

Transforming Our Army Values for the Modern Force

by Colonel Chaveso “Chevy” Cook, PhD



The battlefield is changing as fast as the technology in your pocket, and we know we have to change.

– General Randy George, Army Chief of Staff¹

Introduction

For decades, the U.S. Army has centered its moral and ethical identity on the seven core values enshrined in the tidy initialism LDRSHIP: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage. First grouped together in 1995, these values were part of a post–Cold War push to professionalize the force and rebuild public trust. But today, three decades later, the strategic and societal landscape has changed dramatically. As technology makes warfare more complex, it also becomes more ambiguous. The difference between skilled and unskilled armies is quickly becoming more and more pronounced, both on the technical and tactical edge.

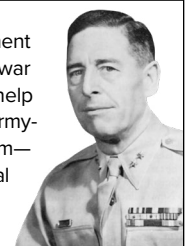
It’s time to ask a hard question: Do the current seven Army values still serve our force—and the nation—as well as they should? This is not to speak heresy or spark controversy. It’s a matter of enabling optimal leadership for what will undoubtedly be a continually intricate future.

Where LDRSHIP Came From—and Why It May Be Stuck in the Past

The LDRSHIP values were born out of an institutional effort to recenter the Army around character after Vietnam and Gulf War ethical lapses. They were developed in collaboration with U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, senior leaders and behavioral scientists who drew on Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*. Their goal was a consistent moral baseline for a post-draft force.

The initialism certainly made the values memorable. But “easy to remember” is not the same as “eternally relevant.” In the years since then, to include 20 years of war, it’s fair to ask whether we are best suited to lead today’s talent-diverse, technologically advanced and strategically complex Army with a framework that was designed for a different era.

In the interwar period of the 1930s, Major Edwin Forrest Harding was appointed editor of the *Infantry Journal*—an assignment that would begin a period of revitalization of scholarship across the Army. Almost a hundred years later, after the decades of war that began the 21st century, the Army has again found itself in need of such revitalization. To address this head-on and so to help the Army meet and overcome the next and future conflicts, The Harding Project was launched in 2023. As a part of this Army-wide effort, AUSA has partnered with Army University Press to host the LTG (Ret) James M. Dubik Writing Fellows Program—a voluntary, non-resident writing fellowship to encourage discourse that contributes to a community of military and national security professionals. *The Harding Papers* series exclusively publishes the work and scholarship of the Dubik Writing Fellows.



The World Has Changed. So Must Our Value Framework.

Today's Soldiers operate in morally gray zones—in cyberspace, through proxy conflicts and under the watchful eye of constant global visibility. Our force is more diverse than ever, and society's expectations for ethical leadership are sharper and more public. Meanwhile, challenges like toxic or counterproductive leadership, general mistrust in institutions and fiscal restraints—all within an Army that must conduct current operations, generate lethal and ready forces and simultaneously transform—demand a new kind of values-based clarity.

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As such, LDRSHIP, admirable as it is, has a few gaps:

1. Values should be aspirational, but they should also be distinct, clear and, in most cases, measurably “on display.” In their current form, some values, like *honor* and *integrity*, are not clearly distinguishable beyond the textbook definition, while others, like *personal courage* and *selfless service*, are not often or readily displayed, nor are they easily seen day-to-day. Is it *personally courageous* to stand up to sexual harassment, or is it my *duty* to do so, or am I enforcing the value of *respect*? At times, it seems like we need a negative situation to arise (e.g., sexual harassment) for some of the values to be positively displayed.
2. *Honor* unfortunately also lacks clarity and enforceability unless there is an obvious violation. Am I honorable just because I do not break any rules? Often, an obvious *honor* or *integrity* violation is a matter of broken trust or some Uniform Code of Military Justice type of offense that can reflect a break from many of the other values, leaving much room for interpretation and conflation. For example, if I did not do my *duty* because I lied about an appointment, am I also less *honorable*?
3. *Duty* can be too easily reduced to checking boxes. Often, *duty* is associated with the job at hand or a position held, not always with respect to the actions conducted. If I just stand watch, have I fulfilled my *duty*? Or should I also improve my fighting position or post while standing watch? There are, again, a lot of variances here. While *duty* is hallowed in its most aspirational sense, we also do not discuss it in terms of the discipline or habit required to continuously and consistently do one's *duty*—which is less intuitive than one thinks.

We need values that reflect today's battlefield and promote mental agility over rote adherence. We need values that leaders can purposefully enact to morally, ethically and intellectually keep pace with the unprecedented technological and societal advancements of modern conflict. In short, we need a new way to lead.

Introducing LEAD: A Modern Army Ethic

To move forward, I propose a modernized value framework—clear, concise and aligned with the mission and moral complexity of our times. It fits naturally with the Army's core mission: to LEAD in the fight to win our nation's wars.

Figure 1
LEAD: A New Compass



1. **Loyalty:** *Not blind obedience, but strong faithfulness to our Army team, the Constitution and our nation, as well as adherence to integrity, honesty and what is morally right—even when inconvenient.* If there is one value that should remain from the old LDRSHIP framework, it is the first one, as loyalty also encompasses the other LDRSHIP values of integrity, honor and duty. Additionally, more often than not, it has been loyalty to battle buddies, not just duty, that has prompted Medal of Honor recipients to give their utmost. This is captured by the Warrior Ethos of our Soldier’s Creed: “I will never leave a fallen comrade.”² Furthermore, while loyalty certainly comes in the form of horizontal allegiance as aforementioned, it also comes in the form of vertical allegiance, which is not just to the chain of command and the organization, but also to superordinate principles, such as our Constitution and enduring American values that will outlive us all.³ As *The Army: A Primer to Our Profession of Arms*, the new FM-1 points out, professionalism—both on and off duty—is rooted in our collective commitment to serving the American nation, stemming from our constitutional commitment.⁴
2. **Empathy:** *Understanding, valuing and uplifting others’ perspectives, while also increasing and developing self- and social awareness.* Empathy is essential in leading varied teams and operating in culturally complex environments. In the past three decades since LDRSHIP was enshrined, emotional intelligence, self-awareness and social awareness have become “must-haves” for leaders and their organizations. FM-1 states that leaders must love, care and be present with their Soldiers beyond just digitally “hitting send.”⁵ It goes on to say that “good followers apply pushback with finesse and emotional intelligence.”⁶ In the current Army values construct, empathy is not accounted for by any other value, yet our doctrine and professional military ethic require it. Additionally, changes across society and among the current generations demand it as a leadership tenet.

As the Army “transforms in contact” to lethally meet the next threat, it needs values that leaders can purposefully enact to morally, ethically and intellectually keep pace with the unprecedented technological and societal advancements of modern conflict.

3. **Adaptability:** *The mental and physical agility to respond with intention to ambiguity and rapid change.* Even before the advent of the global war on terrorism and an ever-changing dynamic conflict environment, we have espoused that leaders and followers in our formations must be adaptive, agile and creative, be it in facing a direct problem set or in figuring out a technical or tactical solution to improve formation. FM-1 contends that “we must be agile and adaptable if we expect victory, and every individual can contribute.”⁷⁷ But this adaptability is not just on the battlefield, as FM-1 goes on to say that we also need to be “adaptable in our service to our fellow citizens” as “our country expects a lot out of our Army” while also “not [agreeing] on what values we should exemplify and to what extent.”⁷⁸ We must respond to the nation’s call, regardless of the complexity of the Army’s mission set and the global strategic environment with respect to living and defending our American values. Again, we see that the current LDRSHIP model fails to account for an attribute we have long demanded and trained for.
4. **Discipline:** *The internal commitment to routinely and consistently do what’s right—even when no one’s watching or there isn’t a specific requirement.* This is a blend of accountability, habit and fairness. As we ask our formations to move faster, think bigger and fight harder, we need to ensure that they do so with discipline in mind. Discipline is also a requirement on and off the battlefield, on and off the installation and on and offline. Additionally, and doctrinally, mission command requires disciplined initiative, not just initiative. But beyond habit and doctrine, 19th century Lieutenant General John Schofield’s definition of discipline states that, “The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army.”⁷⁹ To win, we need discipline in its highest form, not just its baseline. This value, therefore, is also about how to best lead our formations, regardless of circumstances.

From Posters to Practice: Implementing LEAD Across the Force

Adopting a new value framework is not just about rebranding—it’s about realigning how we teach, model and evaluate character across the Army. To make LEAD real, the Army must institutionalize it at every touchpoint:

1. **Professional Military Education (PME):** Reframe lessons around LEAD values. Examine leadership failures and successes through the lenses of truth-telling, empathy, adaptability and moral discipline.
2. **Evaluations (Officer Evaluation Report/Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report):** Integrate LEAD into narrative guidance and leadership attributes. Are leaders candid? Are they morally flexible, or are they rigid under pressure? Do they hold themselves and others accountable?
3. **Command climate surveys:** Measure how well units embody LEAD. Are leaders empathetic? Do Soldiers feel psychological safety in telling the truth?
4. **Doctrine:** Update FM 6-22 and related publications to make LEAD central to Army leadership philosophy.

5. **Recruiting and retention messaging:** Speak to what young Americans want in an employer, namely, meaningful leadership, emotional intelligence, ethical clarity and truth over image.

Merriam-Webster defines *leadership* as a noun, *a concept involving the office or position of a leader, the capacity to lead, or the act or an instance of leading*. Our values, represented through the initialism LDRSHIP, are beyond just being a person, place or thing. The word *lead* is a verb with several definitions, chiefly to *guide on a course of action, to go through, to direct the operations, activity, or performance of, or to begin or conclude*. Our values require action.

The Path Forward

I am not proposing that the Army abandon LDRSHIP to erase tradition. I am arguing that we must evolve it to fulfill its intent. The old values are incorporated directly into this new framework. Furthermore, LEAD is not just more relevant than LDRSHIP—it is more real. It speaks plainly. It fits in a tweet—and in a rucksack. It challenges us to be better, more human and more honest. It asks us to rise to the challenges we will most certainly face, not in some distant future, but right now.

The Army leads the nation not just in lethality, but in moral example. You get what you ask for. If we want to win in the information age and in the human domain, we need an ethic that reflects who we are now—not just who we were 30 years ago. As the Secretary of the Army, Dan Driscoll, and Chief of Staff of the Army, General Randy George, remind us, we are an organization that is transforming in contact. In their letter to the force announcing the Army Transformation Initiative, they have asked that we “*reexamine all requirements and eliminate unnecessary ones, ruthlessly prioritize fighting formations to directly contribute to lethality, and empower leaders at echelon to make hard calls to ensure resources align with strategic objectives.*” Given this intent, a reexamination of our values and the mindset around them will do exactly that, directly empowering our formations to make both hard and strategic calls with **loyalty, empathy, adaptability** and **discipline** in mind.

It’s time to meet the modern formation on the modern battlefield with LEAD.

A reinvention of the Army values as loyalty, empathy, adaptability and discipline (LEAD) will address the potential gaps in our post–Cold War value set to invoke the mindset shift required to morally and ethically make the hard, strategic calls on tomorrow’s battlefield.



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Notes

- ¹ “George: Army Transformation Needs Speed, Agility,” *Association of the United States Army*, 29 May 2025, <https://www.ausa.org/news/george-army-transformation-needs-speed-agility>.
- ² “Warrior Ethos,” *Army.mil*, 29 May 2025, <https://www.army.mil/values/warrior.html>.
- ³ Patrick Sweeney, Michael Matthews and Paul Lester, *Leadership in Dangerous Situations* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011).
- ⁴ Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 1, *The Army: A Primer to Our Profession of Arms* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1 May 2025), 13.
- ⁵ FM 1, 17.
- ⁶ FM 1, 22.
- ⁷ FM 1, 11.
- ⁸ FM 1, 70.
- ⁹ “Schofield’s Definition of Discipline,” *The Military Leader*, 30 November 2014, <https://themilitaryleader.com/quotes/schofield-on-discipline/>.
- ¹⁰ *Merriam-Webster*, “Leadership,” 29 May 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/leadership>.
- ¹¹ *Merriam-Webster*, “Lead,” 29 May 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lead>.
- ¹² Dan Driscoll and Randy George, “Letter to the Force: Army Transformation Initiative,” *Army News Service*, 1 May 2025, https://www.army.mil/article/285100/letter_to_the_force_army_transformation_initiative.

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