Effective Diversity Leadership
Definition and Practices

Abstract

According to their definitions of diversity, the Services have embraced diversity not just as a response to demographic reality but because they perceive it as a way to enhance mission capability (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2009, 2010c). Research shows that the link between diversity and increased capability is not automatic; rather, it requires diversity-conscious leadership (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a). Absent such leadership, diversity—whether defined in traditional demographic terms or more broadly in terms of "difference"—can actually reduce capability, most frequently through decreased communication, increased conflict, or both. Thus, leadership practices are the link between diversity policies and their realization. This issue paper describes practices that leaders at all levels can use to fully implement the Services' diversity policies in the day-to-day functioning of the armed forces. As such, it provides a foundation for the MLDC's consideration of diversity leadership and training.

MLDC Research Areas

Definition of Diversity

Legal Implications

Outreach & Recruiting

Leadership & Training

Branching & Assignments

Promotion

Retention

Implementation & Accountability

Metrics

National Guard & Reserve

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

http://mldc.whs.mil/

- Diversity leadership matters for group performance and morale.
- The quality of diversity leadership varies substantially across unit leaders.
- Leaders receive no specific training, so high-quality diversity leadership depends on their innate abilities or professional experience.

A military "diversity summit" produced this definition: Diversity leadership "deals with ways in which people and groups relate to one another and how management [leadership] decisions are made in the midst of the differences, similarities, and tensions among groups" (Lim, Cho, & Curry, 2008).[2] These authors contrast "assimilation" to the majority's norms with "inclusion," which preserves and leverages individual differences in the service of military capability. Their definition highlights the focus of diversity leadership practices on the functioning of the unit rather than its individual members. To use a sports metaphor, diversity leadership practices do not focus on the coach's inspirational role as motivator or cheerleader. Rather, they address the coach's practices in assessing the skills of the team members and maximizing the ways in which they work together to defeat their opponents.

This approach is clearly echoed in a second definition: "Diversity management [leadership] is a tool for capturing the diversity dividend. Diversity management focuses on managing the difference[s] within a company's workforce, capitalizing on the benefits of diversity and minimizing workplace challenges" (*DiversityWorking.com*, 2010). This definition acknowledges that having a diverse workforce does not, in itself, translate into bottom-line benefits. Nor does exhorting individuals to commit and work together. Instead, the definition focuses on the work group, and it asks leadership to commit to acquiring and using the competencies that will channel individual worker perspectives and knowledge to produce a diversity dividend. As one Air

Diversity leadership addresses how leaders at all ranks and organizational levels shape the impact of diversity dynamics in the forces under their command. These dynamics are triggered when servicemembers categorize themselves based on diversity-related identities in ways that affect how work group or unit members communicate and develop trust and unit cohesion. Leadership practices can moderate the way these dynamics evolve and the way in which these dynamics affect work-group performance (Riche, 2005; Kraus & Riche, 2009).[1]

Building on the findings contained in the empirical literature, Kraus and Riche (2009) observed in several case studies of Air Force leaders that

Force case study participant put it, the question about diversity leadership practices sums up to "the things you do in your diverse organizations that amplify the synergistic effect of having that diversity" (Kraus & Riche, 2009).

Note that the focus on diversity leadership practices takes the traditional equal opportunity approach directly into the workplace because an important aspect of diversity leadership is making sure that people feel that they are being treated fairly and equally. Part of that process is making sure that work-group members feel that evaluation, assignment, and promotion processes are fair and that the value of diversity is demonstrated through leadership practices as well as organizational policies. Informational meetings conducted for this commission communicated clearly that servicemember trust in fairness is a prerequisite for turning diversity into mission capability (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010b).

What Is the Impact of Diversity Leadership?
Diversity leadership takes place at the work-group and organizational levels. To date, the Services have focused on the broadest organizational level, as seen in their diversity policy statements (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010c). With few exceptions, however, they have paid little or no attention to diversity leadership as it takes place in daily interactions in the workplace.

This is the level at which diversity can have a positive effect on organizational capability. (See the appendix for a summary of research findings on the impact of diversity, by organizational level.) The empirical research finds a predominantly negative relationship between diversity and capability at the individual level, "unless work-group leaders manage not just the nature but also the simple presence of diversity" (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a). At the organizational level, the relationship is inconclusive: "The presence of diversity in high performing organizations may simply mean that good managers manage well, whether they are managing human resources or other business aspects of an organization" (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a). However, if leaders can reverse diversity's negative effects on work-group processes, diversity in work teams can lead to greater creativity and innovation. Superior diversity leadership can also improve mission readiness by delivering greater teamwork and morale.

Building on the empirical research, the Air Force case studies mentioned above involved 360-degree interviews in units whose leaders were nominated by their superiors as showing exemplary diversity leadership (Kraus & Riche, 2009).[3] These studies reinforced the empirical evidence that the key elements of a positive diversity climate are leader-dependent—that is, they are leadership practices that enhance the focus on mission, develop shared identities, and promote effective communication and other people-related processes. They also suggested that a positive diversity climate incorporates diversity into practices for motivating and resourcing

diverse work groups and that leading such work groups calls for particular attention to personal and technical credibility.

The leaders who demonstrated these practices were intensely focused on their people, rather than processes or administration, and were generally referred to as "natural" leaders. Not surprisingly, the successful diversity leadership practices they employed turned out to be basic people-management practices:

- Instill a mission-related sense of identity.
- Manage work-group processes.
- Facilitate communication.
- Motivate in accord with needs/goals.
- Provide the tools to do the job.
- Establish personal and professional credibility.

Although all the subjects for the case studies were selected because their commanders considered them to be successful leaders in diversity situations, Kraus and Riche (2009) found that people with traditional leadership styles were actually not successful. For instance, command/control leaders were particularly unsuccessful in component (e.g., active/ Guard) or global (e.g., active/foreign-national employees) diversity situations, which offer little or no space to exert control. Leaders who were most comfortable as administrators or direction setters missed signals coming up from the bottom; in addition, those whose focus was on technical competency missed the impact of diversity on the way in which people work together. Diversity is about differences in people, so top-down leadership practices do not address it.

All of the leaders studied lacked the "diversity lens," or the ability to explicitly pay attention to diversity dynamics. Even the "natural" leaders missed, or misattributed, problems rooted in nonobvious sources of diversity, such as differences in deployment experiences or other unequal job burdens. In most cases, however, these leaders were successful because they used people-related practices and tools. These practices can be taught to people with other leadership styles, and all leaders can learn to look through the so-called diversity lens.

What Are Examples of Diversity Leadership Practices?
Diversity leadership involves applying practices that the management literature has long identified as successful, but these basic people management techniques take on new significance for leaders of diverse work groups. Such leaders are responsible for the on-the-ground functioning of the following elements that mediate between diversity, however it is defined, and work-group outcomes (Kraus & Riche 2009; Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a):

- communication
- cooperation
- cohesion
- trust.

Leaders also influence whether and how diversity creates social identities that are either relevant to work or not, such as in-groups/out-groups, self-categorization, and perspective.

The following practices and examples of tools used by the leaders studied demonstrate both the practical nature of diversity leadership and ways it can be taught. Note that the tools are simply examples of things that successful leaders do. Once leaders learn to apply a diversity lens (i.e., to consciously attend to how diversity affects the mission), they can decide for themselves what will work for them based on the context or their natural leadership styles.

In the interest of space, the practice sets and some of the tools are simply listed here and grouped according to basic leadership principles called out by the literature; see Kraus and Riche (2009) for descriptions and additional tools.

Instill a mission-related sense of identity. The military's collective, mission-based culture provides a foundation for leaders to get work-group members to identify with work-relevant social categories that supersede nonrelevant other categories. Deployment seems to do this almost automatically, but elsewhere it takes leadership to elevate a mission focus to bridge or blur differences between people.[4] This can remove or at least lessen sources of conflict, communication loss, and other drags on productivity that result from divisive social categorization (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a).

- Practice: Build the team around a mission.
  - Tool: Find an overarching framework and common language that are relevant to the unit's work and use them appropriately.
  - Tool: Encourage and facilitate understanding between structurally different groups by helping people see how each unit or function contributes to the mission.
  - Tool: Emphasize and reward teamwork.
  - Tool: Use a diversity lens in sponsoring and supporting inclusive events to model cross-unit engagement and focus members on commonalities.

Manage work-group processes. In general, processes are designed to manage human interactions, so social identities that form around particular types of diversity (e.g., demographic, occupation) can make it harder to get a work group to deliver its full potential. In particular, the literature finds that unmanaged diversity increases conflict and decreases communication. These process losses are the reason for the negative impact of unmanaged diversity (Riche, 2005; Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a).

- Practice: Manage conflict.
  - Tool: Manage diversity-related conflicts proactively.
  - Tool: Be consistently fair in discipline and rewards.
  - Tool: Have hard but needed conversations in a timely fashion.
- Practice: Evaluate group processes.
- Practice: Learn from diversity.
  - Tool: Model learning from each other.
  - Tool: Create opportunities for people to work across diversity lines.
  - Tool: Create opportunities for people to hear from each other.
- Practice: Facilitate brainstorming.
  - Tool: Ask for talking papers on key issues.
  - Tool: Generate "learning" discussions.
- Practice: Prioritize for yourself and for your people.
  - Tool: Prioritize people (over paperwork or other tasks).
  - Tool: Delegate as much as possible.
  - Tool: Be clear about priorities.

Facilitate effective communication. Strong, effective communication practices are essential for leaders of diverse work groups (Riche, 2005; Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010a). In many ways, diversity means that people may "hear" the same thing differently, so leaders may need to communicate in different ways to produce a shared understanding. This involves listening as well as talking to acquire the diversity lens that will let leaders know what and how they need to communicate across diversity categories. This is one of the ways in which a command/control culture works against effective diversity leadership.

- Practice: Facilitate communication within the work group.
  - Tool: Factor diversity dynamics into work-group–wide communications.
- Practice: Facilitate communication within subgroups.
  - Tool: Share as much information as possible as widely as possible.
  - Tool: Turn information into meaning.
  - Tool: Monitor potential communication barriers.
- Practice: Listen to all group members.
  - Tool: Create opportunities for hearing.
  - Tool: Let people know they have been heard.
  - Tool: Listen first.

- Practice: Be accessible.
  - ° Tool: Manage body language.
  - ° Tool: Use walk-around management.

Motivate in accordance with needs/goals. This is a common theme in management literature, but it calls for leaders to use a diversity lens when diversity is present. Without using such a lens, leaders can operate on inappropriate assumptions, sometimes assuming stereotypes, sometimes failing to acknowledge real differences, and sometimes assuming that the "others" will assimilate to the majority.

- Practice: Know your people.
  - ° Tool: Have frequent meetings, including one-on-one meetings.
  - ° Tool: Be able to put a name to a face.
- Practice: Understand/be aware of their jobs/functions (but you need not necessarily be an expert).
  - ° Tool: Create opportunities to know and understand what work-group members do.
- Practice: Acknowledge/reward contributions.
  - ° Tool: Use rewards to support a mission-driven culture.

Provide the tools to do the job. These diversity leadership practices go beyond the obvious need to see that work-group members have the time, materials, and skills to accomplish their tasks. In a diversity context in particular, they extend to providing the practice and policy support that enable subordinates to deal with diversity dynamics as they affect their day-to-day work. Doing this successfully requires the leader to have used the diversity lens (i.e., to be aware of diversity dynamics and their likely sources).

- Practice: Empower subordinates and avoid micromanagement.
  - ° Tool: Supply the necessary resources.
  - ° Tool: Give the necessary guidance.
- Practice: Provide appropriate mentoring.
  - ° Tool: Enlarge the mentoring framework.
  - ° Tool: Think through the mentoring process according to leadership style and work-group mission.

Establish personal and professional credibility. These fundamental aspects of leadership take on particular importance in a diversity context due to the important role trust plays in mediating diversity's impact. When people are asked to work with and for people who are not like them, leaders need to consciously build confidence in their leadership.

- Practice: Model strong individual engagement.
  - ° Tool: Walk the talk.
- Practice: Take ownership of what happens and admit mistakes.
- Practice: Advocate for people/push back.
  - ° Tool: "Have their backs."
- Practice: Demonstrate technical competence at your own job.
  - ° Tool: Participate in work activities.
  - ° Tool: Synthesize understanding of what all workgroup members are doing into a big picture that subordinates would not otherwise perceive.
- Practice: Care. (All the strong diversity leaders were perceived as genuinely caring about all the people that they led.)

Conclusion

Diversity leadership practices are basic people management practices; what is new is viewing them through a diversity lens. With this lens, leaders can explicitly manage the self-categorization mechanisms that accompany diversity and the mediators—trust, cohesion, conflict, and communication—that make the difference in the impact, whether positive, neutral, or negative, of diversity on mission capability. As the MLDC has recently reported, servicemembers surveyed by the MLDC suggested that these practices should be trained at all levels (Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2010b).

Notes

[1]Other elements (such as policy, task type, and organizational culture) also moderate diversity dynamics, but they are largely out of the control of leaders.

[2]Diversity research uses the term *diversity management* to encompass practices as well as policies and programs. This usage is problematic for the military, which uses the term *leadership* to refer to practices that manage people, in the civilian sense. Military personnel will say: We "manage" resources; we "lead" people. In this paper, we substitute *leadership* for *management* whenever possible because we are addressing the practices leaders use, or can use, to manage diverse people effectively.

[3]This research involved interviewing the subject, the subject's superior officer, and two groups of the subject's subordinates: junior airmen, and senior airmen and junior officers. It did not involve interviewing the subject's peers.

[4]Describing his deployment experience, one servicemember said: "It was just like there was no more barriers all of a sudden. It was like we were all the same, you know, and I asked him: 'How come we don't have that at home, you know?'" (Kraus & Riche, 2009).

References

DiversityWorking.com website. (2010). Retrieved March 24, 2010, from http://www.diversityworking.com/employerZone/diversityManagement/

Kraus, A., & Riche, M. F. (2009). *Approaches to and tools for successful diversity management: Results from 360-degree diversity management case studies* [CNA Research Memorandum D0020315.A2]. Alexandria, VA: CNA.

Lim, N., Cho, M., & Curry, K. (2008). *Planning for diversity: Options and recommendations for DOD leaders* [MG-743-OSD]. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

Military Leadership Diversity Commission. (2009, December). *Examples of diversity definitions*. [Issue Paper #3]. Arlington, VA: Military Leadership Diversity Commission.

Military Leadership Diversity Commission. (2010a, February). *Business-case arguments for diversity and diversity programs and their impact in the workplace.* [Issue Paper #14]. Arlington, VA: Military Leadership Diversity Commission.

Military Leadership Diversity Commission. (2010b, March). *Perceptions of diversity and diversity leadership within the Services.* [Issue Paper #18]. Arlington, VA: Military Leadership Diversity Commission.

Military Leadership Diversity Commission. (2010c, March). *Services' processes for developing definitions of diversity and diversity policy statements.* [Issue Paper #20]. Arlington, VA: Military Leadership Diversity Commission.

Riche, M. F., with Kraus, A., Hodari, A. K., & DePasquale, J. P. (2005). *Literature review: Empirical evidence supporting the business-case approach to work force diversity* [CNA Research Memorandum D0011482.A2]. Alexandria, VA: CNA.

Appendix

Table 1. Diversity Management Practices Supported by Empirical Research

Level	Practices
Individual	• Facilitating employee ability to recognize different perspectives and see them as an opportunity for work-related learning • Altering selection processes • Mentoring and networking for nontraditional employees
Work group	• Developing process management skills, such as negotiation and conflict management • Facilitating effective communications • Paying attention to diversity attributes, including status differentials, in composing groups and designating roles within them • Paying attention to the duration of the group's time together • Instilling mission-specific or other team-specific identities
Organization	• Making top leadership commitment visible, as in modeling appropriate behaviors • Tailoring diversity goals and practices to organizational goals and strategies • Developing and maintaining an appropriate organizational culture, including an effective "language" for talking about diversity • Emphasizing the organizational commonalities of diverse employees • Addressing the diversity impact of organizational evaluation and reward systems
SOURCE: Riche, 2005	