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Maintaining Ethical Leadership in Grey Zone Operations

Introduction

Operating in the grey zone against hybrid threats present new challenges to military leaders and increases the pressure on them to make challenging decisions in ambiguous and volatile situations. Grey zone operations are 'multi-dimensional activities aimed to alter adversary behavior [sic] while remaining below the threshold of conventional military employment.'¹ A good example of grey zone operations was the Russian military actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine ahead of their invasion in 2014. The requirement to act positively in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous situations can cause additional stress on leaders. Unless they are aware that their cognitive ability will be degraded and their behaviour altered, they may not respond in an authentic and values-based way.

This article will investigate how the practical application of authentic, ethical leadership is conducted using the S-CALM Model.² The acronym S-CALM stands for: Situational Influencers, Common Behaviours, Accountability, Leadership and Moral Compass. The S-CALM Model provides a simple toolkit that acts as a handrail for ethical decision-making when leaders are confronted with the emotions and stresses of command in ambiguous grey zone operations. This article will outline the S-CALM Model in two sections. The first section explains why leaders make unethical decisions under stress. It will explore three components: firstly, historical research which reveals how the power of the situation has an influence over people and is stronger than their character or will. The second component explores the situational influencers in the contemporary operating environment that enhance the power of the situation. The five common situational influencers identified are 'hostile environment, normalised violence, weak leadership/lack of supervision, lack of resource/fatigue and enhanced emotional state.'³ The final component this section will describe how under the enhanced power of the situation, people change the way that they behave. It outlines the twelve common behaviours in military organisations that are displayed in grey zone situations. The second section will briefly illustrate how a leader can cope with these behaviours in a stressful situation by using the S-CALM Model.

Why Unethical Actions Happen in the Grey Zone?

Unlike normal military campaigns, there are no clear behavioural rules within grey zone operations. My research has found that in these situations, there are three considerations, the first of these is unethical activities start with small actions which then escalate. This phenomenon is termed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as 'The Spiral of Violence.'⁴ The second consideration is termed 'The Banality of Evil.'⁵ It contends that the ability to conduct evil, unethical acts is within everyone and not just a few evil

¹ Tahir Mahmood Azad, Muhammad Waqas Haider, and Muhammad Sadiq. "Understanding gray zone warfare from multiple perspectives." *World Affairs* 186, no. 1 (2023): 84.

² Dennis Vincent. *The S-CALM Model: The Application of Ethical Leadership in the Military*. (Havant: Howgate Publishing, 2025).

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ ICRC. *The Roots of Behaviour in War: Understanding and Preventing IHL Violations*. (Geneva: ICRC, 2004), 16.

⁵ Hannah Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 276.

people. The final consideration is known as 'The Power of the Situation.'⁶ This final concept is the most important as it asserts that under the pressure of a stressful situation individuals and teams behave in ways driven by the environment itself, which is more powerful than their characters and beliefs. It is this power of the situation which is particularly strong in the unregulated grey zone environment.

There are certain influences that enhance the power of the situation and result in non-values-based behaviour in grey zone operations. Defence Force Leadership Doctrine states that 'leaders must be aware that biases, fatigue and stress can influence thought' and these are important.⁷ However, my recent research has identified five common 'Situational Influencers' which can enhance the power of the situation:

- **Hostile Environment.** A hostile environment is one in which a person feels under threat due to the perception of danger. People tend to act differently in a hostile environment than they would if they do not perceive a threat. This point is intricately linked to normalised violence below, in that the longer that people are exposed to a hostile environment the more it becomes the social norm and there is moral disengagement. This detachment is often referred to as 'Ethical Drift'.⁸
- **Normalised Violence.** Everyone has exposure to violence at some level, but for most people this tends to be infrequent, low-level acts. However, if people are exposed to constant violence, it is soon accepted as the social norm and it takes increasing levels of aggression to register as acts of violence. In intensely violent environments, people become immune to the brutality around them and the threshold of inflicting pain on others is lowered.⁹
- **Weak Leadership and Lack of Supervision.** Weak leadership is normally seen when a leader uses a laissez-faire, hands off style with a team that needs to be given more guidance and direction. However, it can also be that the leader is micromanaging their team and followers feel they have no responsibility for their actions. Weak leadership can result in leaders displaying the incorrect level of supervision, which can lead to incremental ethical drift.¹⁰
- **Lack of Resources and Fatigue.** In many situations, leaders believe they do not have the correct level of resource to complete the task. The two key resources lacking tend to be time and people. Leaders who do not have enough time to do things as they should are inclined to prioritise what actions they are able to achieve in the limited time given. Similarly, when leaders do not have enough people to conduct actions as they would have wanted, corners are cut to meet outputs. This deficiency of people and time invariably leads to fatigue amongst those in teams. Furthermore, as the human body requires eight hours sleep a night to regenerate, prolonged periods of less than this reduces cognitive ability. Leaders and teams who lack sleep make poor cognitive decisions.¹¹
- **Enhanced Emotional State.** In stressful situations where people experience intense emotions, their ability to do the right thing is often reduced and their judgement can

⁶ Phillip Zimbardo. *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. (Croydon: Rider Books, 2007).

⁷ Irish Defence Forces. *Defence Forces Leadership Doctrine*. (Dublin: Defence Forces Printing Press, 2023), 54.

⁸ Vincent. *The S-CALM Model*, 20.

⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹¹ Ibid., 27

be clouded. These emotions are sometimes referred to as arousal, the common military arousals are anger, rage, frustration and disgust.¹²

Although these five common situational influencers have been presented as separate items, they are in fact more complex than this and there is a large degree of overlap between them. For example, a person who is fatigued is more likely to be in an enhanced emotional state. This interlocking and overlapping complexity is demonstrated in figure 1 below:



Figure 1: Situational Influencers.

My research has shown there are a number of common behaviours demonstrated by those operating under the power of the situation in the complex contemporary operating environment. The behaviours in themselves are not unethical, but in the wrong situation they can lead to non-values-based, unethical behaviour taking place. There are six common individual and six common group behaviours. Starting with the individual behaviours:

- Social Comparison and Conformity. These two theories have been grouped as for most people they produce similar behaviours and actions. The definition of social comparison occurs when individuals compare 'behaviours and opinions with those of others in order to establish the correct or socially approved way of thinking and behaving.'¹³ Conformity is defined as a change in 'deep-seated private and enduring behaviour and attitudes due to group pressure.'¹⁴ Here there is a strong social obligation to conform, and this is often termed as peer pressure.
- De-individuation. De-individuation is defined as the 'process whereby people lose their sense of socialised individual identity and engage in unsocialised, often antisocial behaviours.'¹⁵ In simple terms this behaviour sees individuals, especially those in the military, lose their identity to the group.
- Obedience. Obedience is defined as a 'behaviour in compliance with a direct command, often one issued by a person in a position of authority.'¹⁶
- Cognitive Dissonance. Cognitive dissonance can be thought of as a 'state of psychological tension produced by simultaneously having two opposing cognitions.'¹⁷ When this occurs, people try to seek harmony between their beliefs and behaviours and attempt to reduce tension that this inconsistency causes.

¹² Ibid., 31.

¹³ Michael Hogg and Graham Vaughan. *Social Psychology, 7th Ed.* (Harlow: Pearson, 2014), 664.

¹⁴ Ibid., 658.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ APA Dictionary of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/obedience>

¹⁷ Hogg & Vaughan. *Social Psychology*, 657.

- Bystander Effect. The bystander effect is defined as the concept where 'people are less likely to help in an emergency when they are with others than when alone. The greater the number, the less likely it is that anyone will help.'¹⁸ One of the main drivers for this concept is what is known as the 'Diffusion of Responsibility' which is the 'tendency of an individual to assume that others will take responsibility.'¹⁹
- Status Quo Bias. Status quo bias is defined as 'doing nothing or maintaining one's previous position.'²⁰ It is often seen when leaders display an unwillingness to change what is established and has worked before.

The six common group behaviours are:

- Groupthink. Groupthink is defined as 'a mode of thinking in highly cohesive groups in which the desire to reach a unanimous agreement overrides the motivation to adopt proper rational decision-making procedures.'²¹ With groupthink, no one wants to be the first to challenge a decision even if they consider it to be wrong.
- Risky Shift. Risky shift is defined as the 'tendency for group discussion to produce group decisions that are more risky than the mean of members pre-discussion opinions.'²²
- Authority Bias. Authority bias has been defined as 'the tendency of people to blindly follow the advice, suggestions, or instructions of others who are in positions of authority.'²³
- Dehumanisation. Dehumanisation is defined as the process of 'stripping people of their dignity and humanity.'²⁴ The ICRC state that 'the humanity of the other side is denied by attributing to the enemy contemptible traits, intentions and behaviours.'²⁵
- Othering. Othering is defined as 'transforming a difference into otherness so as to create an in-group and an out-group.'²⁶ This differentiation between the in-group ('us') and the out-group ('them') is common in many militaries, which are very quick to assign stereotypes.
- Demonisation. Demonisation is defined 'as the characterization of individuals, groups or political bodies as evil.'²⁷ In the grey zone 'there can be the temptation to believe that 'all we do is good' and 'all they do is bad', intentions and actions become black and white. But combat is never black and white it is always a shade of grey.'²⁸

In the stress of complex, grey zone operations the power of the situation builds and is enhanced by the situational influencers which in turn cause all or some behaviours described here to take place. This flow of activity leads to unethical acts.

The S-CALM Model

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 658.

²⁰ W. Samuelson & R. Zeckhauser. "Status Quo Bias in Decision Making." *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 1, (1988): 8.

²¹ Hogg & Vaughan. *Social Psychology*, 660.

²² Ibid., 663.

²³ Newristics. Authority Bias. Heuristic Encyclopaedia. <https://newristics.com/heuristics-biases/authority-bias>

²⁴ Hogg & Vaughan. *Social Psychology*, 658.

²⁵ ICRC. *The Roots of Behaviour in War*, 10.

²⁶ J. F. Staszak. "Other/Otherness." *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography*, 1, (2008): 1.

²⁷ G.O. Faure. "Negotiating with Terrorists: A Discrete form of Diplomacy." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 3, no. 2, (2008): 193.

²⁸ Vincent. *The S-CALM Model*, 68.

The S-CALM Model is a toolkit which provides the means to counter with the flow of unethical actions and is outlined in figure 2. The 'S' stands for situational influencers and is a reminder that the power of a situation is enhanced by these five common influencers. Some, such as a lack of resource, might be identified before the situation whilst others, such as enhanced emotional state are likely only to be recognised once emerged in the environment. In a similar vein, the 'C' relates to the twelve common behaviours. Leaders must know themselves well to be able to detect a change in their behaviour. Nevertheless, if leaders can identify that they are already susceptible to a certain behaviour before they are placed under stress, they can be prepared to mitigate it when under the pressure caused by situational influencers. Leaders also need to understand the group behaviour of their teams. This allows them to identify the six common group behaviours and prepares them to steer their teams away from unethical actions, even under the stress and ambiguity of grey zone operations.

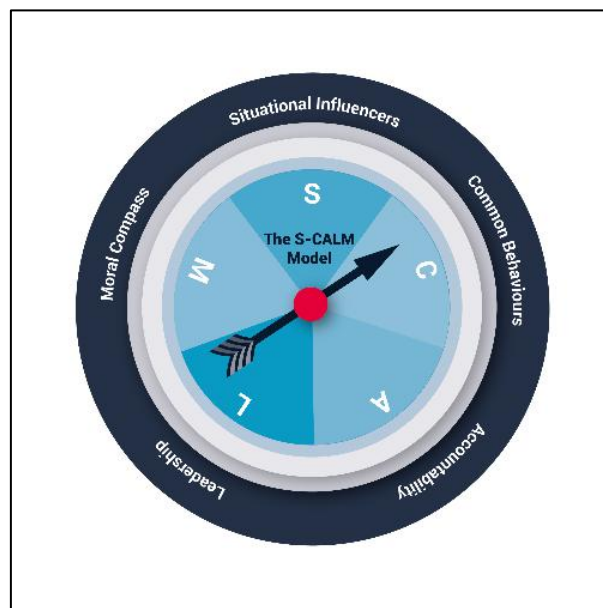


Figure 2: The S-CALM Model.

The 'A' relates to accountability. In the military there are four types of accountabilities: hierarchical, professional, legal and political. Hierarchical accountability is the default for most military organisations, with responsibility being held by the chain of command and subordinates being accountable to their superiors. Professional accountability is the benchmark that we hold ourselves to in an occupation. In the military this tends to happen when a generalist manager is responsible for a group of subject matter experts. Legal accountability relates to operating within Irish Law and International Humanitarian Law. Whilst political accountability may not seem applicable to most leaders at the junior level. In the age of the 'Strategic Corporal' ensuring that the actions of all members of the team are appropriate is vital.²⁹ This is because even small unethical acts distributed on social media can have national or international impact. The main issue with these four distinct types of accountabilities is that they can conflict with each other and the leader needs to balance them. The British Army Standards are designed to ensure that all individual and group behaviours are accountable and provide a useful handrail in volatile situations. The three Standards are: lawfulness, appropriate behaviour and professionalism. These standards provide a useful checklist for measuring accountability. Therefore, the first question that a

²⁹ Charles Krulak. *The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War: Operation Absolute Agility*. (Center for Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, 2002).

leader should ask themselves in a stressful, ambiguous situation is: **Are my actions lawful, appropriate and professional?**

The 'L' in S-CALM is for leadership. Leaders must be courageous in their decision making, and consistent in their supervision, attitudes and activities, to build trust and mutual respect with their teams. To achieve this, leaders in grey zone operations, need to reflect on two considerations in their command, leadership and management responsibilities. Under command, the first consideration is the requirement to demonstrate the loneliness of command. There will be times when the leader will feel under considerable pressure to conform to the group, but Defence Force Leadership Doctrine states that 'commanders alone must always bear responsibility for mission success or failure.'³⁰ If a leader can maintain the condition where they are 'in' the team but not 'of' the team they will be able to manage the required psychological separation. This separation allows a successful leader to make difficult, ethical decisions when the rest of the team want to take easy, unethical actions. This difficult test of leadership is when the concept of the loneliness of command comes into its own. On the second command consideration, few leaders commission unethical acts, but more tend to allow them to happen by omission and do not step in to stop the spiral of violence from taking place. There are two leadership considerations, the first is the requirement to set the moral tone and be the exemplar. The second is the need to gain trust. Trust in the leader is a central commodity. It is vital that followers trust their leaders' abilities and have confidence in their ethical decision-making in complex environments. It can be achieved by a leader demonstrating emotional intelligence and having empathy with their teams. In management, a leader firstly has an obligation to set out their expectations of the team by creating an ethical vision and giving a clear intent to avoid vagueness of understanding. US Army Doctrine states that 'leaders should not intentionally issue vague or ambiguous orders or instructions to avoid responsibility.'³¹ Secondly, leaders are required to ensure that these expectations are achieved by the application of rewards and punishments to motivate the required behaviour in the team. Therefore, the second key question that a leader must ask themselves is, **Do I need to apply the Loneliness of Command?**

Finally, the 'M' is for the moral compass. Most Western militaries use virtue ethics as the mainstay of their moral belief system. Virtue ethics are not focused on a single act, but with the development of a person's character over a longer time. The Defence Forces Values are virtue ethics. When these Values are deep seated in an individual, they become their own personal values and are termed their moral compass. Having a moral compass that points true and displaying moral courage in difficult conditions are vital qualities for ethical leaders. A leader with a strong moral compass is expected to act virtuously whatever the circumstances and external pressure, especially in a complex operating environment. It can be summarised as being able to do the right thing on a bad day when no one is looking. To do this, virtuous ethical behaviour needs to become a leader's intuitive way of thinking and operating. Therefore, the third question that a leader should ask themselves in a stressful, uncertain situation is, **Am I doing the morally right thing?**

Conclusion

The complex grey zone operating environment is 'characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.'³² In this environment it can be easy to slip into believing that the normal rules of war do not apply and succumb to ethical drift. However, my research has

³⁰ Irish Defence Forces. *Defence Forces Leadership Doctrine*, 34.

³¹ US Army. *ADP 6-22: Army Leadership and The Profession*. (Department of the Army, 2019), 2-7.

³² Patrick Bratton. "The Not so Gray Zone in South Asia." *Comparative Strategy*, 39, no. 1, (2020): 42.

shown that leaders need to identify that they are in a stressful, ambiguous and volatile situation which is having power over way that they and their team both think and act, before it leads to non-values-based behaviour. Once they have recognised this power, they can consider the situational influencers and common behaviours that are influencing them and their team. They can then mitigate this power by asking the accountability, leadership and the moral compass questions. In this way, the S-CALM Model is a useful toolkit for maintaining authentic, ethical leadership under the stress of operating in the grey zone. To understand the S-CALM Model in more depth and see how it relates to real world examples the following book is recommend further reading: *The S-CALM Model: The Application of Ethical Leadership in the Military*.



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<https://www.military.ie/en/public-information/publications/defence-forces-review/df-review-2025-digital-edition.pdf>

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