

I'M THE BOSS!

Situation: 1LT White was an energetic, hard-charging officer who was a great asset to our unit. Our job required strong teamwork and leadership in order to get troops and equipment deployed to war in a timely and safe manner. I thought 1LT White was a quick learner and would grow to be a fine transportation officer. However, I held misgivings regarding her leadership philosophy after I observed her promotion to 1LT. Immediately following her oath, she asked, "Okay, now where are some 2LTs so I can boss them around?" I could see the Airmen did not fully appreciate her humor. In private, I inquired about her comment to which she laughed and stated she was only joking. For some reason, though, I was not entirely convinced. 1LT White eagerly volunteered for her first downrange deployment as soon as possible. Unfortunately, it was her very first deployment that substantiated my concerns about her leadership style.

A couple of days after 1LT White returned from deployment, she asked to see me. During her office visit, she detailed a horrific accident that put her in a heap of trouble. She stated she was the officer in charge of a flight line loading operation using a mobile crane system to lift a 15-ton forklift onto a flatbed truck. She told a young Airman to get in the forklift to help spot the placement on the truck and instructed MSgt Price, the non-commissioned officer in charge (NCOIC), to be a spotter at the rear of the truck. MSgt Price told 1LT White he was not comfortable with her plan. 1LT White had made up her mind and told him she was in charge, not him. MSgt Price refused to be a part of the operation. 1LT White took MSgt Price's place behind the truck and told the Airmen to begin the operation.

1LT White was still too inexperienced to be lead spotter, but that did not stop her. When the forklift was almost square over the truck bed, she ordered the crane operator to lower the equipment. The young Airman in the cab of the forklift yelled that he did not think the left front tire was going to land properly. 1LT White ignored him. MSgt Price was about 100 meters away and started running attempting to stop the crane operator, but it was too late. The forklift flipped off the truck bed ejecting the occupant out the door; he narrowly escaped being crushed by the heavy machine. Unfortunately, he was not able to break his fall and he landed head first on the tarmac. The Airman spent 2 months in intensive care suffering from severe brain swelling. The doctors said it was unlikely that he would ever fully recover, having to learn how to walk and talk again. The forklift required over \$200,000 in repairs.

As part of our office visit, 1LT White requested that I write her a character reference she could use in her defense; one that could potentially expunge her of any financial and ultimately professional, responsibility for the incident. Should the young officer be afforded another chance considering the consequences of her actions?

REFLECTION...

I could not write a character reference for 1LT White. However, she was able to manipulate a senior officer into writing the letter for her defense package. The letter had significant impact on the outcome of the investigation, as it painted 1LT White as a responsible and dedicated officer and led the investigators to see the incident as a freak accident and nothing more. Regardless, I was able to maintain my integrity by not encouraging a younger officer to forego responsibility...especially a situation with such serious consequences and, seemingly, no lesson learned on 1LT White's part. Being a good leader is fraught with tough and unpopular decisions; however when leadership works properly, the unit will form into a team and the mission will be done correctly and safely. No one should sacrifice his or her leadership values even if a well-liked follower's reputation is in question. This is not to say that a leader should consistently punish subordinates for all infractions. Every individual situation requires a thorough assessment and good judgment. Subordinates must know they can make small infractions with the opportunity to learn, otherwise morale will suffer.

The Role Of The Major Participant In The Scenario: The incident occurred while 1LT White was deployed and I was her home base supervisor. Coincidentally, her deployed commander initiated all legal disciplinary actions.

Ethical Dilemma At The Time Of The Incident: 1LT White was the officer-in-charge during a disastrous flight line operation resulting in the serious injury of an Airman and significant damage to government property. An intensive investigation ensued to determine fault or negligence on 1LT White's part. If the investigation found her legally responsible for the incident, 1LT White could face a reprimand and owe the amount of damaged government property. She wanted my character reference for her appeal package intended to absolve her of any monetary liability and accountability.

Rules/Laws That Apply: AFDD 1-3, Leadership and Command (draft); US Air Force Core Values.

At What Point Did You Say "Enough Is Enough?" When And How Did You Take Action? 1LT White sat in my office and stated the incident was not her fault. Her insistence that she lacked any responsibility astounded me. She pleaded with me to help her because she was a good officer and had learned her lesson. I was not so sure. My gut told me that if I were to assist in her defense, I would be enabling her unacceptable behavior. I told 1LT White I could not write the character reference for her in. Such a dismissive and self-preservation attitude from a leader is one thing that could demoralize an organization. Although she was young, 1LT White was not so inexperienced that she should not be held accountable for her actions. It was not an easy decision to make.

Consideration Of Other Courses Of Action (COA) And The 2nd And 3rd Order Affects: I could have simply written the character reference for 1LT White. My fear, however, was that if I did so she would never learn to take responsibility for her actions. Without a sense of responsibility, she could never have been a truly effective leader, potentially causing her future subordinates to suffer.

How Did You Recognize Unethical Behavior? 1LT White had not learned a leadership lesson out of the incident. She just wanted my help to get her out of trouble. Not heeding a senior NCO's advice is one thing, but putting her ego before MSgt Price's warning against an unsafe operation is entirely different. 1LT White knew how minimal her flight line experience was, but she took MSgt Price's warning as a challenge to her authority, nothing more.

How Did You Process Or Judge This Was An Ethical Dilemma? 1LT White's desire to be the boss outweighed her responsibility to listen to her experienced NCO. She did not want her authority challenged and it struck me it would take something as severe as this incident if she were to learn the important lessons of teamwork and good leadership. The incident would not have happened if 1LT White had listened to her enlisted counterpart. On the other hand, 1LT White was a decent officer...inexperienced, but she displayed potential. My character reference, therefore, could help salvage her career.

How Did You Get The Courage To Do The Harder Right? What bothered me most was her inability to accept responsibility. What message would I be sending her if I wrote her a glowing letter alluding to the fact that this incident was an anomaly? She may never take responsibility again, thinking that someone would always bail her out. Then again, if I did not write the letter, I would not be supporting a younger officer who made a terrible mistake. I always detested that adage that we were a one-mistake Air Force, but 1LT White's error did not just mean a plane taking off late...an Airman was badly injured.