

## FEATURE ARTICLES

# Inclusion: The Power in Diversity

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Americans in all walks of life—in civil society and the military, including the Air Force Academy—were distressed and galvanized by George Floyd’s death and all that followed it, and spurred to introspection on how we treat each other. As part of that reflective process, it may be time to reconsider the phrase diversity and inclusion. Since the Civil Rights Act of 1965, this phrase has gained increasing prominence in media, academia, corporate and governmental leadership priorities and in the consciousness of the nation. As noble as those two linked ideas may be, and as hard as so many have tried to achieve the promise the combined concept implies, success may require us to rethink the order in which we habitually write and conceive those two words. Why? Because some simple yet powerful realities apply especially strongly to the military context: All leaders can foster inclusion in the teams and relationships they touch, yet few leaders in military hierarchical organizations can directly or rapidly influence the diversity of their own teams. Moreover, success in military conflict places a premium on cohesion, where inclusion with diversity is powerful, but diversity without inclusion fosters division. These realities strongly suggest that leader development must focus intently on how leaders at all levels can more reliably build truly inclusive teams.

The very nature of the future conflict environment demands revisiting inclusion as a preeminent part of military leadership. Tomorrow’s warriors will still do battle in units threatened by enemy weapons, so strong interpersonal bonds among increasingly diverse teammates is as vital as it always has been. Yet those same warriors’ success or failure will also increasingly hinge on an incredibly broad set of capabilities in the electromagnetic spectrum, in cyberspace, in orbit, and in industry, which are provided by an ever-more demographically and cognitively diverse

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workforce, most recently exemplified by creation of the US Space Force. Put less politely, modern militaries still need the strength of their warfare tribes, but the grunt and the geek, the pilot and the programmer, the sailor and the satellite operator are increasingly tightly connected. One cannot win without the other.

In this daunting environment, mission and individual success and creating the kinds of high performing, welcoming environments that leverage every diverse attribute in their teams demands inclusive leadership. Greater inclusion increases the probability of building strong teams that can work effectively with other strong teams. Importantly, inclusive leaders must also be good stewards of the people they *can* influence and develop capability—for their own organization and for the future—valuing diversity as one aspect of potential. Inclusive, aligned leadership at all levels will also give strategic-level leaders greater leverage to shape a force more representative of society as a whole and that values, rewards, and advances more equally all who chose to serve.

### Why This, Why Now?

Suggesting we think first of inclusion, then of diversity, is not to suggest less earnest effort to achieve greater gender, racial, or other social justice—nor is it an endorsement of the status quo. Rather, it is an attempt to focus on one practical, attainable leadership perspective that might make a real difference in actually achieving diverse, AND inclusive teams.

These thoughts are shaped by practical experience overseeing the Air Force assignment process nearly two decades ago as part of a career of followership and leadership in small and large units. They were finally crystallized by reading the views of almost 124,000 people responding to the 2020 Racial

Disparity Review<sup>1</sup> initiated by the Secretary of the Air Force, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and Chief of Space Operations.

Importantly, the Department of the Air Force—past, present and future—is in many ways a microcosm of American society. It competes with myriad other government and commercial entities for those who join its ranks, and it benefits or suffers from the economic forces in society. It differs from most in that its fundamental purpose is to prevail in adversarial combat or competition that could affect the United States. It is challenging, potentially deadly, and morally dangerous work. Physical, intellectual and conduct standards shape who may join and who may remain; and while it aspires to excellence in all things, it remains drawn from the society that it serves. This matters because the Air and Space Forces have no more right to recruit talented, committed Airmen and Guardians than they can earn. Every potential recruit has many choices.

The snapshot of demographic metrics presented in the Racial Disparity Review give valuable insight into how Air Force processes have succeeded or failed over time to create opportunities, attract new talent, shape personal and institutional decisions, and produce positive outcomes. Like all personnel metrics, they reflect the sum of many factors beginning with every demographic, individual, and experiential attribute of those who choose to serve, and how those individuals, groups and systems interact over decades. Decisions shaped by “the system” and individuals in the late 1980s or early 1990s produced the senior leadership makeup of today. Decisions affecting racial disparity made by today’s senior Air Force and Space Force leaders will only be holistically reflected years and decades from today—most likely far beyond the tenures of those senior leaders. Thus improvements in

1 <https://www.af.mil/portals/1/documents/ig/IRDR.pdf>

many demographic metrics on promotion, discipline, education, career field participation, and the like will not be fully apparent until multiple senior leadership terms have passed, even given any given leader's most visionary, concerted, and dedicated actions.

Yet a close reading of the review suggests while force-wide demographic measures are important, they may obscure the most important goal. What if the real targets—the most impactful things that leaders can affect—are the views of 124,785 military and civilian members who voiced varying degrees of dissatisfaction with trust, fairness, bias, opportunity, and relationships? What if leaders were to aim at achieving a future state of affairs where the number of Airmen and Guardians expressing serious concern about bias and racial disparity were to be roughly equal across every race? Would we consider ourselves successful if we were to achieve a societally representative percentage of all demographic categories in all career fields, disciplinary statistics, or other data-driven metrics—if Airmen and Guardians *still* voice discontent? In other words, are we really seeking to eliminate all numerical disparity, and is that an achievable end? — or are we seeking to achieve a professional environment in which all members, regardless of race or the personal career choices they choose to pursue, are generally and equally satisfied with its equity, their own opportunities, the people around them, and the lives they lead within it? It seems likely the latter is far more likely to be the desired effect.

If we are seeking to create a leadership environment where people and units perceive fairness and choose to serve gladly, then perhaps this small change in

how we think about the challenge—operationalizing inclusion as the key to diversity's success—can make all the difference.

Beyond doing what is right from a human perspective, we must again consider external realities we cannot fully control. Modern militaries are already inextricably dependent on competent, committed rear-echelon support personnel and on civilian industry—but future warfare will require an even more intimate degree of interconnection and understanding between very different kinds of people than it ever has. To the degree the core competence of the evolving military profession and its corresponding ethos can be effectively redefined over time, patterns of interaction all throughout that redefined military profession will need to be substantially different than they have historically been if for no other reason than the tasks expected of such a modern military grow increasingly

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broader. As just one example, the interface between military professionals and homeland security personnel crosses jurisdictional, territorial, and conceptual boundaries to intertwine military and civil actors ever more closely. This is traditionally manageable in natural disasters and localized unrest but will be increasingly pressurized by future space and cyber threats and peer competitors capable of viable conventional, not just nuclear, attacks. These kinds of future conflicts already

place a far higher premium on systemic understanding and decision-making, at a more consistently global scale, with greater reference to civilian infrastructures and issues, and in time scales both shorter and longer than traditional military operations and planning have historically encompassed. These trends are accelerating, not slowing.

### Why Inclusion?

Inclusion is powerful. When leaders model, encourage, and expect openness and mutual respect among those they lead, it helps connect the gifts, desires, cultures, constraints, and contributions of every team member, regardless of what they look like. Inclusion is a recognition of common humanity, not

creeds, and outlooks, adding value for each and every individual by seeing and valuing differences and by reinforcing common bonds.

No leader can just summon real or lasting desirable diversity outcomes when the resources to do so lay beyond their authority. Throughout levels of command in the military, but especially at the core unit level of the squadron, leaders have almost no direct influence on the near-term demographic makeup of their unit, nor can they choose the kinds of cognitive diversity that people bring with them. The diversity attainable in any given unit reflects results of birth, education, training, family circumstances, geopolitical events, and innumerable human interactions—most notably

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choice by individuals of all kinds—over periods of years. It also inevitably reflects needs of the military service and the inventory of those who are prepared to fill those needs. In short, very few leaders have direct control over how their unit “looks”—*however, every leader can powerfully set the conditions to enable and create a better future which metrics will then reflect.*

just an organizational imperative; it is the right thing to do. Inclusion elicits the best effort and broadest perspectives—intellectual, cultural, experiential—of all involved, and elevates the performance of an organization by bringing the diversity inherent in its members to bear. An inclusive organization is an attractive organization; it is one in which team members feel valued, heard, and elevated. Talented people will seek to join it; those who are less confident of their talent will see it as a way to move their lives forward; and most importantly, it will be seen as a place where all can flourish. If an organization is truly inclusive, it will be a good place to work—equitably including people of different genders, races, ethnicities,

For any leader in any context, inclusion is a lever they can influence. Leaders can and do control the way they interact, what they model, how they decide, and what they expect, thereby shaping the culture of their organization. They can value each team member’s worth as a person and as a professional, not ignoring their skin color, gender, ethnicity, or any other characteristic, but appreciating it in context. This is not a post-racial mindset; it is a post- and inherently anti-racism mindset, that recognizes and values difference, but encourages and expects common endeavor and values. It reflects the reality that society has much work ahead to address the interplay of interests, social

disparities and injustices, but no individual military or civilian leader in DoD can resolve all such challenges endemic to the pool of those who choose to don the uniform. Nor can they change or erase the past: they can only go forward. Seeking to build a future that does not echo past wrongs, every leader has the power—and the responsibility—to do right in the moment, to include all within their sphere of influence, and help lift those they lead to be their best possible selves.

Importantly, inclusiveness depends on the leaders' good intentions, but also requires a degree of humility that can be seen as superficially antithetical to the discipline, hierarchy and heroic leader stereotypes often associated with the military profession. Inclusion requires mutual respect and true listening; it does not necessarily cede authority or dilute responsibility for leaders, and it recognizes that power shared can be power multiplied for mission accomplishment. Inclusion is a way of structuring a team and an attitude on the part of leaders and team members that comes naturally to some and less to others, so it is incumbent on leaders to create a shared culture that both demonstrates and demands inclusion as the default relationship between teammates and with important partners.

At the strategic level, too, a pattern of thinking of diversity and inclusion in that order subtly tempts us to overlook the reality that diversity is a *dependent* variable; policy can affect some metrics, but an organization's diversity also reflects many individual perspectives and decisions influenced more by the intangibles of organizational culture than by directive. Senior leaders' policy objectives guide personnel systems and processes to attract, retain, and distribute a diverse workforce, but do so in the nationally competitive context; they shape but do not determine diversity outcomes. Without removing all freedom

of choice for people to live as they wish, choose their own professional paths, make choices about family and where and how they live, it is simply not possible to guarantee that any leader at any given level—much less all levels—will be able to mandate proportions of any demographic.

Given that they generally cannot choose who they lead, then, leaders must still build effective teams from whatever human talent and potential they are entrusted with. Those who lead inclusively are more likely to retain diverse teammates and build healthy cultures; those who are blessed with greater diversity *and value it* will benefit accordingly. Diversity without inclusion can institutionalize and magnify resentment, division, and alienation. Put differently, an inclusive organizational climate fosters healthy diversity; while diversity in and of itself does not necessarily lead to inclusion, to personal fulfillment, to excellence in mission accomplishment, or to addressing the concerns expressed in the Racial Disparity Review. How, then do we think about the process of developing more inclusive leaders, particularly those beginning their service in the military profession?

### One Approach to Leader Development

There exists today a useful, still maturing template for achieving diversity's potential through strengthened inclusion. As part of an important developmental framework<sup>2</sup>, the Air Force Academy defines a Leader of Character as one who “lives honorably, lifts others to be their best possible selves, and elevates performance to a common and noble purpose.” From this definition, we can infer some valuable guidelines for developing inclusive leaders for diverse groups of people.

<sup>2</sup> <https://caccapl.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/web/character-development-project/repository/developing-leaders-of-character-conceptual-framework.pdf>

At the fundamental level, leaders who *live honorably* (i.e., consistently practice the virtues embodied in the Air Force's articulated core values of integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do) will necessarily respect themselves and the dignity of others. Those who embrace the goal of living honorably are likely to seek to demonstrate, encourage, and expect honesty, courage, accountability, loyalty, discipline, and a sense of duty to their team's mission. Honor in this sense goes beyond the warrior's honor in battle; it is a larger commitment to doing the right thing for the right reasons, and it inherently drives leaders to be fundamentally inclusive of those with whom they share common purpose, regardless of their differences. In many ways, this is the attribute that makes the US military the apolitical institution that it is: the American military professional honors, supports and defends the Constitution and those chosen to exercise civil authority under its aegis.

Secondly, the leader of character's mandate to *lift others* is not conditioned in any way upon that other's gender, race, religion, ethnicity, or any other immutable (or voluntary) characteristic. As an aspiration, it is unbounded, applying to all in the leader's potential sphere of influence, including subordinates, colleagues, superiors, and sometimes people beyond their immediate team. In practice, it depends on the leader's abilities, energies, closeness of contact with others, and—importantly—the degree of shared understanding they can develop. But whether in theory or practice, achieving the goal of *lifting others* is necessarily inclusive because it depends on a real, constructive, and mutually respectful relationship with the leader. It depends on seeing and caring to know others. It inherently places value on the both the person and contribution of those others, empowering them as individuals and providing powerful motivation for self- and group-oriented positive behaviors. Lifting others

also requires a sense of larger stewardship for inclusive leaders, and mandates they think beyond their immediate unit and needs, considering diversity as an important factor in the many developmental decisions they make that can and do change the course of their subordinates' lives and the character of the future force.

Finally, the leader of character is expected to *elevate performance* to a common and noble purpose. In the professional military context, "elevating performance" often means excellence in assigned mission preparation and mission execution; it can also mean achieving organizational excellence in managing people, developing talent, using resources, acquiring new capabilities, and planning for future challenges. Achieving any of those desirable outcomes requires constructive team members who bring education, training, experience, commitment and courage to bear, among other contributions. An inclusive team elicits the best of everyone on the team; a *diverse team*, inclusively lead and operating, brings even more varied knowledge, life experience, cultural breadth, and a variety of perspectives to any challenge—while powerfully leveraging shared purpose and common human virtues. It stands to reason that a team that is both truly inclusive *and* diverse will do better than those which are neither.

Consistently lifting others and elevating performance is a challenging bar for leaders to reach even in a homogenous setting. Because leaders aren't always successful in forging strong teams, a frequently articulated argument against diversity has been that it can dilute unit cohesion, a vital if intangible component of military victory throughout history. Lack of cohesion can lead to death and defeat. From Shakespeare's Henry V, in which the King prepares his army for battle calling them "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers," to innumerable modern examples, there is no doubt that interpersonal bonds make units stronger

in combat. It is also indisputable that the very nature of the American military's purpose – to employ lethal or other destructive means against identified “others” when properly authorized—accentuates natural human tendencies to form and identify with exclusive groups based on perceived common characteristics. Yet inclusive leaders create an organizational culture that knows the difference and encourages members to rise above instinct, bonding with others based on shared goals, contributions, and experiences. There is no immutable law that says a diverse group cannot share these things; many examples exist of just such groups, from athletic teams to special operations units. The key is in the reciprocal bonds that flow from sharing and experiencing what matters, and inclusion—underpinned by mutual respect—enables that sharing to take place.

A leader of character can gauge how inclusive they and their organizations are by asking some simple questions, every day: Do I *really* listen to my people, and respect what they say whether or not I agree? Do I do so without prejudging their inputs and work based on a pre-existing expectation? Do I model, and see, indications of consistent respect between peers, and between leaders and followers? Do I allow disrespect to exist without correcting it? Are there in- and out-groups? Do I solicit, mentor, recognize and reward excellence and collaborative effort, and do I reject self-centered or prejudiced conduct whenever it becomes apparent? And finally, do I seek to give opportunities to people who bring diversity to the table in race, gender, background, culture, life experience, and cognitive style?

Good leaders in diverse organizations face failures—on the part of individuals or the unit— and must hold people accountable, but do so respectfully and

constructively, where the goal is always the greater good, not the leader's gratification or evasion of responsibility. Leaders at all levels in the Air and Space Forces can do no better at creating inclusive environments than seeking to emulate graduates of the Air Force Weapons School, whose watchwords are humble, approachable, and credible<sup>3</sup>. Those who exhibit those attributes are well equipped to lead inclusively by living honorably, lifting others, and elevating performance.

## Conclusion

The opening assertion of this essay was that the power of “diversity and inclusion” is best achieved by focusing on development of greater inclusion as the universally practical and achievable means to that end, particularly in the military leadership context. This does not diminish the immense importance of achieving greater diversity and minimizing disparity, which is vital for our society and for individuals. In every setting, recruitment, education, mentoring, and other systems must be made relentlessly fair and must eliminate racial and other bias as much as is humanly possible using the tools of policy, law, and other incentives and disincentives. All of these things are necessary, and conscious attention to the diversity of Air and Space Force organizations remains critical.

One caveat is important: while the US military certainly has the potential to achieve real, exemplary success in shaping a high-performing and diverse workforce, it is not because the military has any exclusive claim to moral superiority over the citizenry it serves. Rather, the military recruits capable people by its nature, has the luxury of a compelling set of missions to incentivize shared purpose and most of the resources to do so in reasonable fashion, and benefits from an historic and collective expectation

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/humble-approachable-experts/>

of sacrificial service that provides overt and admirable standards for all military members to achieve. Thus it can serve as a useful template for nonpartisan, principled, and inclusive service without claiming any particular birthright to do so. This is in the best democratic tradition.

Consistent with that tradition, inclusion is the most available and most important leadership tool to enhance diversity over time and holds the greatest promise of maximizing both satisfaction and contribution for individual people and the Department of the Air Force. All leaders, at all levels, lead more effectively when they strive to be more inclusive, respecting and valuing diversity and valuing without accentuating difference, thus lifting all around them—regardless of demographic category—to be the best they can be. Leaders who think beyond the present, as stewards of the future military profession, will invest in development of people, valuing diversity of all kinds in their decisions. Successful inclusion of a fuller degree of the talents of more people of more different kinds cannot help but elevate the performance of the organizations in which they work. Even more, realized inclusiveness brings out the best in individuals and makes diversity not just a matter of metrics, but of more fulfilled and fairly treated people.

Our national motto—*e pluribus unum*—depends equally on the many, and on the one. We can't have unity without embracing all. The inclusive many make for one powerful, diverse, and exemplary military.

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