

# Improving Ethical Decision-Making Across Agencies: Turning Principles to Action in Evolving Situations (Deontology-Focused)

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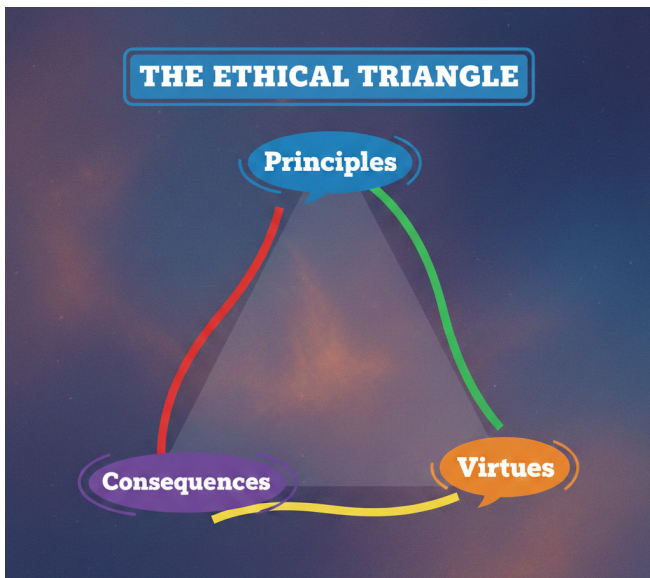
This article proposes that public organizations should implement continuous, workplace-level ethics practices to address the complexity of legal mandates, public expectations, and operational realities. Grounded in deontological (principle-based) reasoning, the recommended approach is supported by leader modeling, short vignettes, and lessons-learned reviews to turn values into sustained habits. The model aligns decisions with law and policy, while using rules, consequences, and virtues to assess lawful options.<sup>1</sup> To promote sound judgments in dynamic situations, principle-based ethics are paired with systems thinking and sense-making tools.<sup>2</sup> For this article, commander's intent is equivalent to leader's intent and can be used interchangeably.

The key to maximizing the ethical triangle in organizations is ethics training, leader modeling, and adaptable decision rights. Systems thinking and sense-making tools clarify the interconnected impacts of decisions, supporting ethical judgment

for diverse situations. Clear operational descriptions foster shared understanding, which is essential to effective action. The structured cycle of planning, readiness, execution, and continuous assessment guides outcomes, while flexible methods enable decentralized and deontological decision-making for teams operating in complex environments.

A clear leader's intent establishes boundaries supporting deontological ethics. Direct communication of this intent fosters understanding and ethical, decentralized decisions. Debriefs build trust among subordinates. Leaders who consider various deontological perspectives and use scenario planning become more adaptable and effective in ethical decision-making.

Organizations must prepare for ethical decision-making challenges heightened by legal and cultural constraints, particularly during war, when members face moral distress. This article, one in a series, examines ways to improve ethical



The Ethical Triangle (AI image generated by Allyson McNitt)

decision-making across domains; this piece focuses on deontology and clarifies its application to military leaders navigating statutes, rules, and laws. While domains such as deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics may appear theoretical amid practical realities, the Army's ethical triangle aims to support leaders who act ethically. Yet relying on this assumption may leave organizations vulnerable to failure amid chaos. Recognizing the strain and vulnerability caused by wartime challenges underscores the urgency of robust ethical preparation.

This article consists of three sections that focus exclusively on rule-based outcomes. The first section explains the significance of the deontological principle in ethical decision-making. The second discusses the benefits and limitations of rule-focused frameworks, including their ability to address moral dilemmas, mitigate unintended consequences, and consider long-term effects. The final section offers recommendations tailored to military leaders. Here, "principles" and "deontology" are used interchangeably. The article also provides an overview of deontological perspectives, emphasizing Immanuel Kant and other key scholars.

## Deontological Perspective

The ethical triangle is central to the United States Army's ethical reasoning framework, serving as the foundation for navigating uncertainty and rapid change due to globalization and technological advancements. By emphasizing this framework, the military adapts through comprehensive ethical training, modeling of desired behavior, and careful discretion within legal and policy boundaries. Deontology within this framework upholds organizational rights and duties, strengthens trust and cohesion, and fosters deeper member commitment.

Deontology, central to military ethics, shapes the organization's rights and duties by focusing on duty-bound actions rather than consequences.<sup>3</sup> Here, "deontology" and "principles" refer to duties or rules specific to ethical obligations, not broader applications. Mizzoni describes deontological ethics as evaluating actions based on their alignment with moral duties, so violating these duties is never justified, regardless of the outcome.<sup>4</sup> This strict adherence to rule-based morality over results ensures actions benefit society by upholding ethical standards.

Delving into deontology reveals greater complexity than a simple choice between moral absolutism and consequential threshold. Absolutism is just one of three options: an absolutist deontologist never violates rules; a moderate deontologist allows exceptions if a moral threshold is surpassed. Thus, a moderate may judge noncompliance with an order acceptable, unlike an absolutist.

Deontological theories in public administration focus on how rights and duties inform ethical decisions. The main distinction lies between absolutist deontologists—who believe rights are never to be overridden—and moderate deontologists, who allow exceptions if doing so results in a more ethically preferable outcome.

This difference shapes key principles like fairness, public trust, transparency, and non-maleficence.<sup>5</sup> Absolutists argue that rules always take precedence, while moderates evaluate when thresholds for breaking a rule are met based on duties, options, and rights.<sup>6</sup> Moderates also introduce policy-specific thresholds, such as emergency powers, yet uphold

rights as constraints. The core dilemma for leaders is how to exercise judgment within these frameworks. Brennan highlights that rights carry higher moral weight than options. For instance, a moderate deontologist may justify extreme actions, such as killing

without consent to save a life.<sup>11</sup> Altogether, these points illustrate deontology's adaptability and complexity and underscore its challenging but fascinating nature.

The philosophical distinctions discussed here

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Hitler to prevent harm, while absolutists maintain such acts are always impermissible. She explains, “Moderate deontological theories are distinguished by their flexibility: constraints or rights may, under specific conditions, be overridden by a threshold level of good. This indicates that in moderate theories, rights are not absolute but have thresholds.”<sup>7</sup> Brennan notes all deontological theories include options, not just duties: “The duty to promote the good doesn’t entail that we are morally required to maximize the good because deontological theories, along with rights or constraints, contain options as part of their structure.”<sup>8</sup> For example, rules prohibit harming, stealing, and lying.<sup>9</sup> Brennan summarizes three perspectives: absolutist (never allowing the good to override duties), moderate (allowing rule-breaking when thresholds are crossed), and balancing (weighing rights and obligations).

Unlike the moderate approach, a minimalist approach allows options to be overridden more easily, making the duty to promote the good relevant at lower thresholds.<sup>10</sup> Both absolute and moderate deontologists can exercise options: an absolutist can choose strict adherence, allow some exceptions, or focus less on maximizing overall good. This distinction has important implications: deontological theories can enable agents to overlook certain obligations. Brennan contrasts the minimalist stance with common sense morality, which sometimes permits overriding rights to promote good, for instance, taking someone’s car

highlight a key question: Is the Army fully applying its ethical framework in practice? My research suggests that, while the ethical triangle exists, many service members and civilians apply only deontological principles. The core issue is whether broader ethical decisions would benefit from considering absolute, moderate, or minimalist viewpoints. For example, does military justice allow some flexibility in adhering to strict law? Are leaders protected when acting on moderate deontological judgments? Has the Army defined thresholds for such cases? These questions, which are outlined in military education, may have major implications for ethics in practical contexts.

Applying moderate deontology in military contexts remains difficult. Ethical decision-making is shaped by strict compliance with orders, enforced by severe penalties. Noncompliance that exceeds personal ethical thresholds risks imprisonment or a dishonorable discharge. In my thirty years of service, there have been no clearly defined decision thresholds; only self-defense is recognized—a right that is closely scrutinized and may deter risk-taking.

Continuous, realistic ethics training is essential for soldiers and Army civilians facing war and uncertainty. Scenario-based training, within PME and organizations, fosters the practical application of ethical principles. Leaders must actively apply the ethical triangle under real-world legal pressure to make it a useful tool. Training aligns personal and Army values, ensuring that moral expectations guide

actions. Despite persistent ethical diversity, some situations require leaders to exercise discretion and sound moral judgment for the greatest good within legal limits—these are high-stakes decisions with severe consequences.

For instance, in 2010, U.S. Army Capt. Rogelio Maynulet was court-martialed and ultimately dismissed from the Army for executing a mercy killing. A mercy killing is the act of ending a person's life to prevent needless suffering when the continuation of life is not possible. Capt. Maynulet, driven by his deeply held personal values and beliefs, did not want the victim's suffering to continue. He believed that ending the person's life was an ethical choice, even though it violated military law. This case serves as a poignant reminder of the human element in moral decisions, as outlined in the ethical triangle. It also highlights the potential consequences of acting in accordance with one's values and beliefs. A strong emphasis on training and modeling ethical behavior is not only necessary but also crucial in shaping the military's moral culture. Continuous ethics training will shape the military's moral culture, making it a crucial component of operations. The consequences encountered by Capt. Maynulet may hinder others from exercising their moral compass during operations.<sup>12</sup>

Soldiers and Army civilians have faced severe consequences when acting on what they believed were legal or implied orders. Military culture and the justice system require strict adherence to orders. Allowing personal beliefs or misinterpretation of orders as justification has not succeeded legally. Notable precedents reinforce this. For example, Lt. Calley was convicted for the My Lai incident despite claiming he was following orders. In Abu Ghraib, soldiers and civilians were prosecuted for acts they believed were implicitly ordered. In Maynulet's case, acting from empathy and compassion still led to conviction. These cases demonstrate that commanders and executives must convey clear, direct intent to help personnel navigate complex ethical dilemmas in chaotic environments, such as combat.

Clear leader's intent and authentic communication by top leadership are critical for moral outcomes in public administration. When leaders articulate intent directly and combine it with ethical training, boundaries and priorities are clarified, shared understanding

is established, and decentralized decisions better align with policy. While frameworks such as PMESII-PT, Boyd's OODA Loop, and systems theory provide environmental context, real success hinges on concise, detailed communication about outcomes and adaptability. Delegating intent writing may save time, but guidance loses legitimacy if written by those without experience; a genuine leadership voice is essential for clarity and alignment.

The commander's and executive's roles carry significant responsibilities beyond their titles. The Army selects leaders intentionally; neglecting these responsibilities can undermine operational success and hinder effective responses to circumstances, reducing the likelihood of favorable outcomes. To foster shared understanding, organizations should engage directly with subordinate leaders. Shared knowledge supports adaptation through the ethical triangle and enables mission accomplishment. Leaders who foster this shared understanding help others feel confident and secure in their decision-making, thereby ensuring alignment with organizational goals. Army culture emphasizes risk aversion and meeting requirements, both of which are necessary for success. It also strives to maintain a proper work-life balance for soldiers, Army civilians, and leaders. The unique challenges of potentially taking lives legally demand more time for leaders to educate and prepare subordinates. In summary, soldiers and Army civilians face higher stakes than their corporate counterparts, such as those at IBM or Google, due to their responsibilities involving human life.

The main argument is that the ethical triangle is underused in military culture because deontological principles dominate, limiting its effectiveness. Research reveals a greater variety of ethical frameworks than is often taught. In the Faculty Development Program, instructors teach that breaking the law is never acceptable, which is an absolutist view. Yet moderate deontologists allow exceptions when needed, though the military lacks formal thresholds for them. Without defined thresholds, leaders lack clear guidance, as in the Maynulet case. This makes ethical decisions more complex. Recognizing these nuances underscores the intellectual challenge and responsibility in ethical judgment, underscoring the need for critical thinking.

A systems thinking approach, paired with the Cynefin framework, is vital for understanding and acting in uncertain environments. The Cynefin framework, as defined by Lawrence, citing Snowden and Boone, is a decision-making tool that recognizes causal distinctions among system types and provides novel approaches to decision-making in complex social settings.<sup>13</sup> It comprises five domains, which Lawrence summarizes as follows:

- 1) The simple domain features clear, predictable, and repeatable cause-and-effect relationships.
- 2) The complicated domain includes cause-and-effect connections that exist but are not obvious and require expertise to decode.
- 3) The complex domain is marked by relationships that can only be understood in hindsight, leading to unpredictable outcomes.
- 4) The chaotic domain has no discernible cause-and-effect relationships.
- 5) The disorder domain arises when decision-makers are uncertain which of the other domains applies.<sup>14</sup>

Military leaders benefit from the Cynefin framework, which equips them with structured tools for comprehending and responding to complexity, enabling more confident decision-making. By applying this framework, they can methodically interpret operational environments, conduct ethical reviews of decisions, and determine when circumstances warrant overriding standing rules. In ambiguous situations, Cynefin reduces uncertainty and strengthens professional assurance.

These two areas are crucial in the deontological perspective, as determining when overriding a rule is necessary in an extreme situation is challenging. The military does not provide thresholds for leaders to deviate from orders, and following orders is integral to military culture. Scenario planning and back-casting, which provide structured approaches to review actions and assess possibilities, may assist decision-makers as they use an absolute, moderate, or minimalist deontological approach to identify the most moral choice. These methods provide guidance in unpredictable environments. Techniques used today may not apply tomorrow, as depicted in chaos theory and the butterfly effect. Gharajedaghi, quoting

Einstein, stated, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”<sup>15</sup>

Chaos theory, including the butterfly effect, shows that our environment is in constant flux. Brady explained chaos theory as the study of (dis-)order in complex systems.<sup>16</sup> He emphasized that slight differences in initial conditions can lead to unpredictable outcomes, making prediction impossible, as noted by Poincaré. Minor changes may evolve into major challenges in the future. To discern when circumstances are so extreme as to justify overriding established rules, ongoing education in deontology and a thorough understanding of the organizational system are necessary. This ensures that decision-makers feel competent and adequately informed. The aim is for leaders, soldiers, and Army civilians to respond instinctively, as training aligns their values and beliefs with their behaviors, operating in a manner similar to heuristics.

Ongoing education parallels the function of heuristics, which are fundamental for cultivating automatic ethical decision-making skills in military settings. Kinney, paraphrasing Richard Young, explained that heuristics are systematic—analytical, linear, and rational.<sup>17</sup> Kinney also described heuristics as a process for discovering knowledge, a view relevant to professional growth. Kinney identified three knowledge categories: empiricism, involving experiential learning; rationalism, involving logical, sequential reasoning from general principles; and intuitionism, involving immediate understanding based on experience. Intuition, grounded in training and experience, serves as a reasoning mode, as Kahneman describes in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*—clarifying the distinction between automatic (heuristics) and analytical (mental models) thought—and is relevant to military preparation.

Deontological thinking uses heuristics and hinges on automatic emotional responses, as Xu and Ma note.<sup>18</sup> This makes deontological judgments fast and efficient, while utilitarianism requires slower, analytical System 2 thinking. I associate utilitarianism with greater cognitive effort to achieve moral outcomes.

This adaptability of deontological thinking enables leaders to make morally sound decisions in rapidly changing operational contexts, enhancing their confidence and effectiveness. Such adaptability enables

the ethical triangle to support adaptive, morally sound decision-making. Kinney hypothesized that “true empiricism is learning by doing, by action, by participation and sensation,” highlighting the necessity of continuous training to ingrain the deontological perspective in automatic responses or, at a minimum, ensure awareness for those who also use utilitarian or virtue perspectives.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned, understanding the system reassures and guides decision-makers.

Leaders bear significant responsibility in applying systems thinking and theory. Their crucial role is to discern inter-connectedness and identify effective resource allocation or approaches that promote a more ethically preferable outcome or preserve organizational values, ideals, and standards. Through design thinking, decision-makers are better equipped to select the most ethical option when overriding a rule, if circumstances warrant it. Design thinkers can “create feasible wholes from infeasible parts” and identify new alternatives for the future.<sup>20</sup> The lack of a threshold for deviation makes this determination particularly daunting, given the potential legal and personal consequences. Thus, professional military education must place greater emphasis on equipping leaders with deontological knowledge to foster mission success.

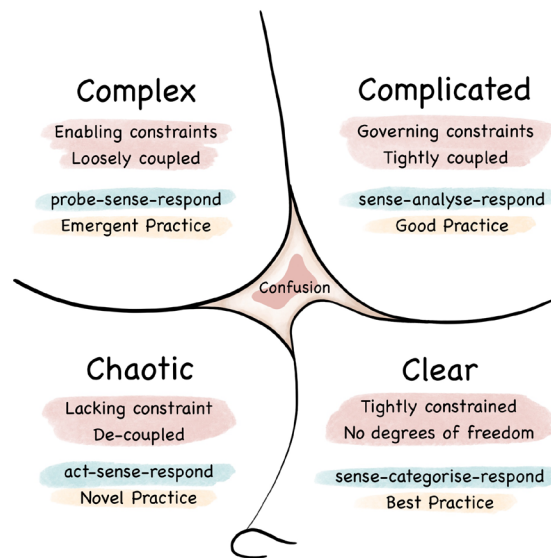
Deontology-based organizational training is crucial for effective navigation of the operational environment. While all DOD personnel receive ethics training, adding deontological perspectives helps clarify when to exercise discretion. This supports morally just decisions and enables decentralized decision-making, which the Army defines as empowering appropriate subordinate decisions. Frameworks like Cynefin further support this approach.

The Cynefin framework is a sense-making tool that is instrumental to ethical decision-making. Understanding the complex environment enables leaders to determine the optimal effort and resources, transforming opportunities into standard operating procedures to address potential issues. Utilizing communities of practice in the complex domain and experts within the complicated domain, as Snowden noted, is essential.<sup>21</sup> The U.S. Army excels by providing realistic, consistent scenario-based training,

enabling soldiers and civilians to understand the effects of their decisions. Back-casting and scenario planning provide a structured approach to address ethical concerns and expand the range of moral reasoning options. Early ethics and systems theory training, together with modeling ethical behavior and maintaining high standards, support ethical outcomes.

The main argument is that preparing future leaders requires a strong foundation in fundamental skills,

especially within the ROTC program and PME. This foundation enables leaders to handle more complex topics, including systems theory and ethical decision-making. Establishing core leadership principles early enables leaders to apply foundational knowledge toward mastering advanced concepts. Therefore, enhancing the basics during sourcing, selection, and commissioning is vital. ROTC programs, post-secondary institutions of higher learning, and other job-preparation programs should strengthen their curricula to focus on leadership fundamentals, justify the investment in cadets, and ultimately align with the comprehensive approach used by institutions like West Point. By allocating more resources and gradually introducing complexity, future leaders will be better equipped to handle the uncertainties of combat



The Cynefin Framework (Image by [tom@thomasbcox.com](mailto:tom@thomasbcox.com); image courtesy of Wikipedia)

environments. Achieving this transformation also depends on institutional changes and on ethical modeling at the operational and organizational levels.

To achieve ethical outcomes, organizational leaders must consistently model ethical behavior. They must emphasize both the importance of adhering to rules and the judgment needed to exercise discretion within the law and policy when thresholds are met, as required by deontological principles. However, leaders often struggle to clearly explain the reasoning behind their decisions due to time constraints. Despite

its individual parts.<sup>22</sup> The Army describes Design Thinking and Analysis as an iterative planning methodology to understand situations and missions, create courses of action, and produce operational plans or orders.<sup>23</sup> This methodology encourages critical and creative thinking to help leaders conceptualize, visualize, and address complex problems.<sup>24</sup> In practice, direct-level leaders often depend on their judgment and experience due to time constraints. This reliance can diminish junior leaders' development by denying them opportunities to experience the process, receive

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this challenge, it remains essential, since soldiers and Army civilians who understand the broader context and share the leaders' rationale are better prepared to master decentralized decision-making and ensure operational success.

Organizational leaders should also promote critical thinking, a skill well-supported by systems thinking. Through critical analysis, subordinates can make informed decisions grounded in a deontological approach, thereby improving the decision-making process. This approach helps them anticipate issues and make decisions that address both present and future challenges. However, Army culture may not prioritize this shift to critical thinking, as lower-level decisions (battalion and below) often rely on intuition.

Reliance on intuition, a deep-rooted aspect of the Army's culture, can sometimes limit the effectiveness of both linear tools (like the military decision-making process) and nonlinear frameworks (such as the Army Design Methodology, also called Design Thinking and Analysis). Gharajedaghi defines a linear system as one in which the value of the whole is the sum of its parts, while a nonlinear system is characterized by emergent properties resulting from the interaction of its parts, so the whole exhibits traits not found in

feedback, reflect on it, and incorporate lessons into ethical decision-making. These junior leaders will eventually advance and must be prepared to navigate complex, uncertain challenges.

Ethical decision-making requires leaders to consistently set the standard by exemplifying deontological principles in realistic training environments and ensuring junior leaders master these processes to the standard. Periodic training that balances deontology and consequentialism is necessary, as Xu and Ma argue that the two are complementary rather than alternatives.<sup>25</sup> Leaders must teach that, in some situations, breaking a rule is justified by extenuating circumstances, while in others, strict adherence produces the most moral outcome, impacting the Army's standing in the international community. Demonstrating ethical conduct increases trust and creates a reputation for integrity. Soldiers must clearly understand the distinctions and interplay between ethical frameworks. While the Army maintains core values, it is the values that ensure survival at each echelon that will be followed in critical moments. This underscores the real-world dilemmas soldiers and civilians face and highlights the need for continuous, relevant ethical training led by example.

Flexibility and adaptability in decision-making are paramount for leaders operating in uncertain and complex environments. Senior leaders must avoid constraining on-the-ground leaders to enable organizations to harness the full potential of the ethical triangle. A deontological attitude, especially when paired with moderate or minimalist approaches, affords leaders options to meet thresholds in changing circumstances. While adherence to rules is important, rules must sometimes be examined to achieve desired outcomes, particularly in life-threatening situations, as the ongoing debate over absolute, moderate, and minimalist methodologies in deontological ethical reasoning reveals. Leaders must remain adaptive in their approach.

A deontological framework, especially the ethical system endorsed by the United States Army, is essential for adaptive leadership. Such a framework guides leaders to make decisions within established moral and legal boundaries, supporting organizational resilience in crises. Adaptive leadership, as defined by Hayashi and Soo and Heifetz, enables organizations to thrive amid crisis by distinguishing between technical challenges with known solutions and adaptive challenges that require novel approaches.<sup>26</sup> Clear guidance on discretion and escalation enables adaptive leadership, as individuals learn through reflection when to adhere to rules or adapt, as noted by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky.<sup>27</sup> The intent is not to encourage rule-breaking, but to advocate for principled flexibility grounded in the Army's approved ethical framework, thereby building confidence in ethical decision-making processes.

Scenario-based training equips teams to handle unclear rules of engagement (ROEs) by emphasizing deontological ethics and critical assessment of rule adherence. Achieving this requires a shift in military culture: leaders must guide ethical transformation, even amid institutional resistance. Leaders should apply systems thinking methods, such as backcasting and scenario planning, by defining desired outcomes, analyzing key decisions, and identifying ethical considerations. Engaging teams in discussion and practice promotes readiness, clarifies leaders' intent, and preserves strategic flexibility. A leader's intent is a:

clear and succinct expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state. It supports decentralized decision-making, focuses the staff, and empowers subordinate and supporting commanders to act toward the commander's desired end state without waiting for further orders, even if the operation unfolds unexpectedly.<sup>28</sup>

A clear, concise leader's intent is vital in scenario-based training. It enables organizations to stay mission-focused and supports the effective use of a deontological approach.

A clear leader's intent is essential for a deontological approach. It must define the operational environment, foster shared understanding, and establish action boundaries. With this clarity, leaders can meet mission objectives and adhere to deontological principles. A concise intent empowers leaders to use their experience and ethical judgment, apply the ethical triangle, clarify decision rights, and make better operational decisions.

The Army regularly holds debriefings after operations to promote a learning culture. These sessions help leaders and teams understand their environment and circumstances. This awareness allows them to recognize when limits have been crossed, supporting ethical decision-making. Organizations should prioritize debriefs to improve operations and boost morale. Ongoing after action reviews, the use of systems thinking, and sense-making tools such as the Cynefin framework help address the challenges of unclear rules of engagement. Thorough rehearsals and a clear, concise leader's intent provide the necessary guidance when rules of engagement are unclear during combat.

In sum, to maximize the ethical triangle, leaders must emphasize ethics training, role modelling, and adaptable decision rights. Shared understanding, achieved through clear operational descriptions, is essential. Systems thinking and sense-making tools help leaders and subordinates grasp the interconnected effects of decisions, supporting ethical decision-making tailored to the situation. Planning, readiness, execution, and continuous assessment provide the necessary structure. Flexibility in approach enables decentralized decision-making, empowering

ground leaders to adapt deontologically to complex environments.

A clear leader's intent establishes decision boundaries supporting a deontological approach. Leaders should communicate intent directly to enable understanding and permit both decentralized and ethical

decision-making. Debriefs foster trust in subordinates. Examining absolute, moderate, and minimalist forms of deontology increases adaptability. Scenario planning and dialogue equip leaders to adopt deontological methods, highlighting the vital role of leader expertise in ethical decision-making. ■

## Notes

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