Air Force Commander's Guide to Diversity and Inclusion

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To perform, we need top talent. Today we claim the title 'World's Greatest Air Force,' but to remain so, we must learn to be comprehensively inclusive, throughout our ranks, and throughout our specialties. If we get this right, we will glean significant benefit from the many perspectives of the population we serve.

— Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James

Modern military operations are executed in complex, uncertain, and rapidly changing operational environments that defy the warfighting standards of the past. To meet these challenges, the Air Force must employ every advantage.

Diversity is an advantage, and the Air Force has expanded its approach to diversity from one that focuses on race, ethnicity, and gender to one that includes skills, background, and ways of thinking. This transition will require an adaptive and agile leadership that can leverage diversity while maintaining unit cohesion.

The military is both influenced by and has an influence on civilian society. The U.S. military is generally regarded as a model for racial integration. When President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981 (1948) to end racial segregation in the military, the military became a catalyst for change. Nearly 70 years later, the military continues to lead and learn when it comes to diversity.

In that spirit, this is a brief introduction to diversity and inclusion for today's busy commanders.

How Does the Department of Defense Define Diversity?

DoD's Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan (2012) defines diversity this way:

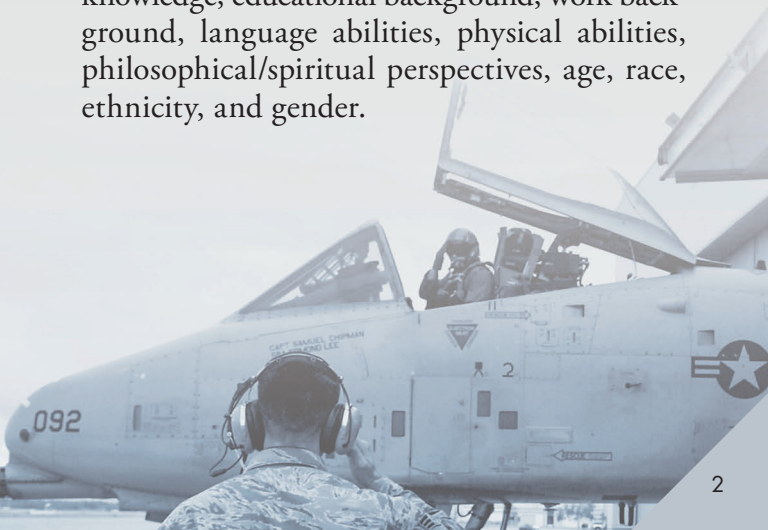
All the different characteristics and attributes of the DoD's Total Force, which are consistent with our core values, integral to overall readiness and mission accomplishment, and reflective of the nation we serve.

The definition acknowledges that individuals come to the military not only with different cultural backgrounds but also with different skills, experiences, and talents. It also acknowledges that these differences are operationally relevant. With proper leadership, diversity can increase military agility and responsiveness.

How Does the Air Force Define Diversity?

Air Force Instruction 36-7001 (AFI, 2012) defines diversity as:

A composite of individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities consistent with the Air Force Core Values and the Air Force Mission. Air Force diversity includes but is not limited to: personal life experiences, geographic background, socioeconomic background, cultural knowledge, educational background, work background, language abilities, physical abilities, philosophical/spiritual perspectives, age, race, ethnicity, and gender.



What Diversity Encompasses

According to the AFI, diversity encompasses:

- **demographic diversity:** inherent or socially defined personal characteristics, including age, race/ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, family status, disability, and geographic origin
- **cognitive/behavioral diversity:** differences in styles of work, thinking, learning, and personality
- **organizational/structural diversity:** organizational/institutional background characteristics affecting interaction, including service, component, and occupation/career field
- **global diversity:** intimate knowledge of and experience with foreign languages and cultures, inclusive of both citizen and noncitizen personnel, exchange officers, coalition partners, and foreign nationals with whom we interact as part of a globally engaged Air Force.

Gay and Lesbian Service Members

In June 2015, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced that gay and lesbian service members will be afforded the same protection under the military's equal opportunity policy as other groups.

Does Such a Broad Definition Hurt Minorities?

Some critics believe that to define diversity in a way that goes beyond race/ethnicity and gender is to define away the very real challenges that specific groups still face. While this concern is understandable, interpreting diversity more broadly can still help increase women and minorities in military leadership, given that no one group has a monopoly on the diverse skills and talents that military leadership requires.

In addition, the broad definition reflects the realities faced by today's military. Just as a more diverse U.S. population affects the demographic mix of Air Force recruits, changes in budgetary and conflict environments affect the need for new skills, more integration across military components, better coordination with other government agencies, and smoother cooperation with global partners.

Progressing from the equal opportunity model of diversity used in the past to the broader concept of inclusion for the future is consistent with equal opportunity policies and practices because it is based on the fair and equitable treatment of all personnel, regardless of their membership in a protected class.

Is Inclusion the Same as Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action?

No. Affirmative action is a policy that favors those who tend to suffer from discrimination, especially in employment or education. Equal opportunity is the policy of not discriminating against people on the basis of their sex, race, or age—an obligation that the Air Force continues to take very seriously to ensure fairness and a level playing field for all airmen.

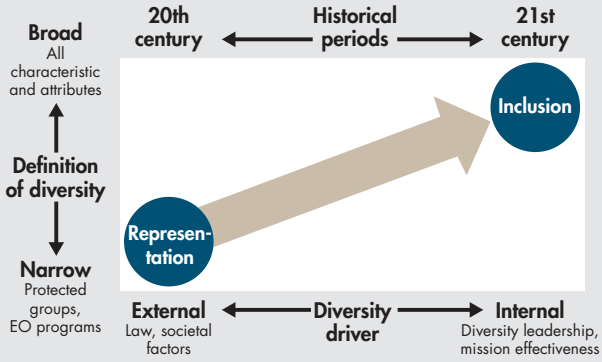
Both policies are aimed in part at increasing an organization's demographic diversity, generally through the assimilation of protected groups. Members of the minority group adopt the language, customs, and attitudes of the majority group, and gravitate toward the norm. In contrast, inclusion aims to preserve an individual's attributes and integrate them into the way an organization functions and makes decisions.

In fact, equal opportunity is the foundation for inclusion and diversity. The concept of diversity and inclusion combines the best ideals of representation

with the practice of casting a wide net to recruit, train, foster, and promote people with any and all attributes that can benefit the services, including thinking style, occupational background, and skill sets. In other words, diversity comprises characteristics and attributes that are both included and not included in equal opportunity law.

Though similar in concept, equal opportunity and inclusion differ in several ways.

- *Historical*: In the 20th century, the central issue was representation of protected groups in military and civilian workplaces. In the 21st century, inclusion becomes part of the equation.
- *Diversity driver*: The representation of protected groups has been driven by external concerns: equal opportunity laws and societal factors. But inclusion is driven by internal concerns: diversity leadership and mission effectiveness.
- *Scope*: Representation of protected groups is narrow in scope, while inclusion is broader.



What Is the Business Case for Diversity?

Like corporate America, the Air Force is interested in using the benefits of diversity to improve organizational performance. The military's intent is to increase regional and cultural capabilities, better coordinate military and civilian capabilities, more seamlessly integrate the National Guard and Reserve with the full-time, active-duty forces, and develop a broader inventory of specialized skills (such as foreign languages, medicine, and computer network operations).

Many needed skills may best be acquired through incorporating reservists, civilians, and contractors more closely into the total force. The total force can provide skills that are in high demand but in short supply in the active component. Computer skills, language proficiency, civil affairs knowledge, and other relevant expertise are likely available in the civilian skill sets possessed by reservists. Efforts are also ongoing to incorporate government employees from a range of agencies into overseas operations.

Research has made a clear case that diversity of skills has a positive effect on operational performance and that a group's diversity is more important than its expertise in finding creative solutions to difficult problems. However, there is no scientific evidence to date that a more demographically representative force is a more capable force or that cognitive/behavioral diversity benefits operations.

What Is the Air Force's Diversity Policy?

The policy (AFI 36-7001, p. 5) states that "Air Force diversity is grounded on inclusion and mutual respect among all personnel." It makes clear that "supervisors and managers at all organizational levels are responsible for implementing applicable Air Force and DoD policy directives, instructions, and other official guidance regarding diversity."

1.4.1. The Air Force will develop and maintain comprehensive diversity initiatives to enhance the all-volunteer Total Force.

1.4.2. The initiatives will:

1.4.2.1. Ensure all qualified personnel are welcome in America's Air Force.

1.4.2.2. Educate and train all personnel on the importance of diversity, including mutual respect, thus promoting an Air Force culture that values inclusion of all personnel in the Total Force and views diversity and inclusion throughout the workforce as a force multiplier in accomplishing the Air Force mission.

1.4.2.3. Ensure that all personnel in the Total Force have the opportunity to achieve their full potential while contributing to the Air Force mission.

1.4.2.4. Establish diversity training, mentoring, and professional development programs that provide the tools for personnel to navigate career progression. Mentoring is further addressed in AFMAN 36-2643, Air Force Mentoring Program.

1.4.2.5. Be reported on and assessed for progression and effectiveness.

Why Are Inclusion and Diversity Important?

For Operations

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has faced an increasingly wide range of threats, and the gap between conventional and unconventional warfare continues to widen. Men and women representative of the U.S. population and with different skills, experiences, and backgrounds are needed to respond to new and emerging threats. Also, given the fact that American demography is rapidly changing, it is important to design policies that will shape personnel trends accordingly.

For Airmen

The performance of the nation's military is tied to the individual's belief that he or she will be treated fairly regardless of background. Having "a leader who looks like me" promotes greater trust in military leadership. Diverse leadership also has the potential to instill pride among those represented, encourage group members to aspire to leadership roles themselves, or inspire youth from different backgrounds to join.

Are There Downsides to Greater Diversity?

Research shows that organizations must lead to reap diversity's benefits. In fact, without leadership, diversity may have no impact or, worse, a negative impact on work performance.

Studies show that an increase in racial, ethnic, and gender diversity is often associated with less communication, poorer social relations, lower psychological commitment to the organization—especially among "the dominant majority and usually among high-status individuals"—and higher turnover. The context, including integrated support for diversity in the organization, influences the extent to which these negative outcomes arise.

One study (Kraus et al., 2009) looked at the impact of diversity specifically on Air Force mission performance from four dimensions:

- demographic diversity
- cognitive diversity (personality types, such as extrovert/introvert and Type A/Type B) and thinking styles (quick and decisive versus slow and methodical)
- structural diversity (service, work function, and component)
- global diversity (foreign military members and foreign nationals).

The reality is that diversity is a liability until and unless processes are in place to manage the negative dynamic and to release diversity's hidden potential.

— Anne S. Tsui and Barbara A. Gutek (1999)

Study participants perceived that demographic, cognitive, and global diversity had a positive impact but that structural diversity had a negative impact on trust and understanding between active and reserve components, and among unit cohesion among newly formed, functionally diverse teams.

These studies suggest that active management of structural diversity is necessary to improve the effectiveness of Air Force operational initiatives, such as Total Force Integration and Smart Operations for the 21st Century.

What Are the Consequences of Failing to Lead on Diversity?

Diversity leadership involves applying practices that have long been considered successful personnel management techniques but that take on new significance for leaders of diverse workgroups. This is because leaders are responsible for the way group members communicate, cooperate, trust one another, and remain cohesive as a group.

Absent effective leadership, this fundamental and powerful human process can create in-groups and out-groups within a given work unit or organization. These dynamics can strongly affect the functioning of a diverse group in a planning room or in a war zone, at the squadron level, or for the commander of a joint force. Facilitating strong communication, cooperation, trust, and cohesion can be challenging but are essential tasks for leaders.

How Is a Diverse and Inclusive Environment Achieved?

Diversity leadership: Diversity leadership must become a core competency at all levels of the armed forces. An effective leader promotes fairness and equity in his or her organization or workgroup, and knows how to focus a broadly diverse group to use its members' differences in ways that benefit the mission. Getting a diverse group to work together in ways that improve mission capabilities is a learned skill.

Change in culture: To meet emerging operational challenges, the services need to identify and reward the range of skills required for mission success. To endure, the new understanding of diversity as a way

to enhance mission effectiveness must become inherent in military culture and in the military's way of doing business.

Commitment: Leveraging diversity as a vital strategic military resource requires the commitment, vision, and know-how of leaders at every level. Without the commitment to instill respect for diversity as a core value, the needed cultural change may not take place.

How Can I Practice Diversity Leadership? Should I Be Blind to People's Differences?

Diversity leadership involves handling the tensions and complexities that diversity engenders in such a way as to gain its benefits. Although good diversity leadership rests on a foundation of fair treatment, it is not about treating everyone the same. Blindness to difference can lead to a culture of assimilation in which differences are suppressed rather than leveraged.

Studies suggest that effective diversity leadership begins with a leader looking through a "diversity lens" to identify and understand the diversity dynamics that are relevant in his or her command. Doing this requires the leader to

- recognize the differences that exist within the group
- understand the dynamics that can cause those differences to have negative effects (e.g., loss of cohesion, communications difficulties, conflict), and create opportunities for those differences to have a positive effect on organizational performance
- apply leadership practices that can neutralize the potential negative effects and, if possible, leverage differences in support of the mission.

These practices might include setting clear priorities that allow people to focus on the mission rather than on their differences, creating opportunities for people to work across diversity lines, explaining to subordinates how their work both benefits from and contributes to the work of others, scheduling team-building activities, and being an active listener and effective communicator.

Why Would Diversity Be a Problem on My Base?

Officers often wonder why diversity would be a problem on their base, thinking "I am not biased, and neither is my team." There are two reasons this may be the case.

First, everyone has implicit biases, particularly ones that favor their own in-group, or peer group. It is difficult for an individual to acknowledge and identify these biases, particularly because the biases don't always sync with beliefs we have declared or would endorse. That said, implicit biases can be gradually unlearned.

Second, even if you and your team are not biased, the people you lead often internalize the negative and positive stereotypes of their groups. So-called "stereotype threat"—the fear that they may reinforce the stereotypes attributed to their group—can cause them to underperform.

It is important to understand both theories to effectively lead diversity initiatives.

What Skills Do 21st-Century Air Force Leaders Need?

Diversity leadership is both a fundamental way of thinking and a set of skills at which all Air Force leaders must excel in order to get the best performance possible from the service members they lead. Today's leaders should possess the following qualities—and look for them in others with an eye toward promotion:

- the ability to work collaboratively in interagency environments, with different governments, and in nation-building activities
- keen decisionmaking skills, since leaders will need to address complex and uncertain emergent threats in 21st-century operational environments
- additional knowledge of foreign languages, regional expertise, and culture
- technological skills, because U.S. military and civilian cybersystems are becoming more complex to defend and utilize.

The greatest strength of our Air Force is our Airmen. The greatest strength of our Airmen is their diversity. Each of them comes from a different background, a different family experience, and a different social experience. Each brings a different set of skills and a unique perspective to the team. We don't just celebrate diversity . . . we embrace it.

— General Mark A. Welsh III, Air Force Chief of Staff

Learn More

The following sources formed the basis for this handbook:

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This guidebook is based on recent RAND research about diversity and inclusion as well as on select external sources. The guidebook is sponsored by the United States Air Force, and the RAND research on which it was based was sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the congressionally appointed Military Leadership Diversity Commission. The author of this publication, Nelson Lim, is an senior sociologist at the RAND Corporation.

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P. 9, SOURCE: Adapted from Defense Business Board Task Group on Increasing Diversity in DoD's Flag and Senior Executive Ranks, 2004.

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