Ethics in Leadership
The Navy understands that leaders will fill positions of command.

The Navy understands too, that very much of leadership is about “taking charge” and “getting stuff done”

But the Navy understands that, besides these practical things, leadership demands character.

Other words for character are integrity, or conscience.
The significance of conscience

Conscience is not connected to rank, or age or gender. It is available to everyone.

As leaders, we are all expected to act in good conscience – always.
Conscience is an inner sense of right and wrong.

Conscience draws upon the environment in which it operates so, in the Navy, conscience is strengthened by appreciation of Navy values, and by the conventions and ideals of Naval Service.
Acting in good conscience is the essence of leadership by example, and fundamental to trust between leaders and followers.

Without trust, leadership is dead.
The Navy argues that:

Leadership depends upon trust sustained by the personal example of the leader. For people to be committed to the goals and values of the Navy, leaders must be a living example of those same goals and values. Once the leader says, “do as I say, not as I do,” trust deteriorates. Along with trust, morale and military effectiveness also diminish.

Leadership Ethic, para. 1.11
Leadership and Command

The ideas of conscience and trust illustrate the difference between leadership and command.

Leadership is personal, it depends upon people of good character and moral courage, acting in good conscience. Such people inspire trust in those who follow them willingly.

*Royal Australian Navy Leadership Ethic*

Command is positional.

...with command comes all the power and authority over subordinates that the leader needs to achieve tasks...Command takes away the requirement to actively exercise persuasion and personal influence to get things done. In theory, a commander ignores leadership as a practice and relies solely on command to achieve military objectives...

*Excerpt from ADDP 00.1 paragraph 1.8*
But ethical leadership is essential because…

The profession of arms bears an unlimited moral liability. For this reason the Navy agrees with the view of West Australian born General Sir John Hackett that:

“The bad person cannot be a good sailor, soldier or airman”.

Leadership Ethic, paragraph 2.4
The Unlimited Moral Liability

The military profession bears an unlimited moral liability which allows no room for ethical passivity. Professional service entails constant ethical challenge, particularly with regards to human life, which must never be risked or taken without proper regard.

This reasoning is foundational to the ideas of Australian professional service.

Leadership Ethic para 2.6, 2.7
The expectation of ethically deliberate and measured leadership is in tune with the expectations of Australian society, and internationally recognised humanitarian principles, according to which the profession of arms serves in defence of ideals and human rights as well as in defence of political territory.

*Leadership Ethic para 1.12*
The idea that leadership depends upon conscience and moral courage is expressed in the Royal Australian Navy leadership framework.

At the centre of the model, leadership is described as a matter of Be-ing.

This idea illuminates leadership as a matter of personal obligation, quite different from positional ideas of command.

Personal obligation entails responsible action.
Take home

Ethics in leadership - and in followership - is about thinking for yourself – it is about responsible decision, and responsible example.

1. We should not be mindlessly obedient
2. We should not take advantage of command power
3. We should not take advantage of people’s willingness to obey in a dutiful way

The Navy leadership framework paints a powerful picture.
The ideas in this slide show are expanded in:

The Royal Australian Navy Leadership Ethic

For additional reading, you might enjoy:


