewing the paramilitary guys and the case officers and the reports officers and the analysts that come through here? Why would I not? I mean, we might learn something.’ I wasn’t asking him about painting the vehicles. My colleague said to me, ‘That’s amazing. I I’ve never seen anybody do anything like that before.’ I never saw anybody do it before either. Behind the idea, the practical reason was to know if there were problems to be fixed, but I also wanted to communicate to the vehicle painters and all the other people that worked in that part of the base, that their work was just as important as everybody else’s. Because I genuinely believe that.
The participant was proud of his technique that combined practicality with care and respect. He justified his decision by explaining that it was part of a broader approach to gather insights from various roles within the organization and a genuine belief in the significance of all individuals' work within the organization. The communication with his peers was another technique which led to a shared understanding of a leader’s methods of gathering feedback and addressing issues.

**Tensions in Preparing for the Conversation**

One tension leaders deal with in preparing for the conversation is the power dynamic and what level of positional power they will implement, depending on the type of feedback. How to prepare for feedback depended on whether it was performance or disciplinary. In performance feedback, the participants spoke to wanting to be sure the conversation had elements of two-way communication, which included checking in with the subordinate about what else might be going on in their careers or lives outside of work. With some performance feedback preparation, there was a level of controlled two-way communication, in which the participant would ask their subordinate how they thought they were doing, in a way that was to guide the subordinate towards a certain realization about their performance. In disciplinary feedback, one participant suggested that leaders may need to use their positional power to more strongly control the direction of communication to be primarily from the leader to the subordinate.

**Preparation and Approach Conclusion**

There are different types of hard conversations, for participants, performance conversations allowed for two-way communication, while disciplinary conversations required the leader to have more control, with participants sharing that they felt they needed to be more authoritative in
that context. The insights shared by the participants shed light on the challenging nature of certain conversations, particularly those involving addressing concerns, issues, or behaviors with subordinates. These difficult dialogues, often with disciplinary undertones, were acknowledged as integral to effective leadership. Participants differed in their motivation or rational as to why they needed to engage in the hard conversations. Some participants saw conversations as needed for the good of the organization and others spoke to hard conversations as their duty as a leader, without reference to the organizational good. The consensus among the participants was that while these discussions were undoubtedly tough, they were an essential aspect of their role as leaders. The responsibility to guide and redirect individuals, even in difficult situations, highlighted the multifaceted nature of leadership—a blend of empathy, clear direction, and a steadfast commitment to what is best for both the organization and the individuals within it.

Participants spoke to their techniques and mindsets around providing feedback to subordinates, which included using formal performance cycle feedback sessions, scheduled by the organization, and incorporating informal feedback methods, in which they gave or gathered feedback with the intent of understanding and addressing issues in a timely manner. Each participant had a different way of addressing feedback and conversation, some described situations in which they were directive and correcting and others described instances in which curiosity helped develop a mutual understanding that had started as feedback.
Section Two: Feedback Processes and Relationship Risks

When you need to deliver feedback that might not be well heard, it's important how you deliver it and what the intention is behind it.

Participants described their specific feedback processes, such as what opportunities they gave a subordinate to bring forward their perspective, how they included positive feedback with negative, and what it was like to receive feedback in an empathetic, professional manner. Overall, they described a lot of freedom in how they wanted to conduct feedback outside of the formal performance review cycle. In their processes, the balance of two-way communication emerged again, as did the idea of providing some positive feedback along with the negative. Their general approaches to feedback included emphasizing that negative feedback should be done in private, using guiding questions, and being direct and honest. Two participants described feedback mechanisms that put leaders in an enabling role, rather than directive, which showed potential for leaders to further consider how they might enable regular, informal feedback that is less “top-down” from the supervisor to the subordinate.

There was a common general philosophy that, whether it was performance or behavioral feedback, there had to be a balance between showing care and being direct. There was also a common desire for feedback to be a set instance during which both parties addressed the issue and then for both parties to move forward. Participants did not want subordinates to feel weighed down by feedback or think that it meant it would affect the relationship or support of the subordinate. Even though feedback was often personal, the participants did not want the subordinate to feel like it was an ongoing, personal, judgement. It was important to a few participants that the feedback was known to not be a personal attack and was not to affect the respect the leader had for the subordinate. There was an emphasis on learning and not allowing
past mistakes to continually affect how a person is treated in the future.

**Feedback Processes**

Participants described set ways that they approached giving feedback to subordinates in different contexts. A key consideration included addressing what was going well, along with what was more problematic and keeping it at a professional level.

One participant, who was a support officer, described how when it came to regular performance feedback sessions, she would ask participants to prepare with their thoughts on how they were performing. She asked them to be ready with sharing what was going well, where they wanted to improve, and then she told them her views:

*I planned feedback at least once a month. Always, it includes “3 up, 3 down, back and forth. “ Meaning, we delivered 3 things going well and 3 that needed improvement. And I was given feedback as well. I asked the officer to write me an after action to gain their ideas on how/what they heard. It gave us both the opportunity to clarify the details and set records for progress and tasks. It helped at evaluation time, too. I think that I started the 3’s method in the military. It was something I did as a parent as well. How things have really gone, things that we were working on and that they could tell me how things were going in the house.*

The participant reflected on how this was something that seemed to work well for her across context, from the military to family life. Another participant provided performance feedback in a similar way of sharing what was going well and being clear about what needed improvement. In this case, the five expectations had been previously discussed and this was how he would review progress. He emphasized giving the subordinate time to speak when it came to
performance feedback and anticipated a defensive reaction that he might have to counter.

_I sit them down and say, you know, of the five things I need you to be doing. You're crushing it on these three, but on these two, you are woefully falling way behind. One, I gotta ask you, first like what's going on either in your life professionally and personally, that you just seem unable to achieve where we both agreed you need to be on all five of these things? Then you let them speak. And then they'll spar and get defensive and you're like, well, then here's what we need to do._

The participant identified specific areas of performance that would be tracked, initiated an opening for the subordinate to address personal and professional obstacles that might be affecting performance, gave the participant an opportunity to express themselves, and closed with necessary actions. The feedback technique combined specificity, directness, and care.

Another participant described what it was like to receive formal performance feedback via the performance cycle. The feedback not directly measurable performance feedback, but a recommendation to the participant about how to more smoothly present information in her briefings:

_You'll learn over time how to smoothly communicate something without your emotion showing so you can have a passion for something, and people can pretty quickly tell when you're passionate about something, even if you have learned to tone it down. I can remember back in that day when I was on the senior leadership team. I was a GS13 and everybody else were senior executives. My boss, senior executive, gave me feedback right after a performance cycle and said_
'You're gonna have to figure out a way to kind of smooth out.' He didn't use the word smooth and I don't remember what it was. Basically, the message was, you see it on your face, you hear it in the volume of your voice, the tone of your voice, and you gotta figure out a way to do that. To even it out. That next year, when he wrote my performance appraisal, he spoke specifically to that and that I had been able to take that on and actually change. It helped me with the whole thing of how to communicate with people.

Her boss used the formal performance review cycle to give feedback that he thought would help her when giving presentations. It was meant to support her further win her career, which she agreed it did help her. It was feedback on the softer skill of communication during a briefing and how to smooth out her presentation so that it would be heard more easily. The risk to this type of less directly measurable feedback is that it was subjective and could be taken as a request to assimilate to a more masculine style of presenting that perhaps did not express emotions.

**Enabling Feedback Environments**

Two participants described methods in which they or their management implemented a way for subordinates to receive performance feedback that was not top-down, manager to subordinate, but was leaders enabling a scenario in which employees could experience feedback from their network of peers. One participant, who was an analyst, described seeing how management tried to resolve the issue with another employee who was not up to par on their analytic techniques. The leaders too an approach to try to solve the issue through mentorship senior analysts’ mentorship for the employee, rather than management involvement. The example went to attempting to resolve an issue at the lowest level first:
There was an instance where an analyst didn't understand how to really do analysis…This individual was really leaning out pretty far beyond the realm of reality. Rather than to make it a huge issue, where a manager got involved, management had senior analysts on the team pull this person aside and try to figure out what was going on and why they were doing this.

The participant reflected on why management supported this way of addressing the issue. She thought that they had a noble intent to not put the subordinate on edge, but try to just correct the issue and then build this person’s confidence:

*I think that was actually wise in the sense of, we see promise in this person who's screwing up pretty badly right here, but this person has promise. We don't want to scare her. We don't want to intimidate her. Let's let other senior people, who are her peers, who are her colleagues, who are going to be a lot more friendly, have this conversation so that this person's not put on edge until we're confident in her again. The intent was, there's promise in everyone, let somebody have their dignity while they can. Especially if it's not something that perhaps the person is aware of that they're doing or maybe there's a good explanation for the thing.*

The approach recognized the potential in the individual, aimed to preserve their dignity, and allowed for a more friendly and understanding conversation, which could lead to a positive resolution. This strategy was driven by the belief in everyone's potential and the importance of providing an opportunity to explain or rectify the problem before resorting to more formal interventions.
Another participant shared how he tried to enable feedback that was peer-provided and not directive from him as the manager. It was a technique he applied later in his career that involved letting the officers talk about their work, with the idea that it would be obvious to an employee if they were behind and needed to address their own performance:

_Much later in my career, when I became much more confident, I did something was called a stand up morning meeting. You gather your 10 case officers around you every Monday or Friday, whatever, and you ask everyone to share, “What do you do this week or what are you going to do this week?” With that notion that with this job, you have got to be out hustling all the time. Maybe you'll get lucky with a volunteer but probably not. So, when you have officers say, ‘Okay, I went to three receptions and then I found out this hobby about this person, so I joined that team…’ Then when a subordinate says, ‘I didn't really do anything this week,’ being simplistic here, there’s a dynamic where everyone’s going to be kind of looking at this officer and saying, ‘What are you doing, you're not pulling your weight, you got to do more.’ It's pretty evident that they haven't done enough. So the stand up meeting, I used it and it was effective, but again, I kind of learned that late._

The participant described that the standup meeting where everyone could hear each others’ plans was effective in getting subordinates to realize if they might not be doing enough if their role. He continued to explain the alternative of going by numbers, which did not always reflect effort as much as explaining one’s plans and actions:

_I think that's better than telling everyone you have to go out six out of seven nights, I'd rather_
have them kind of explained in front of their colleagues. With the complexity in the types of assets and stages, numbers are a little silly sometimes, but talk to me about how you move forward with your advanced developmental this last week.

The participant felt that holding the standing meeting not only allowed subordinates to push each other, but that it let him hear descriptions of what subordinates were working on and those descriptions he found more valuable than statistics or numbers. He did not want to put a number run on how many nights to go out, but wanted to let the details and complexity be heard and understood so that he could make sure people were performing sufficiently and that peers could listen and compare their plans and progress to someone else’s.

General Approaches to Feedback

Participants spoke to their more general approaches and philosophies behind their methods. While they wanted to respect the person, they felt it was better to be direct and clear that to be overly kind and have the subordinate miss the message. Among at least eight of the participants who spoke to it, there was a general philosophy that whether it was performance or behavioral feedback, there had to be a balance between showing care and being direct. There was also a common desire among at least five participants for feedback to be a set instance during which both parties addressed the issue and then for both parties to move forward. Participants did not want subordinates to feel weighed down by feedback or think that it meant it would affect the relationship or support of the subordinate. Even though feedback was often personal, the participants did not want the subordinate to feel like it was an ongoing, personal, judgement:

*There’s a grace element. It's not a matter of holding somebody responsible forever and a day*
about something that they did, that you've already given them feedback about. We've already addressed it. I'm it's not going to show up in the way I treat you two days from now, or five days, or six months or a year from now. It's done. So there is an element of grace that has to be part of it. You're not going to be ostracized.

It was important that the feedback was known to not be a personal attack and was not to affect the respect the leader had for the subordinate. There was an emphasis on learning and not allowing past mistakes to continually affect how a person is treated in the future. In describing the importance of being direct and honest, one participant, who was a case officer, described this as “sugar coating” and felt it was not helpful:

Too often, we even you know, if you try to be a good person, and you sugarcoat what it is and you know, kind of soft pedal, it doesn't suit anybody if the person is not performing you sit them down. And say, look, you're not performing and this is why and this is what you need to do.

He continued to explain that critiques should be done privately to show respect to the person. Yelling or critiquing publicly was unlikely to be well-received and thus would be ineffective:

I think it was fair to the person to sit there and say, here's how you're viewed. Here's what we think these are the issues in general is properly presented. Never had a real explosion with those people. I think it's the old adage, you criticize people in private and you praise them in public. I don't think it is beneficial to yell at somebody in front of a group of people because they'll dig
their heels in and it becomes a pissing contest. I think it's always best, to say, come to my office, close the door, here's what we're going to talk about.

The participant spoke to approaching his feedback style with fairness and that the fairness was what helped someone hear what he was advising. When it was done that way, he did not experience strong, explosive, defensiveness, like what might happen if critiques were public and disrespectful. Another participant, who was an analyst, shared how one of his own role models gave tough feedback, but had built a relationship so that subordinates knew it came from kindness:

When he gave you feedback, it was feedback given with kindness. It was tough feedback. If you needed one piece of feedback one more time, he would give it to me again. People knew that he cared about them as individuals. He cared about their career. He cared about their life outside of work, seeing the whole person. If he you looked at you one day and you just didn't quite look right, he would ask, ‘What's going on today?’

The analyst noted the importance of the relationship and how the good relationship with his supervisor let him, and he believed others, know that even tough feedback was coming from kindness and care. Another participant, who was a case officer, spoke to how his tolerance for poor behavior or performance was lowered as he moved up in rank and expected more from people. He would provide feedback once, and if it was not corrected, he was ready to sit down and initiate the second conversation that had consequences:
As I got more senior, I was slightly less accommodating with people on when it came to multiple chances. Like you you've probably got one with me, but the second time I was having to say look, ‘I’ve been through this rodeo before, and I let things go on and it got worse.’ So I think people started to realize that I set conditions where they knew they had one strike if they got to the second, things weren’t going to go well. So that was evolution. I think for me, I didn’t change the style of how I would talk to or treat those people. It's just, if I was to go into it and say, ‘Hey, look, , we've talked about this before. You kind of fell down, you screwed something up. I'd hoped you'd learn from that. We're back here again less than six months later. I'm sorry, I'm removing you from your job.’

Feedback was intertwined with accountability. The documentation, joint agreement after the conversations helped formalize it so that further actions could be taken as needed. The participant explained his that reduced patience with others came from giving people too many chances. He realized it was not beneficial to him or the organization to give so much leeway, with more senior subordinates expected to know better:

I gotten burned a couple of times, where I'd given people extra chances and they had claimed, ‘Oh, just just give me another chance. It'll be okay.’ I believed them because I tend to want to see the good in folks. In some cases where I have given chances, people had remarkable turnarounds, they really became exceptional officers. Some of them are now promoted to the senior ranks. I had talked to them about something they weren’t doing well, when they were GS fourteens and then I said saw them grow and not have like those types of issues again, while others, who had hugely high hopes for, crashed and burned.
His movement to shorter tolerance was an evolution in his leadership tenure. He felt that too many chances for the same corrective feedback was not beneficial and that he would be taken advantage of for giving too much grace for repeated problems. The dilemma was in when to give opportunities to learn and when to get firm on consequences. The style demonstrates the importance of using the opportunity for feedback to its fullest extent with a clear message from the leader, an opportunity for discussion, and clear action steps that can be evaluated for their level of success.

One participant explained how he approached feedback for performance and how the same approach was not always as effective for disciplinary issues. He described controlling the feedback sessions differently as performance feedback than disciplinary feedback. When it came to performance feedback, he felt that it could be calm, honest, and direct, with notes of what was going well and the consequences in the future if performance is not improved. He described a controlled two-way communication, in which the subordinate had a chance to speak and reflect, but it was under the control of the participant as the leader:

There are different styles on this. Some people have a really hard time giving bad news and some people can be kind of a mean jerk when giving feedback. I think it's much better to be calm, but honest and direct and say, ‘You're not cutting it on this. These are things that are going well. For example, ‘You're very good handler of agents, you're a good writer, but you haven't recruited anyone.’ Another thing I would do sometimes is say, ‘Okay, tell me how you think you're doing.’ That can be effective sometimes as well, because then someone's gonna say, ‘I haven't recruited anyone’ and then as the leader, you're like, ‘Right, and so what does that mean for your next
promotion board? What do you think?’ That was a feedback tactic for me.

The participant continued to explain how when there is a disciplinary issue, not a performance issue, that asking what happened from the subordinate’s perspective, even if controlled, was not always as effective and had its risks:

*I learned much later down the line, as I became more senior as a manager, if there's a disciplinary issue, asking, ‘Hey, what do you think happened here? Where did this derail?’ Can go totally sideways, it doesn't always work. If there's a dispute, someone might say, ‘I did nothing wrong.’ Generally, people understood when something had gone awry, but it wasn’t always the best way to start.*

The participant differentiated between what he used for performance feedback and how that same method was not always as effective in disciplinary conversations. He was much more willing to ask a subordinate their thoughts when an issue was performance and saw the potential inefficiency or ineffectiveness of using the same tactic for a disciplinary issue. The distinction played into how he would prepare to start the hard conversation.

**Evaluating Relationship Risks of Feedback**

Participants described how opening up giving feedback to colleagues at the supervisor or peer-level posed a risk for disrupting relationships, rather than improving them. One participant described informally approaching someone of higher rank to describe the perception her team had of her and how it was affecting their trust in working together. The participant was very careful in her approach and described the outcome of the conversation as being worth the risk:
I remember telling her that our group did not trust her and that I personally wasn't sure if I trusted her or not because I didn't have enough to experience to go on. The ultimate outcome, fairly shortly down the road after that conversation, was that I ended up having a tremendous amount of respect for her and how she handled it. We ended up having a few conversations about it. She ended up having a tremendous amount of respect for me for the same reason. I mean, she was very senior and female. At that time females getting for those the positions that she was in were few and far between. They had reputations of being very hard, very unforgiving. For me, that was part of my fear going into the conversation. It was early to mid career for me. I didn’t know where it was gonna go from there, but it actually served me well and it served her well from my staff’s perspective, and then the other colleagues that I had, that could experience what I experienced through my telling of that experience in talking with her.

For the participant, opening up the conversation by being direct and honest with someone about the issue build trust in that person’s intentions. It helped her team understand the bigger picture of what was going on when trying to work with this senior person and they opened up an ongoing dialogue. The participant continued to describe what the conversation build between her and the other person and what she was able to carry back to her team to understand:

After our initial conversation, there were several times that we had conversations or brief or comments that referenced it, and it made a shift in who we were to each other and how we interacted with each other in a group. One day, you’re unsure and you’re a little cagey or your little scared or whatever, and then the next day down the road somewhere, there’s full belief and
trust in her intention. Sometimes there are behaviors that are either just human, or you don't understand because you don't know the whole story. But if you trust somebody, and you learn to trust, rely on that, their dependability, their constancy, who they are, then you're willing to believe that their intentions are good. You just have to understand what's going on and what the intention is. What's the story? With this person, the difference for me was trusting the intention.

What started out as feedback opened up an opportunity for a new way to relate with this person. It was a risky conversation because of the difference in seniority and the expectation of a hardness among senior, female leaders at that time. Another participant described a time in which he decided that communication risked his working relationship with someone who was closer to a peer than subordinate. In this case, he decided not to confront the other officer with feedback about a decision that he did not agree with:

_I did not agree with a decision that the officer out there made, but he's a guy who was out there. He was in charge. I backed him up 100%, but I didn't agree with him. I think he should have handled the issue with the person and put them to work instead of sending them home. I decided that there wasn't any value in telling him I didn't I didn't agree with that. That was his decision._

In his case, he decided the risk to the relationship was not worth opening up the conversation. Prior to his decision not to have a conversation, he analyzed the potential for a conversation having a positive impact and concluded that the person likely would not have changed from the feedback:
I never told him that I didn’t agree with him. Even when he came home, I never told him, because knowing him, knowing his personality, it wouldn’t have changed anything with him. It would have been counterproductive to the functional working relationship I had with him. Overall he was he wasn’t well liked guy, but he was technically he was incredibly capable. So, that’s a horrible story to demonstrate leadership with.

The participant was between regretting his decision not to provide feedback and knowing that not communicating meant that their relationship was intact for mission needs. For him, he describing feeling that the scenario and his decision was not his best leadership example and perhaps was an instance in which he did not show courage.

**Tensions in Feedback Techniques and Approaches**

How many chances do people get and how do you judge who has potential for growth? The leader’s decision on how many chances can be dictated by formal organizational methods, such as tracking performance through scheduled cycles and feedback sessions, but in the less formal sense, at some point, a leader probably wants to make a judgement on someone’s potential to improve and grow. There is a tension in potential biases in deciding who deserves the chances when evidence is limited. Even one participant with experience noted that some people excelled with one more chance while others completely failed.

When is a leader completely “right” in their corrective feedback versus when does a leader take the opportunity to get really curious about someone’s performance or behavior? The tension of biases exists here as well. For example, the female participant who was advised to “smooth out” her delivery during briefs might have encountered a male dominated environment
that tried to form her to their style, rather than recognizing value in her own delivery. While corrections might be helpful in assimilating, there is some tension in what is “right” and what is advice to conform. In other instances of performance feedback, the pressure for a leader to correct with limited back and forth is likely strong in periods of high stress and high tempo. Performance and behavior needs to be addressed and changed, even if there might be underlying or root cause reasons for it. In other instances of pure performance feedback, perhaps when a leader has the experience to have seen over time that there is a “right way” rather than the subordinate’s “tried way,” which has a history of being tried and failing.

How might communicating feedback to a peer or superior negatively affect the relationship? Participants grappled with the potential bad consequences of providing feedback to someone other than a subordinate. While their power in positional leadership seemed to protect the leader to subordinate relationship, the power equality with a peer or inverse with a supervisor made participants really think through the risk versus potential gain of opening up a conversation with feedback that might be felt as a criticism and threat to the relationship.

Feedback Processes and Relationship Risks Conclusion

Feedback was something that could affect the personal and working relationships between colleagues and required careful techniques, approaches, and evaluation of risk. Participants shared their structured approaches to gathering and providing feedback, having both formal and informal schedules and methods. Participants discussed their feedback philosophies, emphasizing the effectiveness of directness over sugar-coating, the importance of private critiques, and the likelihood of public criticism being poorly received. Overall, the approaches to feedback described in this section emphasized the need for directness, fairness, and a structured framework to foster effective communication and improvement.
Section Three: Communicating Leadership Lessons

*Look, my suggestion to you is to be whoever you are in this interview because if you're not, you're gonna get into the organization and you're gonna be miserable.*

Participants expressed times in which they had conversations about what a leader was intentionally role modeling. Sometimes, the conversation was initiated by subordinates’ questions and sometimes the leader took the initiative to fully explain their behavior in attempt to verbally socialize a norm. Many of the conversations occurred one on one, which personalized the experience and likely embedded an emotional aspect to the leadership lesson conversation.

Ethical leadership involves role modeling ethical behavior (Brown et al., 2005). The participants added the responsibility leaders had to also explain that behavior so that it was less prone to going unnoticed or being misinterpreted. It also brought attention to the role modeling, which is a key part in observational learning (Bandura, 2023). The set and setting of the leadership lessons were personal, sidebar conversations, which likely also brought increased attention and the personal mentoring aspect of the leadership lessons likely supports increased attention to the leaders’ modeling.

Leadership Lessons as Informal Conversations

Three case officers explained examples of when they either experienced a leader verbalizing their actions or verbalized their own actions to others to further explain their intention behind their behavior and one support officer explained how she role modeled and verbalized the importance of people seeking leadership development opportunities. The lessons were not just to be role modeled, but to be explained for better understanding and socialization. Some lessons were deliberately given and others emerged through subordinate’s questions in casual conversation and reflection. Each lesson that was told as impactful for the participant had
an aspect of mentoring, rather than lessons from leaders to the larger team or group.

One participant describe how his own leader communicated how he tried to embed his ethics of doing the right thing. This leader engaged his subordinates every meeting on the same ethical topic and then explained to the participant what was behind that and why he did it:

*Ethics had to be practiced all the time, and my boss would talk about that. What I learned from him was not only modeling ethical behavior, but talking about it, almost so much that people got annoyed. Every month, he would hold an all hands meeting and he would repeat his expectations for everybody. And one of them was personal conduct and doing the right thing. I'm not sure he ever used the specific word ‘ethics,’ but it was understood. He would list his expectations: Being respectful to the people on your right and your left, being honest, if something goes badly you come tell us. You’d look around the room and all the people on their first tour were like, ‘Yeah, boss, we’ve heard this last month,’ and they’d roll their eyes. He used to say to me, ‘Did you just see that?’ And I’m like, ‘Well, yeah, what do you mean?’ He goes, ‘If you're repeating messages so often that people get annoyed, it's sinking in, they're, they're hearing it so often. Then, if you were to go and ask them later, what are the things that the boss thinks about? They're naturally gonna say, Well, every month he always tells us these things.’ I think, was a healthy thing for me to learn because then I adopted a lot of that.*

The participant’s boss spoke to his values to the point that people knew them and could recite them. Although it wasn’t proof that the boss’s values were embedded in thought and action, what he did was an intentional leadership practice to verbalize his ethical values. The same participant explained how a leader of his who served as mentor over the years gave him
personal leadership development advice on his own tolerance of poor behavior. The mentor advised he might benefit from lowering his tolerance, despite his intent to be flexible in offering people room to learn:

*I'd worked for him four times. I've worked for him as a junior officer and into my senior positions of GS-15, junior SIS and senior SIS. He was one of the people who I had a conversation with about being a little crisper and having higher expectations as I got more senior because I'd gotten burned by giving people too many chances to change their behavior.*

His ongoing conversations with that leader had an impact on his own leadership philosophy and development. He learned to verbalize ethical lessons and consider his level of tolerance and chances for people who were not performing or behaving up to standards. Another participant who was a case officer explained how he, as a leader, verbalized the intent behind his actions in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague. In this scenario, his colleague asked why he was conducting exit interviews with every single person, which gave an opportunity for him to explain:

*I used to do exit interviews with people who would come through the base. I would ask the support person and my colleagues to come out for them if they were free. We had people who would come in to paint our vehicles, so I had an exit interview with the painters, I’d ask, ’How were you treated? How was the chow? Did you understand your mission? Did you have everything here that you need?’ I asked everybody the same questions. ’Did you feel like you were treated with respect?’ Sometimes we would get critical feedback and we would implement*
He continued to explain a discussion he had when a colleague questioned the intent behind his inquiries to everyone:

*After one of those exit interviews, my colleagues and I were at lunch and one colleague said to me, ‘I can't believe you interviewed the vehicle painters.’ I said, ‘Why would I not interview that if I'm interviewing the paramilitary guys and the case officers and the reports officers and the analysts that come through here? Why would I not? I mean, we might learn something.’ I wasn't asking him about painting the vehicles. He said to me, ‘That's amazing. I I've never seen anybody do anything like that before.’ I never saw anybody do it before either, but the idea was that there was a practical reason. But I also wanted to communicate to them and all the other people that worked in that part of the base, that their work was just as important as everybody else's. because I genuinely believe that.*

The participant saw it as practical to interview everybody to get feedback on their experience so that they could make changes. He communicated his intentions to his colleague who did not understand what he was doing. The participant explained the practicality and humility of interviewing everyone which the saw as valuable and an important part of leadership. Another participant explained how he spoke up against some colleagues who he thought might need to consider another perspective when it came to the next generation of employees and what it meant for leader behaviors:
There were a couple of senior case officers who came back from the field and they're all bitching and whining and complaining about the new generation and how entitled they are. I'm looking at them I'm like, 'We've lost, if this is the way you all think. Guess what? People are different now.

I was shit on as a young officer, but when young officers care about work life balance and they are looking at their managers and holding them accountable. I got yelled out a million times, but you shouldn’t yell at someone. They were kind of whining about that. And I was just like, ‘You all have it totally wrong, we're not going to change the new generations The bottom line is it's got to be a place to work where people feel comfortable and feel empowered and value what they're doing for national security. If they don’t feel that way, they're gonna go somewhere else.

The officer wanted to serve as a mediator for what the new generation expected and the senior case officers’ attitudes that the new generation was not entitled to better leadership. He explained his view, with unknown impact on the other officers, but he felt it was important to verbalize and tie the importance of better leadership to the organization’s mission and legacy.

The same participant described his priority of communicating during an experience he had trying to provide opportunities for leadership positions by directly calling officers he thought were qualified, but had not applied:

We had tons of management positions open and we started to go through promotion panels and the numbers come up to me and there's maybe five female case officers who applied. I just thought, ‘We can't have this, there should be more female applicants.’ I would call down to a female officer somewhere, who was incredibly qualified, but it hadn't applied for jobs. I would ask, ‘Why didn't you apply for this thing?’ And they would say, ‘Well, I know there's five criteria
to be qualified for the job, but I only match four the five.’ I'm like, ‘The dude who got it had one of the five.’ I had to ask myself, what are we doing? I get there’s more to it, but I do wonder that is part of a culture at the Agency, harassment, work-life, and everything.

The participant alluded to the lack of female officers applying to the leadership roles was likely part of a larger cultural issue in the organization and beyond, but he felt it was his role to communicate to female officers, in particular, that they should apply if they wanted the job. While there was clearly more work to do on encouraging women, the participant chose to engage in communication to at least address it on the surface level with qualified female officers. The leadership conversation was seen as part of offering support to other officers in leadership opportunities. A participant who was a support officer described how she sought out leadership opportunities and made sure she communicated that others should do the same:

*I earned a certificate in leadership from Notre Dame. I took Organizational Behavior courses and women's leadership courses through the Agency, and then on my own, I did a certificate course at Princeton. I always encouraged others to seek those education opportunities. I would tell them, you can always take these courses through the Agency because enabling those opportunities to learn was one of our standards in professional development.*

The participant not only role modeled taking advantage of leadership development opportunities, but communicated that those opportunities are open to others and she would support people taking those courses. It was part of her attempt to embed an environment where people could learn more about leadership, which would support the organization and the mission.
Receiving a leadership lesson was noted to have a positive impact. One support officer described a moment of appreciative, positive feedback from his supervisor. It came after a period in which he worked long hours and made a great deal of progress towards their mission. The boss’s actions allowed for a moment of reflection in the grueling times of supporting war time operations:

*I was a GS 15 I had personally went over built bases on the ground. My boss was one of the base troops. I was his chief of support. We built the base for previous war. I had been working over there 20 hours a day, seven days a week, just ridiculous. After about five days, you do it again. One day, my boss said, “Come here,” and I said to him, ‘I'm busy.’ Even though he was the chief, we were friends. He's like, ‘No, come here’. So, we walked out. I had no idea what he was doing. We walked out about 200 yards and it was it was dark. He says ‘Now turn around. You see, that's an operating base? Five days ago, that was a blank field. You took that slate that canvas and you came up with a vision and you executed and now we have an operational base in five days to supporting the mission.’ He says, ‘That's what support is all about.’*

Even at the high rank of GS15, the participant welcomed the positive feedback about his work and the results. He had been ready to keep grinding away at the job and tasks and welcomed the moment of recognition from his boss. Another participant shared that she would regularly remind people on her team that their behavior was being watched and likely emulated:

*I used to say all the time, this was a mantra of mine. You better be paying attention to your behavior because you were modeling all the time. You might not think anybody's paying*
attention. somebody's paying attention. So, you've got to be paying attention to your own modeling your own behaviors.

She emphasized that people, leaders in particular, needed to be aware of their behaviors and self-regulate because other employees would be watching and learning from what they did. Her lesson verbally brought attention to one’s behavior, knowing that how one acted was likely to be socialized in the organization.

Participant’s descriptions of communicating leadership lessons displayed the impact of mentor-like, verbalized leadership lessons and its likely importance in addition to formal leadership development training, assessments, and feedback opportunities. The lessons encompassed explaining the leader’s behavior, recommending suggestions, and directly telling people about opportunities available, among other key lessons that supported employees. Even with the high operational tempo and organizational focus on the mission, leaders in the organization held themselves accountable for sharing their views, perceived wisdom, and lessons in a personal and impactful manner.

Disagreement About CIA Leader’s “Chalk Line” Metaphor

Two participants brought up their reactions to a football metaphor a former CIA leader used when speaking to the organization at large as a guest speaker. The conflict exemplified how followers identify differently with different leaders. It also demonstrated the variance in the common ethical value of between the two participants of “doing the right thing.” The CIA leader they spoke about was General Hayden, who is known to speak to his metaphor of the “chalk line.” Getting chalk on one’s cleats as an athlete by being so close to the line is how he wanted CIA officers to operate when it came to gathering intelligence and supporting or carrying
out operations. The chalk line metaphor was intended to communicate that officers needed to work all the up to the limits of the law and capabilities, but not cross them. Hayden’s experiences and views are expanded upon in his book, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror*. The book highlights the challenges and tensions of the era in which he was leading intelligence organizations, being both prior to, during, and after immediately 9/11.

The participants interpreted the metaphor differently from each other. They had conflicting views on it based on their interpretation of the speaker, which likely influenced by the difference in their directorates, work roles, and potentially, their values. One participant saw the speaker as having a poor ethical reputation and interpreted the message through an ethical lens. The other participant had a shared career identity with the speaker and thought Hayden was widely seen as an ethical and balanced leader in the intelligence realm. This participant thus interpreted the metaphor in terms of the legal limitations in his job duties.

The speaker used a football metaphor in which he directed people to have “chalk on their toes” from reaching either the ethical or legal line, but not exceeding it. Whether the speaker spoke to the line being “ethical” or “legal” was in dispute between the participants’ interpretations, with the speaker’s metaphor meaning a combination of both. The participant who saw the metaphor as damaging interpreted the “chalk line” being the ethical line and a poor message to deliver in an already highly mission-focused and ethically tense environment. The participant who passionately shared his disgust at the metaphor and message had been in the Directorate of Analysis. He saw the metaphor as harmful to building ethical leadership and another message for employees to put mission above human values:

*He came in as a guest speaker and had a reputation, from a mission perspective, of walking up*
to the line and sticking his toe on the sideline of ethics, the other side of the line, meaning, you're crossing the ethical boundaries into things that may be unethical or questionable. He had a reputation for being a mission driven individual and walking up to the line and actually occasionally dipping his toe on the other side of the line. I would argue that the times in which he dipped his toe on the other side of that line and almost crossing into the territory of unethical behavior, illegal behavior, etc. It was overlooked because he was carrying out the mission.

The participant who appreciated the metaphor described the “chalk line” as having to do with legality and felt that it gave him support in pushing towards the legal limits, but not past them. This participant, who appreciated the metaphor, had been in the Directorate of Support and Directorate of Operations in which he was on the ground, conducting and supporting operations. He saw the metaphor as a guideline related to operating within legality, but right up to the line. He did not see the metaphor as evoking an emphasis on mission over treating people well:

He said something along the lines of, ‘At the end of the day, I expect all my players to have chalk on the toes of their cleats,’ which meant they were playing right up to the line, not over the line, but they got chalk on their cleats over from being so close. As in, if you're not over the line, you're still okay. Even if you're close. I love that sort of analogy. I felt like it was my job to play up to the line. Get things done, as long as we stayed on the on the allowable, the legal side of the line. It was okay, it made people uncomfortable sometimes.

In their interviews, both participants described the importance of ethical leaders and told stories of the importance of treating people with respect and maintaining human dignity.
However, one participant felt that the impact of the metaphor on the workforce was negative. From this participant's perspective, the metaphor was encouraging behavior that was questionably ethical. The other participant thought it was a helpful metaphor in guiding his own decisions to be within legal standards, but pushing to the line.

The conflict in their interpretation of the metaphor and its value for the workforce was representative of different interpretations of common generic phrases they both used, such as “good leadership” and “doing the right thing.” Looking deeper at each of their descriptions of ethics might display their differing interpretations of ethical leadership. The disgusted participant spoke to highly valuing integrity and congruency between words and actions. The participant with the favorable view of the metaphor highly valued honor and was comfortable with operational risk taking. The conflict in interpretation seemed to be influenced by how they identified with the guest speaker, the disgusted participant described the speaker as a poor ethical role model and the participant with a more favorable view of the speaker’s message identifying with the speaker’s career.

**Tensions in Information Leadership Lessons**

While some of the leadership lessons were given in a group setting, many were part of one-on-one mentorship on the finer aspects of one’s leadership and development. While these lessons were emotional and impactful, they required a personal mentorship and informal relationship between colleagues, which might not have been widely available to other individuals in the organization and could be influenced by shared individual identities between the superior and subordinate, such as race and gender. The tension lies in balancing the intimate, emotionally impactful nature of one-on-one mentorship with the necessity of disseminating ethical leadership principles across the organization on a larger scale. This raises questions about the scalability
and inclusivity of these leadership lessons.

Leadership Lessons Conclusion

Participants discuss instances where leaders either initiated or responded to conversations about ethical leadership, emphasizing the role of verbalizing actions to socially reinforce norms. The section sheds light on the multifaceted nature of ethical leadership, not just to be role-modeled but also explained for increased attention, better understanding, and socialization. Participants shared examples of leaders who consistently communicated ethical expectations, providing insights into their own values and principles. Through one-on-one conversations, leaders articulated their intentions, reinforcing the importance of transparency and clarity. These verbalized lessons extended beyond ethical behavior, encompassing aspects like leadership development opportunities. The verbalization of ethical lessons was depicted as a deliberate leadership practice, contributing to a shared understanding of values. The tension arises in the personalized nature of these lessons, with one-on-one mentorship being crucial for their emotional impact, potentially limiting widespread availability within the organization. Overall, the section underscores the significance of verbalizing ethical behavior for effective leadership and organizational culture.
Part III. Communication Discussion

Feedback and leadership lessons were communication themes that encompassed executing on ethical leadership principle of accountability, both the accountability principle of holding people accountable and the accountability principle of holding themselves accountable to fulfill their role as leaders. The participants described holding themselves accountable for engaging in hard feedback conversations for different reasons, to include for the good of the organization and because it was part of the responsibility of being in a leadership position, even if was a difficult responsibility. In addition to feedback conversations, participants described the impact that shared leadership lessons had on their leader experience. Their accounts indicated that in some areas of the organization, leaders were engaging in conversations around proper conduct in performance and in leadership, thus avoiding “moral muteness,” which tends to support inappropriate behavior in an organization (Treviño et al., 2006). Examining the participants’ stories around communicating feedback and leadership lessons highlighted examples of verbally bringing attention to behaviors, aligned with social cognitive theory’s explanation that attention is needed to socially learn (Bandura, 2023).

To compare the participant’s descriptions of performance feedback to research findings, most of the characteristics of their feedback processes were in line with effective performance feedback characteristics (Sleiman et al., 2020). Effective feedback mechanisms not emphasized in the participant narratives, which have been shown to be beneficial, are self-generated feedback and frequent (daily or weekly) informal feedback (Sleiman et al., 2020). That being said, a review of feedback research suggests that feedback delivered with less-than-ideal characteristics is likely to produce behavioral change (Sleiman et al., 2020). For example, in terms of the nature of the feedback, positive feedback was found to be most effective, however, all types of feedback
nature were shown to be effective (Sleiman et al., 2020). Similarly, in terms of the immediacy of feedback, feedback that was delivered within 60 seconds of a behavior was most effective, but both immediately delivered feedback and feedback that was not delivered immediately was found effective (Sleiman et al., 2020). Although it was indicated that feedback from supervisors was effective, the study found that self-generated feedback was also highly effective and combining supervisor feedback with self-generated was the most effective. More frequent feedback (daily and weekly) was found to be more effective, and perhaps part of the self-generated feedback’s effectiveness is from being able to engage in one’s own feedback on a more regular basis than with a supervisor. Among participants, common feedback characteristics were giving feedback in private, face-to-face, and in an empathetic, but direct manner, with the intent to be professional and not a personal, long-held judgement on the person. While the performance feedback research review found that private feedback was equally effective as public and positive feedback was effective, it did not examine the in-person versus virtual settings nor the style or emotional delivery of feedback. One feedback characteristic that was different among participants was the frequency of informal feedback. One participant emphasized a regular “walking around” philosophy to gather and then deliver feedback while another had planned one-on-one feedback conversations that were in addition to the organization’s performance feedback cycle. Participants described taking feedback seriously and wanting it to be effective in changing behavior. Although many described their preferred processes, it seemed likely that there was an openness to considering other best practices.

In terms of the potential impact of ethical leadership on feedback effectiveness, a more recent study found that it was the subordinate-supervisor relationship that both supervisors and subordinates agreed highly impacted negative feedback success (Heine, 2023). There was a
cyclical element in the relation between negative feedback success and relationship quality between the supervisor and subordinate, with a high-quality relationship between supervisor and subordinate supporting successfully received negative feedback, and negative feedback success in turn building the supervisor-subordinate relationship (Heine, 2023). Similarly, the subordinate’s level of identification with the leader has been shown to affect the amount of influence a leader has on a subordinate (Wang et al., 2021). Ethical leadership involves relations-oriented leader behavior (Yukl et al., 2013), which suggests that focus on ethical leader development and its orientation towards human-centeredness and building relationships, as well as emphasizing accountability, would be likely to also increase the effectiveness of feedback.

Evidence overall points to the still “industrial era” functioning of the CIA as a top-down bureaucratic system when it came to feedback and leadership lessons, however, evidence showed two attempts of leaders at the CIA to resolve a performance issue in a networked-way, one of which being when senior analysts mentored a junior officer and the other being a weekly “standup meeting” in which subordinates would hear what others were doing and be able to compare their plans with those of their peers. Also in line with enabling a more adaptive approach to leading, communicating leadership lessons demonstrated a willingness to evoke internal tension through stories to foster new learning. When it comes to enabling complex systems, conditions of interaction, interdependency, and tension catalyze adaptive leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Participants’ communication of performance standards and leadership lessons supported sharing information about what was acceptable. The participants’ various ways of sharing feedback was their attempt to frame the information in a way that would be impactful to the employee. At the individual level of interdependency, the move towards adaptive leadership involves resisting creating an atmosphere in which employees bring work problems to
management. In this theme, the CIA remained at the bureaucratic framework of the “Industrial Age” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), with managers describing themselves as the administrators of feedback. The attempts at a more “knowledge era” way of embedding performance lessons, were still top-down, but aimed to foster coordinated efforts to affect performance. Leadership lessons could be used to create tension to evoke action by fostering productive discussions and interactions.

**Next up: Discussion on Accountability, Self-Development, and Communication**

The emergent themes of accountability, self-development, and crucial communication each incorporate elements of each other, with none encompassing holistic ethical leadership without the others. The next section is a discussion on what these themes mean for and about leadership at the CIA and other organizations with increasingly complex environments to navigate and multifaceted demands on leaders. The discussion examines the evidence in terms of gaps in CIA ethical leader development, proposes accountability to the leadership role as the first step to self-development required of a leader, and calls attention to the need for ethics to be considered as organizations implement complexity leadership theory concepts into their organization.
CONCLUSION

The CIA will certainly remain an organization where officers operate in an ambiguous ethical environment and are authorized as independent actors in many contexts of their service. This research highlights numerous considerations regarding the organization’s relationship with ethical leadership and provides a base for further research in moral development in the intelligence profession, among other professions. Among suggestions for improving ethical leadership at the CIA and within other organizations is attention to the themes in this study and a deep examination of gaps in organizational support towards moral development, ethical norms, and leader development through the lenses of social cognitive theory, vertical development theory, and complexity leadership theory. Based on the participants’ narratives and ethical leadership research, perceived levels of ethical leadership impacts employee organizational identification (O’Keefe et al., 2019), employee knowledge sharing (Bavik et al., 2018), team efficacy and social integration (Martin et al., 2022), among other employee dynamics that support teamwork and mission accomplishment. This makes ethical leadership an important influence on the organization.

A number of combined initiatives related to building leader capacity in the areas of accountability, self-development, and communication would support systematically socializing ethics across an organization. One proposed initiative is to measure ethical inclinations using research-backed scales as part of the employee screening process and throughout the employee’s development and movement into leadership positions. Another initiative is to create ethics education and leader training based on the themes of this study. This includes applying complexity leadership concepts with attention to encouraging ethical adaptive responses in the network. Additionally, organizational support for elevated sense making throughout employees’
tenure will allow for employees engaging with heat and colliding experiences to integrate their experiences and vertically develop their leadership capacity. In addition to the practical implications, the study challenges the practicality of embedding complexity leadership concepts within an organization without first considering ethics and ethical leadership.

After the below summary of the findings, the discussion begins by exploring the ethical approaches participants described. The participants’ approaches and narratives revealed a tension within the organization, the tension being between acknowledging the importance of value-based leadership and also maintaining a hierarchical structure. The discussion then moves to the practical implications. The practical implications emphasize the importance of attention to the study’s themes to build ethical leader capacity in organizations, proposes using ethical leadership-related measures in screening and leader development programs, and examines what ethical leader development gaps there may be in the CIA and other organizations when examining the evidence through social cognitive theory, moral development theories, and vertical development theory. The practical implications also suggest that leaders can be developed regardless of their natural disposition as long as the person is committed to learning the leadership role with attention to the study’s themes. The theoretical implications focus on how the findings challenge the reality of implementing complexity leadership theory without prior consideration to moral development levels within networks.

Summary of the Findings

This research aimed to examine how former CIA leadership made sense of their CIA experience in terms of ethical leadership. The findings showed that their insights focused accountability, highlighting the themes of Truth to Power, Punishment and Consequences, and Accountable to Others. The ten participants’ perspectives acted as windows into the organization
and revealed “the good, the bad, and the ugly on leadership at the Agency,” per one participant’s review of the study findings. The findings support emphasizing the accountability part of ethical leadership as a first step in developing leaders and socializing higher ethical standards in an organization.

Through the lens of the related theories, the findings indicate a number of initiatives the CIA and other organizations might consider. One proposed initiative to support leader ethics is to measure ethical inclinations using research-backed scales as part of the employee screening process and throughout the employee’s development and movement into leadership positions. Another initiative is to create ethics education and leader training based on the themes of this study. This includes applying complexity leadership concepts with attention to encouraging ethical adaptive responses in the network. Additionally, organizational support for elevated sense making throughout employees’ tenure will allow for employees engaging with heat and colliding experiences to integrate their experiences and vertically develop their leadership capacity. In addition to the practical implications, the study challenges the practicality of embedding complexity leadership concepts within an organization without first considering ethics and ethical leadership.

Discussion

The following discussion begins with a brief explanation of the significance of the research, then moves to exploring the ethical approaches participants described. The participants’ approaches and narratives revealed a tension within the organization, the tension being between acknowledging the importance of value-based leadership and also maintaining a hierarchical structure. Next are the practical implications. The practical implications emphasize the importance of attention to the study’s findings to build ethical leader capacity in organizations.
The first calls for supporting leaders in exploring their individual motivations that commit them to leadership roles and under ethical behavior. The individualization is in contrast to asking leaders to conform to entirely altruistic leadership philosophies that may not internally align with all leaders. The second section of the practical implications explores the tensions participants experienced when it came to accountability conceptions and the need for leaders to balance multiple conceptions, rather than one. The next practical implication is a proposal to use ethical leadership-related measures in screening and leader development programs, and examines what ethical leader development gaps there may be in the CIA and other organizations when examining the evidence through social cognitive theory, moral development theories, and vertical development theory. The practical implications also suggest that leaders can be developed regardless of their natural disposition as long as the person is committed to learning the leadership role with support for moral and vertical development. The theoretical implication section focuses on how the findings challenge the reality of implementing complexity leadership theory without prior consideration to moral development levels within networks.

**Significance of the research**

Many organizations aim have leaders that are sufficient enough in their accomplishments and their ethics to retain personnel, keep the organization out of trouble, and complete the work needed. Organizations like the CIA place a strong value on excellence to support mission accomplishment, from rigorously testing the people they recruit to expecting excellence in employee tradecraft towards the mission. It seems that from the focus on excellence blended with societal changes towards more ethical leaders, that CIA employees are demanding more excellence in their leaders. Moreover, organizational leaders are starting to see the benefits that ethical leadership brings to supporting teams meeting their goals. While the CIA had been
“imprinted”³ (Johnson, 2007) since its inception with a rogue, unprincipled-style leader and cultural mentality, this study and related media shows that its founding ways are no longer holding up to the changing society and expectations. Participants from this study were able to hold that the CIA meets high levels of excellence in many ways and still want the Agency’s leaders to be better and more ethical leaders.

**Ethical Approaches, Values-Based Leadership, and Hierarchy**

The CIA already has a natural inclination towards values-based leadership. Since values are not necessarily moral (Robinson et al., 2022), the organization will benefit from stronger moral development programs focused on exploring values that employees bring into the organization and how they can further evolve and develop their values and subsequent behaviors. Only one out of ten participants knew the CIA’s core values and each had their own definition of ethics. This indicates that the organization is already putting trust in its people to lead by their own values and sense making. The CIA’s multitude of contexts in which leaders operate means that strong personal core values, with moral underpinnings, are needed because rules and regulations cannot address all specific scenarios in which officers are operating. Moreover, while there is an understanding and acknowledgment of the importance of value-based leadership, participants’ narratives indicate there may still be entrenched hierarchical structures and practices in place that are difficult to change or fully integrate with these values. This tension can manifest in various ways among leaders within the organization, including stress from conflicting priorities and challenges in empowering individuals at all levels, while also maintaining oversight required in a hierarchy.

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³ Organizational theorists have acknowledged for some time that organizations tend to assimilate characteristics from their surrounding environments and founders during their establishment phase (Johnson, 2007)
The general ethical approaches participants communicated involved cognitively balancing the CIA’s mission objectives, rule of law, and the participants’ own individual moral values. The evidence demonstrates that CIA officers were permitted to incorporate their own moral values into their decisions, which is known as values-based leadership (Robinson et al., 2022). However, the study also shows that values-based leadership was occasionally limited in the CIA by risk to reputation and the organization’s hierarchal nature. Participants described their confidence engaging in values-based decisions once they had a certain level of power and reputation. Certain narratives showed a strong reputation was needed for values-based decisions not to negatively impact one’s career when the values-based decision went against a norm or against higher orders. Narratives also revealed that were inclinations for superior officers to “pull rank” and stifle values-based decisions based on the hierarchy. Even if the CIA’s values-based leadership is currently limited, the CIA has potential for values-based leadership to be more widely accepted in the organization and more deeply embedded in the organizational culture. The participant’s comments on ‘rules’ versus ‘laws’ how the organization already has a culture in which there is rules independence, which is a requirement for values-based leadership to work (Robinson et al., 2022). Participant narratives of unethical leaders and the Agency’s own ethical blunders in the media show that the CIA, and other organizations that allow for the autonomy of values-based leadership, would benefit from attention to moral development in the workforce.

**Accountability, Self-Development, and Communication for Leader Capacity Building**

Accountability is the first step in leading and leader development, with self-development and

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4 Laws adhere to the constitution. Regulations are interpretations of how a law should be implemented. Agencies can typically modify or amend regulations without action from Congress. [Link](https://www.phe.gov/s3/law/Pages/default.aspx#:~:text=Laws%20are%20passed%20by%20both,also%20state%20requirements%20or%20prohibitions.)
communication following. Participants described how they understood their role as a leader involved doing the things that were hard or challenging, committing to learning to do better, and preparing for and carrying out needed conversations. Many of their narratives, in which they made moral judgements and then moved to moral action, included aspects of each theme. For example, one participant described how he learned that he was coming off as authoritative in meetings where he thought he was just supporting the team in brainstorming. With regard to specific aspects of accountability (Koppell 2005), the participant showed responsiveness to the reaction of the subordinates, rather than pushing forward with his own way of being. It also involved self-development by integrating that information from his subordinates and realizing he needed to be and communicate differently from his position of power and authority, if he wanted people to brainstorm and not just take what he was saying as the way forward. In another example, in the act of intelligent disobedience, a participant held himself accountable to the role of a senior case officer who was responsible for balancing the tension between US national security and for his agent’s life. He calculated multiple factors, including his own values, and communicated his message first by word, then by action, and still by an honest summary of his actions. The act of communicating feedback entirely required the leaders to hold themselves accountable to their leadership role and identify how to best talk to someone of whom they wanted to change a behavior.

Capacity building in the workforce focused within the themes of accountability, self-development, and communication is beneficial for employees at all levels. The focus on these three themes is bound to develop ethical employees who become ethical leaders that understand the potential to grow by committing to morally and vertically developing. Leaders focused on the themes are not just reaching high levels upon their reflection at retirement, but reaching new
peaks in development throughout their tenure by ongoing attention and development in the themes, supported by the organization. Building an ongoing program for employees with attention to the themes simplifies leadership development programs that are often complicated by the plethora of leadership theories (Mango, 2018). Taking research findings from a study on CIA employees towards leader development programs is answering the question of what leadership capacity CIA leaders specifically need in their unique workforce. Likewise, incorporating these themes of accountability, self-development, and communication for leader development in other organizational contexts will build ethical leader capacity. Because these themes emerged in a study of CIA leaders routinely operating in an ethically ambiguous environment, then they are likely also applicable in other organizations with different levels and types of ambiguity. The study's findings are likely to support all organizations that require independence in their workforce and want to improve behavior at the micro, or macro, morality level.

Considering Multiple Accountability Conceptions

This study examined participant narratives on ethical leadership at the CIA. Koppell’s (2005) conceptions of accountability served to make sense of the themes that emerged regarding accountability. A major finding is that leaders at the CIA are being asked to resolve tensions between the accountability conceptions. The accountability themes within the participants’ narratives emerged as representing the underpinnings of accountability: transparency and liability, with the additional theme of responsiveness, tensions with controllability (accomplishing the mission), and the organization having a unique relationship with responsibility (flexible views on rules) (Koppell, 2005). The evidence indicates that properly resolving the tension requires a high cognitive capacity and consideration to ethics. However, historically, according to artifacts and the participants narratives, to avoid “multiple
accountability disorder” and resolve the tension (Koppell, 2005), CIA leaders focused on one component of accountability: controllability. CIA leaders focused on controllability by prioritizing accountability for accomplishing the mission that the US government asked them to accomplish. However, by focusing primarily on the mission (controllability), CIA leaders left aside duties to balance controllability with transparency, being liable to consequences, responsible to rules, and responsive to subordinates. Figure 6 interprets from the evidence how the “older” or “historic” CIA leaders managed accountability concepts and Figure 6 displays how the “new” leaders CIA are being asked to find balance between the concepts.

Figure 6. Relieving tension by choosing one accountability conception (“old way”).

Figure 7. Relieving tension by confronting multiple accountability conceptions and making decisions with consideration to multiple conceptions (“new way”).
Per participant narratives and related artifacts (Polymeropoulos, 2020; 2020-2023 CIA Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, n.d.), the CIA has been responsive to the general societal progression towards more ethical (Fontrodona et al., 2018) and human-centered leadership (Kennedy et al., 2020). The organization has been pushing for leadership attention to the other accountability concepts, not just being accountable for the mission. The organization has now put pressure on leaders to be able to hold the tension of balancing multiple accountability concepts and make decisions with consideration to more than one concept. This means that leaders must develop the capacity for complex decision making, with consideration to competing accountability conceptions. The need for leaders with capacity to make dynamic judgements when it comes to accountability can be supported by attention to vertical development. Vertical development results in leaders having the ability to think in increasingly intricate, systemic, strategic, and interdependent manners (Petrie, 2014). Because accountability is a concept within
ethical leadership, ethical and moral development is important to incorporate alongside the vertical development conditions.

**Enhancing Moral and Vertical Cognitive Capacity**

Through the lens of vertical development theory, the CIA is strong in heat experiences and colliding perspectives, but a major gap in the CIA’s leader development is support for elevated sense making. Certainly, from the participants’ narratives, the organization made strides during their tenure in supporting wellness programs. The wellness programs include mindfulness activities like yoga and meditation, which allow time for rest and reflection. With some guidance the programs are likely helpful in sense making. However, the wellness activities are not offering direct integration and sense making support. The organization also incorporated coaching its leaders through programs like the 360-degree feedback program. Coaching is part of supporting elevated sense making (Petrie, 2015). Still, it was apparent through the evidence that the heavy mission focus placed a lot of pressure on the individual leaders to elevate their sense making based on their own personal feeling of responsibility and accountability, as well as their own inclination for learning. Much of the time for reflection appeared to be brief and self-organized.

**Measuring for Ethical Leadership Inclinations**

The CIA and other organizations that empower employees to be highly independent actors certainly have a responsibility to recruit for, develop, and perhaps measure for ethical capacity among this workforce, particularly in its potential leaders. When it comes to screening employees, the CIA’s intense screening process certainly allows the organization to have insight on a potential employee’s psychological disposition and ethical standards, which may influence the potential employee’s ethical behavior and leadership behavior. However, other organizations with less intrusive screenings and authorities may not have the opportunity to more deeply
understand its employees. For all organizations, research-backed measures of ethical and leadership inclinations may be beneficial for initial recruitment and also screening employees prior to placement in leader roles.

According to participant statements, during in their tenure, the CIA was not systematically assessing for leader capacity or moral standards in their screening process nor measuring for similar standards prior to career progression into leadership roles. Seeing that the organization allows for even further increased autonomy as employees move into leadership positions, it will be beneficial for the CIA, and others with similar characteristics, to identify a measure for ethical propensity and leader capacity that could remain in an employee’s file. The measures could be revisited and perhaps tested again before the employee steps into a position of increased authority over others. A few such scales that may be beneficial for ethics include the measure for Organizational Identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), the Propensity for Moral Disengagement Scale (Moore et al., 2012), and the Moral Identity measure (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Social desirability can affect self-reporting on these measures and the 14-item Egoistic and Moralistic Self-enhancement Scale (Vecchione et al., 2013) would be a measure to consider along with an individual’s scores (Payne, 2023).

**Socializing Ethics, Morals, and Ethical Leadership using Social Cognitive Theory**

Organizations, like the CIA, will benefit from a deeper dive into how their current practices for socializing ethical norms at the micro morality level could be enhanced with attention to social cognitive theory. Since most CIA intelligence officers likely have high levels of self-efficacy and adequate cognitive process experience for moral action, the organization can move towards examining how they are approaching teaching ethics and ethical leadership. The organization will not have to begin by building self-efficacy, but can work on understanding
motivations for a cognitive change in moral principles, encouraging appropriate moral 
judgements in the workforce, and increasing awareness of the psychological mechanisms that 
lead to moral disengagement. The examination via social cognitive theory will support the 
organization’s current efforts to socialize appropriate behavior with federally mandated trainings 
(Federally Mandated Training, n.d.), leader development programs, and diversity, equity, and 

Narratives in the study revealed that problematic behavior was regularly occurring in the 
organization at the micro morality level, such as harassment, treating people with disregard to 
human dignity, and a lack of accountability for inappropriate behavior. The descriptions 
indicated that moral judgement at the micro morality level may not be strong throughout the 
organization and may be individually driven, rather than organizationally influenced. For 
example, accountability for inappropriate behavior appeared to strongly depend on individual 
ethical leaders enforcing standards based on laws, regulations, and their own values, rather than 
appropriate well-socialized and internalized behavior norms.

Participants described the CIA as an organization with uneven accountability practices 
throughout, both uneven across the organization and vertically within the hierarchy. Social 
cognitive theory would explain that the uneven norms are likely due to a lack of even 
consequences for inappropriate behavior. It is further explained by vicarious reinforcement of the 
less-than-ideal behaviors. Vicarious reinforcement is when an observer changes their own 
behavior because of witnessing another person’s actions being rewarded or punished (Bandura, 
2023). Vicarious reinforcement differs from operant conditioning because social cognitive theory 
still assumes that one’s behavior is self-regulated, not entirely regulated by external stimuli 
(Bandura, 2023). Participants described trying to implement consequences for inappropriate
behavior and many shared seeing lack of accountability by other leaders, firsthand. They also
saw poor leader behavior rewarded, such as employees using manipulative tactics to earn
influence that led to promotions. According to social cognitive theory, the lack of consequences
for inappropriate behavior and rewards for poor behavior means that others in the organization
may then be likely to imitate such behaviors. Participants in the study spoke to attempting to set
standards against inappropriate behavior and speaking and enacting appropriate behavior
themselves, however, their narratives indicate that a more complex approach is needed for moral
standards to be widely normalized in the organization.

**Individualizing Ethical Leadership: Potential for Many Dispositions and Motivations to be
able to Lead Ethically**

Assisting leaders’ in finding their personal reasons for committing to leadership and
exploring their own ethical reasons for engaging in ethical leadership conduct is likely support
those who are less “natural born” leaders to step into the role asked of them. By engaging with
their personal values and driving forces, individuals can enhance their commitment, which is
crucial for ongoing learning and accountability. Participants were not all naturally inclined as
leaders in their dispositions. Some stated they preferred to work as lone workers and were
unwillingly placed in a leadership role. Yet, the participants without the natural inclinations to be
a leader described committing to the role and the required learning. The participants
communicated growth into leadership, based in their commitment to the role, which
demonstrates the potential for people less inclined to be leaders to still learn and enact the role.
One participant shared that he was not a natural leader and preferred to work alone, yet
committed to becoming a leader because he did not like to be bad at things, he liked to be good
at everything. He evaluated that by the end of his career that he was a good leader. Other
participants shared learning to take on accountability behaviors that did not come naturally to them, such as mediating interpersonal conflicts. Participant narratives emphasized that even “unnatural” leaders can learn the skills needed to lead, if they are willing to identify as a leader and commit to learning the role.

The evidence also supports encouraging leaders to understand and lead ethically with their own motivations, rather than lead under an organization-pushed leadership philosophy that does not represent the leader’s motivations. Not all the participants were internally aligned with servant leadership and other “softer” leadership philosophies, yet they still displayed human-centered, ethical behavior. One participant referred to himself as bordering on sociopath and another described the desire for subordinates to feel harmony as a team, mostly because it helps them get the job done. These two participants described enacting ethical leadership behaviors, like acting in care and support of people and creating the highly valued virtue of harmony (Li & Düring, 2022), even if their core motivation was less of complete care and more based in meeting mission objectives. In one example, a participant shared their multiple motivations for getting up early to greet a team returning from an operation. One reason was to show care to the people returning from a dangerous scenario; however, another was to fulfill the participant’s own interest in knowing what happened with the operation. An additional motivation was that the participant knew that showing up made people feel respected and he knew that when people felt respected, they would work harder to accomplish goals. One part of his motivation was the ethics of care, the others were motivated by self-interest and the organization’s best interest. All of the motivations, in this case, resulted in showing care and consideration to the subordinates, and the participant found his own motivation to support that caring action.

**Measuring for Ethical Leadership Inclinations**
The CIA and other organizations that empower employees to be highly independent actors certainly have a responsibility to recruit for, develop, and perhaps measure for ethical capacity among this workforce, particularly in its potential leaders. When it comes to screening employees, the CIA’s intense screening process certainly allows the organization to have insight on a potential employee’s psychological disposition and ethical standards, which may influence the potential employee’s ethical behavior and leadership behavior. However, other organizations with less intrusive screenings and authorities may not have the opportunity to more deeply understand its employees. For all organizations, research-backed measures of ethical and leadership inclinations may be beneficial for initial recruitment and also screening employees prior to placement in leader roles.

According to participant statements, during in their tenure, the CIA was not systematically assessing for leader capacity or moral standards in their screening process nor measuring for similar standards prior to career progression into leadership roles. Seeing that the organization allows for even further increased autonomy as employees move into leadership positions, it will be beneficial for the CIA, and others with similar characteristics, to identify a measure for ethical propensity and leader capacity that could remain in an employee’s file. The measures could be revisited and perhaps tested again before the employee steps into a position of increased authority over others. A few such scales that may be beneficial for ethics include the measure for Organizational Identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), the Propensity for Moral Disengagement Scale (Moore et al., 2012), and the Moral Identity measure (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Social desirability can affect self-reporting on these measures and the 14-item Egoistic and Moralistic Self-enhancement Scale (Vecchione et al., 2013) would be a measure to consider along with an individual’s scores (Payne, 2023).
Developing Ethical Leadership Awareness and Education

Participants’ experiences with unethical leadership and a few of the participants’ own narratives of learning ethical leadership through trial and error indicates that the organization will benefit from additional attention on ethical leader development. Although the CIA may appreciate its employees learning ethical leadership through their own reflection on their behavior, excessive use of trial-and-error learning can lead to excessive leadership errors. Moreover, it is unlikely that all employees actively reflect on their own behavior at the micro morality level, given the CIA’s mission intensity is high and participants reportedly did not have much time for reflection. The lack of time for reflection was particularly highlighted by participants in the DO. Although CIA officers likely have high levels of self-efficacy, which is needed for ethical behavior and action, it is apparent that the topics of ethics, morals, and ethical leadership at the micro morality level were not well-socialized throughout the organization.

Moral development research asserts that although there are precursor influences to adult ethical behavior, functioning ethically as an adult professional is enhanced by, or may require, ethics-focused education and attention (Rest & Narvarez, 1994). There are three ways in which professionals can build a base in moral knowledge. Those include 1) teaching a body of moral theories, principles and values to evoke thought and communication skills regarding ethics; 2) Enhancing critical thinking skills; and 3) enhancing awareness of contexts in which things like values, duties, and responsibilities are in conflict (Rest & Navarez, 1994). Moral theories, lessons, critical thinking, and awareness of instances with conflicting values should be regularly incorporated into employee training and leader development programs. This study provides a foundation of themes that can enhance ethical leader capacity. In terms of the organization taking on the themes of accountability, self-development, and communication for itself; the CIA would
hold itself accountable to teaching ethics, becoming aware of its ethical blind spots through organizational culture assessments and feedback, and communicate its own lessons on itself to the workforce to build its internal and external legitimacy and better socialize employees in ethical leadership.

**Socializing Ethics, Morals, and Ethical Leadership using Social Cognitive Theory**

Organizations, like the CIA, will benefit from a deeper dive into how their current practices for socializing ethical norms at the micro morality level could be enhanced with attention to social cognitive theory. Since most CIA intelligence officers likely have high levels of self-efficacy and adequate cognitive process experience for moral action, the organization can move towards examining how they are approaching teaching ethics and ethical leadership. The organization will not have to begin by building self-efficacy, but can work on understanding motivations for a cognitive change in moral principles, encouraging appropriate moral judgements in the workforce, and increasing awareness of the psychological mechanisms that lead to moral disengagement. The examination via social cognitive theory will support the organization’s current efforts to socialize appropriate behavior with federally mandated trainings (*Federally Mandated Training*, n.d.), leader development programs, and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (2020-2023 CIA Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, n.d.), among others.

Narratives in the study revealed that problematic behavior was regularly occurring in the organization at the micro morality level, such as harassment, treating people with disregard to human dignity, and a lack of accountability for inappropriate behavior. The descriptions indicated that moral judgement at the micro morality level may not be strong throughout the organization and may be individually-driven, rather than organizationally influenced. For example, accountability for inappropriate behavior appeared to strongly depend on individual
ethical leaders enforcing standards based on laws, regulations, and their own values, rather than appropriate well-socialized and internalized behavior norms. Uneven distribution of moral judgment and moral action were apparent in participants’ accounts within the self-development evidence and communication evidence as well. For example, one participant shared that much of the spending on advanced development programs depended on the individual leader’s level of value in self-development. Likewise, in communicating feedback, participants had the individual freedom to implement or not implement feedback mechanisms outside of the organization’s routine performance review cycle.

**Enhancing Leaders’ Elevated Sense Making with Vertical Development**

Through the lens of vertical development theory, the CIA is strong in heat experiences and colliding perspectives, but a major gap in the CIA’s leader development is support for elevated sense making. Certainly, from the participants’ narratives, the organization made strides during their tenure in supporting wellness programs. The wellness programs include mindfulness activities like yoga and meditation, which allow time for rest and reflection. With some guidance the programs are likely helpful in sense making. However, the wellness activities are not offering direct integration and sense making support. The organization also incorporated coaching its leaders through programs like the 360-degree feedback program. Coaching is part of supporting elevated sense making (Petrie, 2015). Still, it was apparent through the evidence that the heavy mission focus placed a lot of pressure on the individual leaders to elevate their sense making based on their own personal feeling of responsibility and accountability, as well as their own inclination for learning. Much of the time for reflection appeared to be brief and self-organized. The participants who described their reflections in such a way also generally described themselves as willing to examine their own short comings or tendencies, a tendency towards
humility that may not be as natural among all CIA officers (and was still a challenge for some participants).

Essentially, because heat experiences and colliding perspectives are a given in many CIA roles, closing the gap in vertical development for employees will start with supporting employees in building their capacity for humility through commitment to their leadership role and subsequent reflection. Creating space and practices of engaging with humility would support officers in looking at themselves in the context of other employees and support momentary reflection, sense making, and elevation, when mission allows. Examples of this include creative courses, like comedy and storytelling, that encourage engagement with one’s humility and would be beneficial to officers as they move up the ranks, not solely once they are at the senior level. Another way to work towards filling the gap in elevated sense making would be to provide coaches for employees as they move through the ranks. Providing sense making opportunities for employees at multiple ranks will help them to regularly processes their experiences and perspectives and elevate as they promote, rather than once they reach the senior ranks or retire and have time to reflect on their entire career.

Applying Complexity Leadership Theory to Support Enabling Ethical Leadership

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) centers on investigating strategies and behaviors that encourage creativity, learning, and adaptability within organizations (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). CLT can occur when complex adaptive system dynamics are supported in the organization, even if the organization is hierarchical (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). According to participants’ accounts, the CIA does have people or contexts that authorize its employees to ditch the traditional hierarchy limitations and enable team or individually authorized adaptability. The CIA seems to allow the bucking of the restrictions of hierarchal approval primarily for the sake of
accomplishing the mission. Participants reported also taking advantage of the allowed adaptability when it came to moral actions, such as speaking truth to power. When speaking truth to power, the participants described taking a lead role in speaking to people of higher rank, who, within the hierarchy, normally authorize speaking because they hold the power. When a leader allows someone to speak truth to their power, they are enabling a complex adaptive system in which the employee injects tension to the system with their truth, which can motivate change. Even the act of speaking out is a tension on the system. The leaders who did not welcome truth spoken to their position of power removed the tension that was created the employee who spoke out. Removing the tension in this way disabled system change and would be considered “maladaptive” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020). In the long run, leaders who remove the tension and potential for change are usually unable to maintain power over a changing environment (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020)

Some leaders in the organization seem to understand the base of complexity leadership theory, which is that “hierarchical views of leadership are less and less useful given the complexities of our modern world,” (Lichtenstein et al., 2006, p. 2). Conscious attention to incorporating and socializing aspects of complexity leadership theory into the CIA through its leaders is likely to support the move away from the limitations that strict hierarchy impose, while still using leaders in the hierarchy as nodes that can socialize complexity leadership concepts through influence such as role modeling, teaching, and creating tensions that lead to change. Leaders who see themselves as enabling, either naturally or though instruction, are able to focus on creating conditions for which adaptive processes can occur (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020)

**Room for Ethics in Applying Complexity Leadership Theory: Are Networks Ethically Ready?**
Complexity leadership theory supports allowing measured autonomy so that employees can work without formal authority interference and within a more informal, networked dynamic (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The increased autonomy that complexity leadership calls for in enabling creativity and natural interdependencies among the network begs the question of whether independent actors are ethically or morally ready to operate with such autonomy and informality. The networked approach has been recommended for the nursing context, for example, and touted as a successful leadership style for the Joint Special Operations Command during the Iraq War (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020). However, with the pressure for systems and organizations to change to more adaptive leadership and responses, when applied, there does not seem to be consideration to ethical capacity prior to enabling an increasingly adaptive systems within complexity leadership theory.

What moral influence or moral actors in the network are able to strongly influence an adaptive system so that its actions, which take place without approval from authority, can be trusted to meet the network’s ethical standards? Participants' narratives on unethical leader behavior at the CIA, coupled with ethical scandals in other organizations like the US Navy SEALs (Cole, 2022), highlight a lack of "readiness" among certain networks and organizations to embrace more adaptive leadership processes. Despite the complexity of their work that calls on individuals in those organizations to operate independently, there is a lack of moral readiness for such autonomy, as evidenced by their susceptibility to inappropriate norms.

A strategy to support enhancing, enabling, and measuring for ethical readiness would benefit organizations, like the CIA, to better operate in complex environments while still maintaining appropriate ethical norms. The strategy would examine who in the network is to serve as the “ethical nodes” that are called on to influence ethical standards. Additionally in the strategy,
ethical leader training would teach enabling leadership focused on ethics. The message would call on leaders to inject ethical thought, education, or lessons with their teams that help build ethical thought in the network. Overall, an organizational strategy will examine complexity leadership processes and recommendations, along with an organization’s current network, to create a unique strategy to enable ethics while an organization is on the pathway to increasingly adaptive and enabling leadership.

Closing

Ethical leadership is a key part of organizational success and normalized ethical standards can allow organizations to replace resource consuming and ineffective hierarchical oversight with personalized and continuous ethical leadership development. The release and move towards enabling leadership, with ethical norms, allows an organization’s employees and related networks to thrive in working through complexity. Participants’ sense making revealed their own thought processes in coming to the “right” way forward when facing ethical ambiguity, such as competing values. The findings from interviewing people with careers in an ethically ambiguous organization, plus the related theories, supports the idea that ethical leadership is not just about leader behaviors, but a cognitive capacity that people can build over time, if given appropriate support.
REFERENCES


JOINT HEARING BEFORE THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE AND THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH: PROJECT MKULTRA, THE CIA’S PROGRAM OF RESEARCH IN BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION. (1977,


Levitt, H. M. (2021). Qualitative generalization, not to the population but to the phenomenon: Reconceptualizing variation in qualitative research. Qualitative Psychology, 8(1), 95–110. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000184


APPENDIX A

Semi Structured Interview Questions

(Introduction to self and study)

I’ll start with having you share how you have defined some of these terms.

- What is ethics to you?
- What is ethical leadership?

*I’ll share the academic definition for reference as we go forward.*

Ethical leadership involves:

- demonstrating appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and promoting such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.

Values (“moral person”)

1. For background, what is a brief summary of your career with the CIA, starting with why you chose to join the CIA? What are the main career steps you have taken at the CIA? (I’m interested in what piqued your interest in the CIA, where you started your career in the CIA, and how your career developed for you to find yourself in a senior leadership position).

2. Regarding values, which are your basic principles or standards of behavior - the basis of how you treat people, behave, prioritize your career and how you operate, during your career at the Agency? What would you say were your top three values?

3. Did your values evolve over your career? How?

4. Which values did you come into the CIA with?
5. What experiences solidified or influenced you to adapt your values over time?

6. Who, inside or outside the CIA, influenced the development of your values?

7. What are your perspectives on the CIA’s core values (integrity; service; excellence; courage; teamwork; and stewardship)? What did you see as your duty related to those values?

8. In terms of the organization’s values, what habits did you have to center yourself in those values?

9. How connected were your leadership practices to the specific organizational values?

10. Was there a time in your career where the organization’s values really resonated with you or became more of a part of your way of being in the organization?

11. Are you aware of the sexual harassment and assault reporting issues at the CIA that have come to light in the media in the last few months? How do you make sense of the sexual harassment and assault reporting issues within the CIA that made headlines in the last few months? What did reporting look like in your area?

Now we’ll move into ethical leadership specifically (“moral manager”).

I would like to break down each of the parts of ethical leadership and talk about any examples, practices, or stories you have to you when it comes to:

- role modeling
- two-way communication between you and subordinates
- reinforcement, aka holding people accountable
- actively managing ethics in the CIA at the different levels in which you served

**ROLE MODELING**

12. First, what can you say about your role modeling of ethics as a leader at the CIA?
13 How did it change as you were promoted into higher level positions?
14 Who were your own ethical role models (anyone you wanted to emulate or definitely did not)?
15 Did you have any daily or regular actions that you hoped others would appreciate or pick up for themselves?

**TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION** (truth to power, feedback, ideas, questions)

16 What communication practices did you engage in with your subordinates as a team level leader and then as you moved up in grade?
17 Hard convos, what were those like?
18 What kind of communication would you say there was specifically about values or ethical behavior?
19 What practices did you implement with subordinates to be sure you were hearing their perspectives, ideas, and feedback, if any?
20 How did you encourage open and honest communication of problems or ethical problems, if at all?
   1 Was there anything specific you did in meetings related to encouraging communication?
   2 Anything in the field?
   3 What challenges did you experience related to communicating with subordinates?

**ACCOUNTABILITY**

21 I am interested in instances where you had to hold someone accountable. Or when you were held accountable? How was that experience? What did you consider?
   1 How did your personal values come into play?
2 How did the organization’s values come into play?

3 What informal actions did you take?

4 What formal actions?

5 What influenced how you acted or responded? Any personal experiences, rules, or training?

6 What were your considerations with time away from mission?

**ACTIVELY MANAGING ETHICS AT ORG LEVEL**

22 At the organizational level, ethics is managed in a number of different ways, including training and regulations. What role did you have in actively managing ethics in the larger organization, to include influencing training, behaviors, culture, and/or leadership development?

1 How did you see others do it that were successful or not successful?

2 Did you have a specific strategy to “embed ethics” among organization members?

3 How effective did you feel at the higher level? How effective did you feel at a lower level of leadership?

4 360?

**DEVELOPMENT - Vertical Leadership Questions**

23 What opportunities did you have for reflection?

1 From work (i.e. training, sabbatical)?

2 In your personal life (personal reflection habits)?

24 Culture - working across cultures (internal and global)

25 Any final thoughts on ethical leadership or your leadership reflections as we come to a
close on this interview?
# APPENDIX B

## Individual Expressions Related to Accountability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Expressions Related to Accountability</th>
<th>Participant IDs</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>OO1</th>
<th>OO2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>A3</th>
<th>OO3</th>
<th>OO4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability Expression</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant shared an instance when they spoke truth to power or enacted the truth</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant commented on the importance of accountability for financial misconduct</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant acknowledged issues at CIA with harassment or discrimination</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant told story of harassment or discrimination at CIA impacting them or someone close to them</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant called attention to the importance of accountability for seemingly minor behaviors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant shared perception on adultery and its impact on the</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>workplace</td>
<td>Participant told, step-by-step, how they discerned a holding someone accountable</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant described having a perspective of leadership as a social contract</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant emphasized the importance of helping people find the right fit in the organization</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX C

### Individual Expressions Related to Self-Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Development Expression</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Participant ID</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personality and Other Assessments</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoke to incorporating 360-degree feedback</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed interest in 360-experience</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed seeking feedback other than 360</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied personality concepts from MBTI within interview or in narrative or comments post-interview</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed understanding personality differences and preferences in their interactions with colleagues (other than MBTI)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humility</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told of importance of accepting their own fallibility in terms of their leadership philosophy</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Provided example of their own fallibility in a story</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Told a story describing how they learned to understand someone who they previously saw as difficult or did not understand</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Human Dignity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commented on importance treating people with respect, even in times of stress</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicitly discussed the importance of human dignity or respect</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Told story of a leader's compassionate support that went beyond job duties (either their own compassion or a leader's compassion for them)</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spoke to importance of family-like support among colleagues at CIA</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experienced a leader yelling or treating them or others with disrespect</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Described a time when they regulated their internal dialogue to</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjust their larger attitude and/or behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Described a time when they leaned on someone else to help them regulate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their emotions, communication, or a personnel decision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX D

### Individual Expressions Related to Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Expressions Related to Communication</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Participant ID</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Expression</td>
<td></td>
<td>S1  S2  OO1  OO2  S3  A1  A2  A3  OO3  OO4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Described preparation method for feedback</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledged emotions that recipient of feedback can experience</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Described a specific feedback technique</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned importance of feedback being direct</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned importance of feedback including positive notes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared two-way methods of communicating feedback</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasized that feedback could be personal, but wasn't a long-term judgement on the person</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Described sharing a leadership lesson with subordinate(s)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1  1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

The table above outlines different expressions related to communication, each with a total frequency count and participant ID frequency counts.
Described a leadership lesson imparted on them that was impactful | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1
March 31, 2023

Caroline Walsh
Sch of Leadership & Ed Science

Re: Expedited - Initial - IRB-2023-236, Ethical Leadership and Integrity in the Central Intelligence Agency

Dear Caroline Walsh:

The University of San Diego Institutional Review Board (USD IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-2023-236: Ethical Leadership and Integrity in the Central Intelligence Agency.

Decision: Approved. This study may start no earlier than March 31, 2023.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Findings: Thank you for addressing prior IRB review feedback. This approval is based on the intended work and scope of activities outlined in the submitted proposal. If the research team makes changes to the project and/or its study protocols, the PI or their designated team member must submit a modification application for IRB’s re-evaluation.

Research Notes: Please note that the PI’s human subjects training will expire on Oct. 14, 2023. Administrative check-in date is set for this date instead of the normal one-year anniversary check-in period. If the project continues past this date, please update your CITI training record and submit a renewal application before Oct. 14, 2023.

Internal Notes:

The USD IRB requires annual renewal of all active studies reviewed and approved by the IRB. Please submit an application for renewal prior to the annual anniversary date of initial study approval. If an application for renewal is not received, the study will be administratively closed.

Note: We send IRB correspondence regarding student research to the faculty advisor, who bears the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research. We request that the faculty advisor share this correspondence with the student researcher.

Applications for full review must be submitted at least two weeks prior to the next scheduled monthly IRB meeting; see https://www.sandiego.edu/irb/updates/ for specific deadlines. You may submit an IRB application for expedited
or exempt review at any time.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Truc Ngo, PhD
IRB Administrator

Office of the Senior Vice President and Provost
Hughes Administration Center, Room 212
5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110-2492
Phone (619) 260-4553 • Fax (619) 260-2210 • www.sandiego.edu