Perceptions of Diversity and Diversity Leadership Within the Services

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This issue paper aims to aid in the deliberations of the MLDC. It does not contain the recommendations of the MLDC.

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Abstract

Data from both a survey and informational meetings with servicemembers revealed that definitions of diversity within the military are broad and include any differences that make individuals unique. Results also show that how leaders manage these individual differences plays an important role in perceptions of mission effectiveness and discrimination within work units. Furthermore, servicemembers report that responsibility for effective diversity leadership resides at all levels, not just among senior ranks. Thus, this suggests that incorporating diversity into leadership training at all ranks could pay dividends in terms of mission accomplishment.

Whether defined narrowly in terms of racial and ethnic origin or broadly in terms of work-related differences, diversity is increasing within the armed forces. Diversity leadership will determine the extent to which the Services encourage and leverage the potential benefits of diversity or allow differences to negatively affect unit functioning and effectiveness. This issue paper presents quantitative and qualitative results of data collected on servicemembers' perceptions of the role and importance of diversity leadership in their units. It also presents data on the relationship between perceptions of strong diversity leadership and unit effectiveness and discrimination.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey and informational meetings with enlisted troops and officers. Survey data were collected between December 2009 and January 2010 during the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute's online Defense Equal Opportunity Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS).[1] A total of 3,942 servicemembers completed the survey (150 Air Force; 2,186 Army; 130 Coast Guard; 705 Marine Corps; 771 Navy). The final sample of participants was 85-percent male, 15-percent female, 71-percent white non-Hispanic, 16-percent black non-Hispanic, 7-percent Hispanic, 4-percent Asian non-Hispanic, and 3-percent other non-Hispanic (American Indian, Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander).[2] In terms of military rank, 84-percent of participants were enlisted, 15-percent were military officers, and 1-percent were warrant officers.

Following collection of the survey data, a subset of MLDC commissioners conducted informational meetings in February 2010. Commissioners met with three different groups each from the Navy, the Marine Corps, the Army, and the Air Force: enlisted troops, junior noncommissioned and commissioned officers, and senior noncommissioned and commissioned officers. Each enlisted group consisted of a dozen or more personnel, and the groups from higher in the chain of command were smaller. These informational meetings were designed to supplement the quantitative data obtained through the survey with direct comments from a sample of servicemembers about their perspectives on diversity within the military. Note, however, that the sample size of servicemembers and their leaders was very small. Therefore, although the information obtained through these meetings was helpful in providing insight into some of the survey findings, the groups were by no means a representative sample of the military population.

Perceptions of Diversity Within the Military

The first set of survey items concerned how servicemembers understand the term *diversity* as it is being used in the military. We included three survey items rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree":

1) I understand my Service branch's policy on diversity.
2) Diversity is about demographics (race, sex, ethnicity, etc.).
3) There is a difference between equal opportunity and diversity management.

Table 1 displays the results of this portion of the survey.

Diversity Policy

On average, survey respondents reported understanding their Service branch's policy on diversity ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.87$).[3] There was no statistically significant difference[4] in understanding reported between men and women or between different race/ethnicity groups. However, there was a small but statistically significant difference between military officers and enlisted members, with military officers ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.85$) reporting a stronger understanding of their branch's policy on diversity compared with enlisted members ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.86$). (Note that "understanding" was self-reported and may not have been entirely accurate.)

We also asked participants in the informational meetings about their branch's policy on diversity. We found considerably lower levels of awareness, with most participants reporting little knowledge of the details of their Service branch's policy on diversity and many not even being aware that their Service had such a policy. However, the majority of participants thought that a policy focused on diversity was important and that such a policy would help ensure the development of a military climate that encouraged and valued learning from others' differences. A small number of participants stated that they did not think a specific diversity policy was necessary or that the military may have outgrown such a policy. This feedback was reflected primarily in the responses of younger participants, who also tended to report that they did not perceive diversity as being an issue in the military. (Older, higher-ranking participants also noted a generational difference with regard to perceptions of diversity.)

Diversity as Demographics

Service diversity policies all define diversity in broad terms, going beyond traditional demographic dimensions of race, ethnicity, and gender (see Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2009). Yet, in terms of how the term *diversity* is conceptualized, survey respondents generally agreed that diversity was about demographics (race, sex, ethnicity, etc.) ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.95$). There was a small but statistically significant difference in the level of agreement reported between women and men, with women ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.91$) reporting significantly higher agreement with this statement compared with men ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.96$). There was also a statistically significant difference in the level of agreement with this statement between several race/ethnicity groups, with Asians ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.99$) reporting the highest agreement and whites ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.96$) reporting the lowest agreement. There were no statistically significant differences between servicemembers of different ranks, however.

Consistent with these findings, participants in the informational meetings all reported that demographics are an important part of diversity. However, participants also went beyond this statement and reported that diversity was about any differences that may exist among individuals, including such additional attributes as religion, hometown, education, military occupational specialty, values, general background, and different life experiences. Furthermore, when discussing what the term *diversity* meant to them, they focused on diversity as anything that could help contribute to different perspectives and learning within their units.

Table 1. Average Diversity Ratings by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Rank

	I understand my Service branch's policy on diversity.	Diversity is about demographics (race, sex, ethnicity, etc.).	There is a difference between equal opportunity and diversity management.
Overall average (*N* = 3,942)	4.19	3.96	3.69
Gender			
Female (*N* = 606)	4.20	4.03	3.77
Male (*N* = 3,336)	4.19	3.95	3.68
Race/Ethnicity			
White non-Hispanic (*N* = 2,794)	4.21	3.93	3.68
Black non-Hispanic (*N* = 622)	4.15	4.06	3.70
Hispanic (*N* = 278)	4.12	3.97	3.74
Asian non-Hispanic (*N* = 144)	4.17	4.10	3.80
Other non-Hispanic (*N* = 104)	4.18	3.96	3.60
Rank			
Military officer (*N* = 582)	4.37	3.96	3.92
Warrant officer (*N* = 53)	4.30	3.94	3.55
Enlisted (*N* = 3,307)	4.15	3.96	3.65

NOTES: Response scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.
Other non-Hispanic comprises American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander.

Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity

The third survey item focused on the perceived difference between diversity management and equal opportunity. Overall, respondents only somewhat agreed that diversity management is different from equal opportunity ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.95$). There were small but statistically significant differences between the average responses of men and women and between servicemembers of different ranks. Specifically, women ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.88$) reported significantly stronger agreement with this statement compared with men ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.96$), and military officers ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.91$) reported significantly stronger agreement with this statement compared with both enlisted ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.95$) and warrant officers ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.01$). There were no statistically significant differences between race/ethnicity groups, however.

In the informational meetings, we further explored this relationship but instead focused first on the difference between general diversity and equal opportunity. As a result, the informational meetings revealed a somewhat more-complex understanding of the relationship between equal opportunity and diversity than could be obtained through survey methods. Specifically, most participants described diversity as being about valuing and learning from differences but described equal opportunity as being about everyone receiving fair and equal treatment, regardless of any differences. Equal opportunity was also characterized as focusing more on policy. Thus, most people described the two concepts as distinct but interrelated in the sense that fairness is an important component of valuing differences.

Perceptions of the Importance of Diversity Management/Leadership

The second set of survey items focused on perceptions of the importance of diversity management within the Services. When the survey was designed, we were using nonmilitary terminology, in which the term *management* encompasses practices in addition to programs and policies. Since then, we have adapted military terminology, in which the practices that leaders employ to "manage" people daily are referred to as *leadership*: i.e., diversity leadership. Thus, in this issue paper, we maintain the term *management* where we report the questions but shift to the term *leadership* when we discuss concepts.

We included four survey items designed to assess perceptions of the importance of diversity management within a respondent's unit. For each of the below items, respondents used a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree":

1) Diversity management will improve mission effectiveness.
2) Diversity management falls under the line's responsibility.
3) Diversity management is a core value in my unit.
4) Diversity management ensures that everyone's contributions are valued.

Because we were interested in examining overall perceptions of the importance of diversity management, we averaged responses across the items to create a single representative score.[5] Using a single representative score also

Table 2. Average Perceptions of the Importance of Diversity Management/Leadership, by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Rank

	Average Rating Across All items	Survey Item			
		1	2	3	4
Gender					
Overall average (*N* = 3,942)	3.44	3.49	3.38	3.32	3.56
Female (*N* = 606)	3.53	3.68	3.41	3.30	3.72
Male (*N* = 3,336)	3.42	3.45	3.37	3.32	3.53
Race/Ethnicity					
Overall average (*N* = 3,942)	3.44	3.49	3.38	3.32	3.56
White non-Hispanic (*N* = 2,794)	3.37	3.40	3.31	3.29	3.50
Black non-Hispanic (*N* = 622)	3.61	3.78	3.56	3.35	3.75
Hispanic (*N* = 278)	3.53	3.58	3.55	3.35	3.63
Asian non-Hispanic (*N* = 144)	3.74	3.85	3.68	3.56	3.88
Other non-Hispanic (*N* = 104)	3.39	3.48	3.29	3.24	3.54
Rank					
Overall average (*N* = 3,942)	3.44	3.49	3.38	3.32	3.56
Military officer (*N* = 582)	3.43	3.44	3.28	3.40	3.63
Warrant officer (*N* = 53)	3.36	3.49	3.21	3.32	3.43
Enlisted (*N* = 3,307)	3.44	3.50	3.40	3.30	3.55

NOTES: Response scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.
Survey Item 1: Diversity Management will improve mission effectiveness.
Survey Item 2: Diversity Management falls under the line's responsibility.
Survey Item 3: Diversity management is a core value in my unit.
Survey Item 4: Diversity management ensures that everyone's contributions are valued.
Other non-Hispanic comprises American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander.

provides a more reliable indication of a group's opinion by minimizing the influence of any wording bias that may be contained in a single item. The overall average score across items and respondents was 3.44 ($SD = 0.76$), indicating only somewhat-positive perceptions of the importance of diversity management. In Table 2, we present average ratings for each scale and individual item broken out by gender, race/ethnicity, and military rank. There were statistically significant differences between men and women and between race/ethnicity groups. Specifically, women ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.68$) were significantly more likely to think that diversity management is important compared with men ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.78$), and there was also a statistically significant difference in the average rating among several race/ethnicity groups, with Asians ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.77$) providing the highest ratings of the importance of diversity management and whites ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.76$) providing the lowest ratings of the importance of diversity management. There were no statistically significant differences between servicemembers of different ranks.

The importance of the leadership component of diversity management was further explored during the informational meetings with servicemembers. Overall, participants focused on the value that diversity can bring by providing different perspectives, learning opportunities, adaptability to new situations, and increased mission effectiveness. They also noted, however, that diversity can have negative effects, including the creation of subgroups within units, based most often on demographic similarities. Thus, they described the need to understand, value, and accept other's differences but to come together and sometimes look past any differences to achieve the mission. Notably, this was reported as being the responsibility of not only the leaders but of all team members.

Perceptions of the Quality of Diversity Management/Leadership

Our final set of survey items focused on perceptions of the quality of diversity leadership. Specifically, we designed the following seven survey items to assess servicemembers' perceptions of their leaders' ability to encourage and use the diverse ideas and talents of each unit's members. For each of the below items, respondents used a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree":

1) Leaders in my unit actively welcome new ideas from the organization's members.
2) Leaders are likely to employ new ideas provided by the organization's members.
3) My commander is held accountable for effectively employing the diverse talents of this organization's members.
4) Training is available in my unit to support employing the diverse talents of this organization's members to maximize effectiveness.
5) To my knowledge, my leader has been trained in employing the diverse talents of this organization's members to maximize effectiveness.

Table 3. Average Perceptions of the Quality of Diversity Management/Leadership, by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Rank

	Average Rating Across All Items	Survey Item						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender								
Overall average (N = 3,942)	3.53	3.47	3.42	3.63	3.48	3.55	3.55	3.59
Female (N = 606)	3.45	3.42	3.38	3.50	3.39	3.45	3.47	3.52
Male (N = 3,336)	3.54	3.48	3.42	3.65	3.50	3.57	3.57	3.61
Race/Ethnicity								
Overall average (N = 3,942)	3.53	3.47	3.42	3.63	3.48	3.55	3.55	3.59
White non-Hispanic (N = 2,794)	3.52	3.47	3.40	3.61	3.47	3.56	3.56	3.59
Black non-Hispanic (N = 622)	3.52	3.45	3.43	3.65	3.50	3.46	3.55	3.62
Hispanic (N = 278)	3.51	3.42	3.38	3.60	3.46	3.50	3.58	3.62
Asian non-Hispanic (N = 144)	3.57	3.56	3.56	3.86	3.53	3.55	3.46	3.50
Other non-Hispanic (N = 104)	3.67	3.67	3.58	3.74	3.66	3.72	3.60	3.71
Rank								
Overall average (N = 3,942)	3.53	3.47	3.42	3.63	3.48	3.55	3.55	3.59
Military officer (N = 582)	3.81	3.98	3.84	3.84	3.67	3.74	3.86	3.76
Warrant officer (N = 53)	3.65	3.62	3.51	3.75	3.64	3.62	3.68	3.72
Enlisted (N = 3,307)	3.48	3.38	3.34	3.59	3.45	3.51	3.50	3.56

NOTES: Response scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.
Survey Item 1: Leaders in my unit actively welcome new ideas from the organization's members.
Survey Item 2: Leaders are likely to employ new ideas provided by the organization's members.
Survey Item 3: My commander is held accountable for effectively employing the diverse talents of this organization's members.
Survey Item 4: Training is available in my unit to support employing the diverse talents of this organization's members to maximize effectiveness.
Survey Item 5: To my knowledge, my leader has been trained in employing the diverse talents of this organization's members to maximize effectiveness.
Survey Item 6: My leader effectively employs the diverse talents of this organization to maximize effectiveness.
Survey Item 7: My leader has the resources to employ the diverse talents of this organization's members to maximize effectiveness.

Other non-Hispanic comprises American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander.

6) My leader effectively employs the diverse talents of this organization to maximize effectiveness.
7) My leader has the resources to employ the diverse talents of this organization's members to maximize effectiveness.

Because we were interested in examining overall perceptions of the quality of diversity leadership within a unit, we once again averaged responses across the items to create a single representative score.[6] The overall average score across items and respondents was 3.53 (SD = 0.84), indicating only somewhat-positive perceptions of the quality of diversity leadership across the Services. In Table 3, we present average ratings for each scale and individual item broken out by gender, race/ethnicity, and rank within the military. Overall, there were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of men and women and between members of different ranks. Specifically, men (M = 3.54, SD = 0.85) reported significantly higher-quality diversity leadership within their units compared with women (M = 3.45, SD = 0.85), and military officers (M = 3.81, SD = 0.75) reported significantly higher-quality diversity leadership within their units compared with enlisted servicemembers (M = 3.48, SD = 0.85). There were no statistically significant differences in the ratings between race/ethnicity groups.

During the informational meetings, we further explored the quality of diversity leadership that servicemembers experience. In general, participants reported that their leaders used the diverse talents of individual members. More notably, both unit members and leaders reported that there was a greater focus on mission accomplishment and performance than on anything else. Therefore, the focus for leaders was on understanding and accepting individual team members in order to achieve the mission at hand.

We also explored the level of training that leaders receive regarding how to lead and benefit from having a diverse military. Overall, meeting participants reported receiving some type of equal-opportunity training. Most participants, however, reported having little to no formal training on diversity or how to lead a diverse group of individuals. They reported

that the concept of diversity was touched on in several other training sessions, including equal-opportunity training, but with no substantial focus. The majority of participants thought that having such training would be beneficial and important. Furthermore, they believed it was important not only for top leaders but also for new recruits to receive the training. Thus, participants said that an approach that is simultaneously top-down and bottom-up would enhance diversity leadership in the Services.

Using the survey data, we also examined the extent to which there was a relationship (i.e., correlation)[7] between perceptions of the quality of diversity leadership within a unit and (1) perceptions of workgroup effectiveness, (2) attitudes toward the organization, and (3) perceptions of discrimination (see Table 4).[8] Overall, individuals who reported higher-quality diversity leadership within their units were significantly more likely to report perceptions of higher workgroup effectiveness and workgroup cohesion, greater feelings of commitment to the organization, and greater job satisfaction. Finally, those who reported higher-quality diversity leadership within their units were also significantly less likely to report the existence of discriminatory behaviors. Thus, although these results are based only on individual-level perceptions, they echo the business-case literature described in an earlier issue paper (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010), which suggests that strong diversity leadership is associated with positive unit and organizational outcomes.

Conclusion

The survey and the informational meetings elicited a number of useful findings for MLDC commissioners. They indicated that

- Servicemembers see diversity in the military as more than simple demographics; in their perceptions, the term *diversity* is more likely than not to include any differences that make individuals unique.

- The level of awareness and understanding of Service diversity policies seems to be mixed.

- How leaders manage individual differences within the military plays an important role in perceptions of mission effectiveness and discrimination within work units.

At the same time, servicemembers reported a relative absence of specific training in leading diverse work groups. They also tended to perceive that responsibility for effective diversity leadership resides at all levels, not just among senior ranks. This suggests that incorporating diversity into leadership training at all ranks could pay dividends in terms of mission accomplishment.

Table 4. Correlations Between Perceptions of the Quality of Diversity Management/Leadership and Workgroup Outcomes and Attitudes

	Perceptions of the Quality of Diversity Leadership
Workgroup effectiveness	0.40**
Workgroup cohesion	0.45**
Organizational commitment	0.56**
Job satisfaction	0.55**
Racist behaviors	−0.31**
Religious discrimination	−0.29**
Age discrimination	−0.29**
Sexual harassment	−0.34**
Disability discrimination	−0.24**

NOTE: N= 3,942; ** indicates a statistically significant correlation at p < 0.01.

Notes

[1]DEOCS assesses critical organizational-climate dimensions, such as military equal opportunity, civilian equal employment opportunity, and organizational effectiveness. DEOCS is administered by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute and is typically deployed at the request of a military unit commander. It is available 24 hours a day and operates similarly to an employee survey.

[2]The sum of the percentages does not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

[3]*M* refers to the mean (average) of ratings. *SD* refers to the standard deviation, which represents the variability or average deviation of scores from the mean.

[4]Throughout this issue paper, we report whether there are statistically significant differences between the ratings of different groups. Statistical significance was based on a cutoff value of $p < 0.05$, where p represents the probability that group differences could have occurred by chance. In general, group differences associated with p-values less than 0.05 are considered sufficiently rare, and the conclusion that the observed group differences did not occur by chance is justified.

[5]In order to support averaging these items into a single unified scale, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis which is a statistical procedure designed to asses the extent to which the items are measuring a single theme. We also examined the extent to which the scale demonstrated acceptable reliability or internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$).

[6]Averaging these items into a single unified scale or factor as well as into a factor distinct from the *importance of diversity management* scale was supported through an exploratory factor analysis. The scale also demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.92$).

[7]A correlation coefficient represents the linear relationship between two variables. The absolute value of a correlation coefficient ranges from 0.00 to 1.00, with higher values representing a stronger relationship between the two variables. A positive correlation indicates that as one variable increases, the other variable tends to also increase. A negative correlation indicates that as one variable increases, the other variable tends to decrease.

[8]These are validated scales that are consistently included in the DEOCS survey. A sample of the DEOCS survey can be found at Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, Directorate of Research, 2008.

References

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