

FEATURE ARTICLES

Talking and Listening to Build a Stronger Military: Cosmopolitan Communication as an Essential Skill of Military Leader Development

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ABSTRACT

The United States military is a highly respected national institution. Military personnel are called to represent and defend American values and build American identity, but these ideas are not fixed. In fact, the question of what it means to be “American,” is contested ground, and the experience of what it means to be “American” varies based on race, gender, and many other categories of demographic difference. In the wake of significant and growing political division and unrest, senior American military leaders have called on the force to engage in hard conversations about these topics. However, without a roadmap for guiding such largely subjective and often emotionally charged discussions, the results could yield unintended consequences. This paper offers a theoretical and practical toolkit for engaging in such conversations, drawing from the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory and its particular application in Cosmopolitan Communication approaches and perspectives. The authors argue that by engaging in this communicative work, military leaders can acquire necessary skills and insights to potentially build a stronger, more inclusive and ultimately more effective military.

Introduction

Imagine this scene: Airmen are deployed in August 2017, and they are trying their best to keep up with the news at home while focusing on the mission at hand. Partisan divisions in the United States over a variety of issues have dominated the news, but conversations within the Air Force are subdued and difficult due to the professional norm of remaining apolitical and nonpartisan. The group of airmen doesn't really know what to make of the controversy about Confederate statues or the Black Lives Matter movement, but like many Americans, they cannot really articulate why. The airmen know things are not as they should be, yet they are unsure how to talk about what they see. As news coverage of the killing of Heather Heyer, and injury of 19 counter-protestors at a "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA, reaches their unit, one of the airmen is particularly perplexed and disturbed.

Following his return to the United States, the airman finds himself at an Air Force-sponsored conference on military cultural competence and, at the end of a presentation, he gathers the courage to tell his story and to ask his question. This white airman asks for help in making sense of the events in Charlottesville, which seem far removed from the ideals he believes U.S. military service is supposed to represent and protect. The country he sees on the news feels very different from the country he thought he knew, and nobody in his unit seemed to know how to talk to each other about it. He sums up his concerns by saying, "This isn't us . . . this is not who we are . . . this isn't America."

But across the auditorium, a black female airman's raised eyebrow, sideways glance, and sigh suggest a different perspective. Her body language says: "It may not be your America, but it seems pretty much in line with mine." The presenters, catching her expression, pause before praising the first airman's courage in raising difficult questions about how to interpret and talk about this traumatic event. They go on to say that while most airmen, and probably most in the audience, would agree that the Charlottesville events represented a tragic episode, there may be diverse

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viewpoints on whether they constitute a departure from American history.

In that auditorium, this brief exchange opened up a whole range of questions, important for American military personnel to reflect upon and talk about: What does it mean to be an American? Whose experiences and perspectives are accepted as normative? What do different ideas about American identity and values mean when it is time for American service members to deploy in service of the state? Why does it matter that American service members understand and acknowledge the complexity within their own society as long as they are competent and well trained, effectively carrying out orders in service of broader national security objectives?

These are more than rhetorical or philosophical questions. Our collective responses to these questions should shape training and education within the American armed forces, and military leaders must be equipped to facilitate the difficult conversations that might help answer such questions. While engaging in hard conversations may induce some level of discomfort in the short term, navigating and leading them, will result in a stronger military in the long term.

American service members need a sophisticated understanding of American history, identity, society, and culture, and its inherent tensions and complexities. The United States military is a national institution, so the organization should reflect national interests and values. But there may be competing interpretations about what these are, and about what it means to be an American. Military personnel at every level should be aware of these differences, and senior military leaders, commanders, senior noncommissioned officers, mentors, and educators in military-academic

institutions should devote serious attention and resources to helping American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines understand and confront them. Leading such conversations has the potential to strengthen the American warrior ethos by expecting and modeling perspective taking, empathetic leadership, and moral courage. Such ongoing mentoring, leader development, and education, if done well, may ultimately strengthen the health and effectiveness of military units.

In this article, we suggest that American military leaders have a duty to help all service members recognize and acknowledge the diverse experiences and perspectives among their ranks. Such diversity has long been a part of espoused American identity and values and enables the American military to operate effectively as a national institution. To help leaders meet the challenge of leading a diverse organization in the twenty-first century, we propose an approach for developing this kind of awareness based upon the practical theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) and its intellectual relative, Cosmopolitan Communication.

Whose Values? Whose Interests? Whose Experiences?

The need for leaders who are capable of cultivating and managing diverse perspectives on complex social issues, especially those surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion, is perhaps more pressing now than ever. In the last few years, the United States has been rocked by a series of events—from protests, to police violence, the #MeToo movement, to a violent assault at the U.S. Capitol—that seem to demand interpretation, explanation, justice, and reconciliation. The military has not been immune from the effects of these deep fissures, but military organizations and leaders have sometimes had difficulty confronting these issues

directly because they are fundamentally *political* ones, and dealing with them directly may challenge service members' deeply-held assumptions and norms that the military should be an apolitical institution in the United States.

In a few short months in 2020, military leaders from every service called on service members and civilian employees to engage in critical self-reflection, listening, conversation, and action to ensure the American military is modeling, as well as defending, American values. Senior leaders in the Army, including Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy, Chief of Staff of the Army General James McConville, and Sergeant Major of the Army Michael Grinston wrote: "To Army leaders of all ranks, listen to your people, but don't wait for them to come to you. Go to them. Ask the uncomfortable questions. Lead with compassion and humility, and create an environment in which people feel comfortable expressing grievances" (2020, para. 3). In June 2020, General David Goldfein, then Chief of Staff of the Air Force, urged Air Force members to read then Chief Master Sergeant Kaleth Wright's Op-Ed, WHO AM I, and issued a call to commanders: "Discussing our different life experiences and viewpoints can be tough, uncomfortable, and therefore often avoided. But we have been presented a crisis. We can no longer walk by this problem" (2020, para. 3).

As powerful as these statements are, an underlying assumption seems to be that the nation's identity, values, and interests are widely known and agreed upon, their meanings fixed, self-evident, and uncontested. We suggest they are anything but. Rather, they are dynamic and evolving ideas that have rhetorical, cultural, and political power. From a social constructionist perspective, we might say that there are values espoused, and there are values enacted;

these are not always one and the same. The American government and American citizens ask American service members to protect and defend the nation, to uphold national values, and to serve and sacrifice in support of these objectives. In return, the country—its citizens, leaders, and institutions—owes it to service members serious conversations about what these core values and ideas mean. The imperative for this work seems clear, as the country is in the midst of engaging serious and difficult conversations about the interplay of race, sexuality, religion, region, class, gender, and immigration on American national identity. Engaging in these conversations will require moral courage, resilience, and fortitude—essential to the warrior ethos the country seeks to develop in its service members. They will not be easy, and some of them may reveal systemic and difficult problems that must be remedied. Leaders who embrace the contemporary warrior ethos will not shy away from the challenge.

Understanding (and Embracing) Complexity

Service members come from all over the United States, and they bring with them a range of knowledge and perspectives, and a host of life experiences. Increasingly, among newly enlisted or commissioned military members, these perspectives include a narrower and narrower representation of the diversity of the American nation in terms of region, the legacy of family service, and socio-economic status (CFR, 2020). At the same time, the American military of the twenty-first century is as diverse as it ever has been in terms of race and ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and other surface measures of diversity (Parker et al., 2017).

The idea that the United States military might be an important institution for building and defining

a uniquely American identity is not new. The United States military, from the American Revolution on, has been a powerful nationalizing force. The Continental Army was a key symbol in uniting rebels from different colonies into an American fighting force, which could become the foundation for a new nation (Royster, 2011). In *Americans All*, an examination of the integration of foreign-born soldiers in the American Army of World War I, Nancy Gentile Ford argues that the military, as an institution, created space for celebrating both American nationalist and ethnic identities (Gentile Ford, 2001). Thomas Brusino argues that the experience of the Second World War “caused a dramatic shift from intolerance to tolerance in white ethnic and religious relations in America.” (2010, p. 3). Ron Krebs convincingly argues that increased access to the rights and obligations of citizenship is at least partly won through successful military service (2006). All of this together means that military service *itself* has been a recognized pathway, historically, for Americans to form a collective identity. We suggest that, at this critical juncture, if concrete and specific discussions—about this identity, about defining America’s most cherished values, about recent events that might challenge assumptions and lead to disparate viewpoints and opinions—are not held intentionally, American military leaders may miss an opportunity to contribute constructively to a national debate on these important matters.

Consider, for instance, how Americans understand *freedom* and *democracy*—two ideas that most Americans would agree are central to American national identity. From the earliest days when European settler colonists established themselves in North America, freedom was a watchword for some, while being denied to others. Democracy has likewise been a messy endeavor. The Articles of Confederation,

ratified in 1781, were scrapped just six years later. Drafting the U.S. Constitution involved contentious debates by delegates on issues including representation and slavery. The problem of slavery would eventually rend the country, resulting in secession and war. Jim Crow laws created racial injustices whose legacies remain well into the twenty-first century. Women were not franchised until 1919 (and then, only white women), and their freedom of movement and bodily autonomy have been limited by law and custom, which often have required a husband’s or father’s permission to access certain rights. Access to voting, fundamental to democratic participation, is still uneven across racial groups in the United States, with Black Americans routinely waiting longer to cast a vote than white Americans and non-white groups having lower voter registration rates than white Americans (Chen et al., 2019; Soloman et al., 2019; Minnis and Shah, 2020). The experience of American democracy and American freedom—and consequently our interpretations of and the stories we tell about them—is unequal and differentiated, especially by race, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship status.

Moving Toward a “Cosmopolitan” Solution

One way military leaders and educators might support service members and the civilians who work alongside them is to address divergent perspectives and experiences about complex social issues through the inclusion of Cosmopolitan Communication approaches and techniques in our teaching and training. The Cosmopolitan Communication model (Pearce, 1989) offers ways to consider difference among people and perspectives while simultaneously acknowledging commonality—holding these in tension, and thus in balance, with one another. It involves creating capacity for recognizing and respecting diverse worldviews and

offers some strategies for managing potentially difficult interactions across a range of social contexts. Good leaders cultivate teams, and teams are most effective when they share purpose, and value and trust each other. Cosmopolitan Communication principles offer leaders one way to acknowledge diverse perspectives and strengthen communication in their teams.

Cosmopolitan Communication derives from the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) Theory (Pearce & Cronen, 1980), which views communication as a primary force in creating social reality, not simply a means of transmitting information between sender and receiver. CMM focuses on the *process* of communication and considers its *forms* as important to meaning-making as the informational content in any given message. It is a practical theory whose approaches and heuristics have been usefully applied to public discourse involving polemic issues and polarized positions. Its utility is due, in part, to CMM's social constructionist view of communicating as shaping social reality, which denotes a certain agency in how individuals make meaning, engage in communicative practice, and manage difficult conversations. Steen, Mackenzie & Buechner (2018) argue that CMM is "a particularly useful concept to be taught to populations where diversity and complexity of experience—and potential for conflicting worldviews—are considerations" (p. 402). As the preferred form of communication identified by CMM Theory, Cosmopolitan Communication offers helpful ways to approach difference and embodies strategies for more effective interaction among diverse perspectives, peoples, and cultures.

Three qualities key to understanding Cosmopolitan Communication are coherence, coordination, and mystery. In interaction, people engage simultaneously

in coordination (of collective action); experiencing *coherence* (collective sense-making and interpretation); and dealing with the presence and effects of *mystery*, or things that cannot be predicted, such as what one could have otherwise said and done - stories left untold, unanticipated interpretations, different stories that might have been used to make sense of an interaction. A leader must balance these elements to help the group create shared meaning while getting things done and being alert for the unexpected or emergent.

According to Pearce (2004), there are certain responsibilities inherent to the development of Cosmopolitan Communication. The first of these is to stop thinking about communication in terms of messages, channels, and receivers, and to instead think in terms of patterns, systems and relationships. Next is to have a third-party perspective or to recognize one's own stories as merely one set among many; to treat others' stories with interest and respect; and to examine situations from the perspectives of others, as well as one's own. Making this kind of change comes with personal development, or a shift in the way the leader looks at the world.

Moving from "Us and Them" to "All of Us"

Pearce described communication in multicultural societies and contexts as developing upwards through four levels, or forms: monocultural, ethnocentric, modernistic, and cosmopolitan (1989). The primary difference among these forms is the way that "others," and their sense-making resources and practices, are regarded and treated (Parrish-Sprowl, 2014; Penman & Jensen, 2019). Practically, these forms determine how members of a given society behave toward and interact with others. "Are they treated "as 'native' or non-native, or 'like us', or 'not like us?'" (Penman & Jensen, 2019,

p. 61). For example, within a particular cultural group, members might assume that other members of the group think and act much like they do, thereby treating them like “us.” Defining other people as being “like us” means identifying with a common set of values, practices, and stories, which enables fairly standard interpretations of events and circumstances.

Are one’s own ways seen as the best (or perhaps the only) ways to make sense of the world; or are others’ ways, truths, and stories given legitimacy and validity?

But this assumption of similarity does not always hold up, as this paper’s initial anecdote demonstrated. The consequence of such misidentification is that a group may use the same words to signify different things, and/or hold different interpretations of historical and contemporary events that are never brought to the surface because of an assumption of shared identity and interpretation. These failed assumptions of likeness leave important differences related to identity and self-awareness just under the surface, primed to induce miscommunication, misunderstanding, and mistrust amongst people who must (in the case of our military personnel), work together to accomplish vital missions. This is one reason we argue that it is important to recognize and acknowledge different perspectives on issues related to American identity, values, and diversity in American society.

The second distinction among the communication forms lies in how others’ sense-making resources (e.g., their worldviews, perspectives, assumptions, values, beliefs) are regarded. Are one’s own resources and

practices considered inviolate, as truth, as fact—while others’ are viewed as foolish or false? Are one’s own ways seen as the best (or perhaps the only) ways to make sense of the world; or are others’ ways, truths, and stories given legitimacy and validity?

Creating More Common Ground: Another Look at Charlottesville

This article opened with the scenario of an airman asking hard questions as he tried to make sense of the traumatic events of Charlottesville. Applying Cosmopolitan Communication framing, we will next consider how this approach may help to reconcile conflicting perceptions. We might begin by asking ourselves how others’ interpretations of Charlottesville’s events; divergent experiences of different individuals and groups in American society; and disparate perspectives about what it means to be American may be acknowledged as authentic, even if these differ from our own? Through each form or level described below, we will see how the responses to such questions evolve.

The *monocultural* pattern of communication embodies a perspective in which all are considered “local natives.” There is only one group (us), and one set of stories, interpretations, and practices. Everyone is considered to be more or less the same, and there is little or no awareness of the possibility of difference. A person with a monocultural worldview sees his or her world as the world and assumes that others in this world are just like him or her, with the same story. There is only one world, one truth, and one “us.” A person who comes from a monocultural perspective would likely reject outright the notion that that the violence at the demonstrations was in any way representative of America or Americans, dismissing it as an aberration. Such a view would not recognize a different

interpretation of the episode as an unfortunate legacy from a troubled history of white supremacy whose reach still haunts us today. In trying to make sense of how the Charlottesville events could occur and finding it difficult to reconcile with the America that he loves and serves, but recognizing that something larger is at play he can't put his finger on, the airman is demonstrating a shift from a monocultural perspective to one that acknowledges a different possibility, a different interpretation of events.

The next level of communication within Pearce's framework is the ethnocentric form. Herein there is an awareness of difference, with sharp distinctions drawn between "us" and "them," "our" ways and "their" ways. People may share tight bonds with those in their own group and eschew interaction with those who are different, drawing clear boundaries between insiders and outsiders. The ethnocentric perspective regards others' stories, beliefs, and practices with skepticism or suspicion, viewing them as threatening or undermining locals' own, and thus as inferior or wrong.

An ethnocentric approach to the discussion of the Charlottesville violence might concede: "Yes, there are different voices and perspectives on this matter. Some might suggest that what occurred in Charlottesville, while dreadful, is not inconsistent with their understanding of the American story—the good, the bad, and the ugly. But I believe that event is a deviation. It doesn't fit our American narrative, and it is not who we are. People who believe otherwise do not understand how America works or what it truly means to be American. They are wrong, and these competing interpretations are part of the problem we face in our country."

The *modernistic* perspective recognizes an array of stories, interpretations, and practices, and considers

most to have intrinsic merit and value as long as they involve some kind of 'Western progress' motif. Parrish-Sprowl (2014, p. 301) suggests in that the "absence of any preferred set of stories, combined with the ever-changing set of stories based on progress, leaves those enmeshed in modernity form without a sense of place and exhausted . . . with no effort to preserve or protect" local stories and practices. In other words, in recognizing everyone else's stories and ways as ok, but not privileging their own group's, people are left with no glue to bind them together, which presents a problem for cohesion—for the development of group identity, values, and customs.

A modernistic interpretation of the Charlottesville events might go something like this: "There are so many stories about the Charlottesville protests and violence. Some of these resonate with some groups, while different stories are meaningful to other groups. Why bother trying to determine which stories make more sense? Let's not worry about making collective meaning about what is going on; we can simply all carry on with our own understanding."

Cosmopolitan Communication, on the other hand, acknowledges and values the ways that people, their perspectives, and their sense-making resources are at once similar and different. It takes into account group differences but does not consider being different as being inferior, and deliberately shades the boundaries between "us" and "them" (indeed, within this framework, everyone is both "us" and "them.") According to Penman and Jensen (2019), the Cosmopolitan form strains the taxonomy set up by the two dimensions of how others are treated and how their resources are regarded, because it "simultaneously treats others as natives and not-natives" and treats their stories and resources with respect without sacrificing insiders' cherished values and ways, thus embodying

a “both/and logic that is possible because of the recognition that all cultures are socially constructed in communication” (p.66). Competing perspectives are therefore not problematic; members of a group can value their own perspectives, stories, and interpretation of events while simultaneously recognizing others’ as valid, legitimate, and important to them, without having to agree or disagree, approve or disapprove.

In considering Charlottesville’s tragic events and the ensuing aftermath, a Cosmopolitan approach might sound like this: “I believe that the America showcased in the Charlottesville protests is not the America I know and love. But I recognize that others may have a very different interpretation of this event—one that may be painful for me to hear and even harder for me to believe. It is an alternative perspective that suggests the America depicted in Charlottesville is not an aberration or anomaly—it was far from the first time (and unlikely to be the last time) that racially-motivated hatred and violence have marked public interactions. I may not like this perspective, but I acknowledge that it is real to others, and that their perspective matters. Maybe I can ask some questions to understand better what they are trying to say.”

Cosmopolitan Communication and Leadership

As we have just seen, a Cosmopolitan Communication perspective creates a space in which reaching a single agreed-upon interpretation is not the goal. Rather, the space created by Cosmopolitan Communication enables a recognition of both common ground and departure points, and requires an on-going, deliberate process of engaging with and respecting others, and their divergent points of view. The Cosmopolitan form does not necessarily end in agreement or compromise, but holds in tension (and thus, in balance) different ways of looking at the world.

Such a space may be difficult to imagine in a military context, where uniformity, conformity, hierarchy, collective identity, and othering are baked into the culture and perhaps even the purpose of the institution. Putting on the uniform is supposed to elide difference and erase individual identity—in uniform, an individual represents the embodiment of both the state’s power and its values. On the opposite side, the enemy is literally and figuratively, “othered.” The enemy cannot be like us. Military culture is therefore primed toward ethnocentric forms of communication, but it does not have to be that way. We argue in some cases it may be effective for building resilience and cohesion for military leaders to cultivate a cosmopolitan approach toward communication, which emphasizes the *coordination* of meaning over coherence. This task is not simple, and in a military environment, such an approach might even be seen as radical. It is, however, worth the effort, because leaders who have the skills to hold space for and facilitate these conversations will enable important systemic and cultural change.

Cultivating Cosmopolitan Communication Perspectives

We do not suggest that incorporating Cosmopolitan Communication perspectives into military organizations will resolve challenges that are as old as the country’s founding. Cosmopolitan Communication is not the right tool, for example, for confronting disinformation in the ranks. But it can help where experiences and interpretations are at the center of disagreements. In such cases, we argue that developing this leadership capacity can help the American military improve cohesiveness, and thereby, readiness and operational effectiveness. Specifically, leaders should model these concepts to help service members with the process of recognizing and valuing the diverse perspectives and experiences of those

servicing alongside them. It is a tool for acknowledging difference while also recognizing common ground.

Leaders must take responsibility for facilitating these important and difficult conversations and can equip themselves with tools to enable and encourage their peers and subordinates to cultivate a Cosmopolitan Communication perspective. Classroom settings, from commissioning sources such as Professional Military Education (PME) and Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) education, offers opportunities to explicitly model and teach Cosmopolitan Communication techniques and principles. In such settings case studies, critical incident methodologies, and circular questioning (Steen et al., 2018) are all potential techniques. Of these approaches, circular (or systemic) questioning offers perhaps the most useful tool for engaging in informal or semi-structured conversations, such as might also occur outside a classroom setting within established groups such as military units. Therefore, we focus here on that technique by examining how it might be applied in the initial scenario.

Circular questioning represents a significant advance in the development of leadership skills for working with differing perspectives and heading off potential conflict within units. Chen (2014) describes systemic (or circular) questioning as a “powerful tool for demonstrating connections and revealing relationships within and between groups, organizations, and communities” (p. 173). Circular questioning emphasizes that points of difference are constructed in relational context as opposed to focusing on “facts;” thus, the technique is “ideally suited to the sorts of social issues that divide communities and groups” (Chen, 2014, p. 173). It has been successfully used in contexts ranging

from family therapy, to debriefing among healthcare teams, to community dialogue involving contentious issues (for an extended example of the latter, see Spano, 2001; Chen, 2004) and has likewise been employed in educational settings to help students explore their own assumptions and positions on various topics, and to

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identify commonalities among different value systems or common ground on controversial subjects (Steen et al., 2018). While circular questioning is not itself neutral or value-free, it is an accessible method that can help participants better understand different levels of context, and engage in reframing of their own and others’ stories in meaningful ways (Rossmann, 1995).

Circular Questioning and Charlottesville

Reflecting back to our initial scenario of the airman struggling to reconcile Charlottesville’s events with the America he believes in, and another airman’s perspective on the events as not incompatible with her own understanding of the American experience, we might engage a circular (or systemic) questioning approach to carefully elicit further discussion among the group. We could ask descriptive questions to prompt others to share their perspectives and experiences on the events in Charlottesville and help ascertain what they know and believe about not only this episode, but also the larger history of race and racial discrimination in America. For example, by asking participants in the conversation to describe what they observed, we might uncover

different perspectives by thinking about the words we use to describe who was there and what happened. Do our audience members imagine protestors and counter-protesters, demonstrators, innocent bystanders, white supremacists, activists, or agitators? Was it a march, a rally, a demonstration, a protest, a riot, a mob? How does our language reflect our experience and shape our perspectives? We could likewise ask participants how they would describe Charlottesville's events in terms of its historical nature—that is, is it divergent from or consistent with their understanding of American history. We could further ask them to imagine who else might describe it as the former, or the latter.

Additionally, we could use reflective questions to engage a historical perspective on the issue and expand the timeline and/or the context, enabling creation of common ground among the participants. For example, we might ask audience members to consider how they would interpret and explain the significance of the events in Charlottesville had they occurred in 1880 vs. now, and what has changed/not changed in the time since. Or we could ask them to reflect upon how we might perceive and describe these events had they occurred in a different country, instead of the United States. In our experience, using circular questions such as these can facilitate perspective-taking, depersonalize positions, and prevent conflict between people from diverse backgrounds from spiraling out of control, thus enabling groups to construct shared perspectives (although not necessarily agreement) by encouraging participants to “draw connections between their personal stories and their position, and between their own and others' voices” (Chen, 2014, p. 175) in meaningful ways.

In addition to the examples we have already provided of Cosmopolitan Communication dynamics and circular questioning, Penman and Jensen (2019) suggest a number of other ways to strengthen cosmopolitan

perspectives and build skills to bridge differences. Some of these include:

- developing genuine curiosity about others' stories,
- considering biases as starting points for understanding, rather than “end points to be defended or protected from exploration”,
- deep, holistic listening (being fully present, listening for what is said and unsaid, and listening for meanings that are larger than what is occurring in any one episode or incident), and
- dialogic skills that feature the capacity to hold in tension one's own valued traditions, beliefs and practices while enacting an openness and appreciation for others' (p. 70).

Developing these skillsets is an important element of professional development for military leaders to empower them to engage in and lead meaningful exchanges and conversations about important, but controversial and challenging, subjects. Familiarization with Cosmopolitan Communication principles may be especially useful in officer commissioning sources, PME, and in NCO education. This cadre of leaders can then incorporate these techniques into the conversations, professional development, and training in military units.

Avoiding Mixed Signals in Leadership Communication

Before we go further, it is important to note that CMM and Cosmopolitan Communication do not require that discriminatory or bigoted viewpoints are positions that must be accepted or integrated. At the same time, they mitigate against the social pressure to label other perspectives as such, which often effectively shuts down conversation. Instead, we suggest that Cosmopolitan Communication perspectives could create openings to help others reconstruct their own interpretations and stories through engaging strategies such as systemic

questioning, helping participants “reflect on their social standing in the community and create a sense of ‘grouping’ so they can see and hear the complex process by which differences, inequalities, power, and privilege are socially created in interaction” (Chen, 2014, p. 175). Cosmopolitan Communication perspectives therefore offer ways to acknowledge and account for divergent perspectives while continuing the engagement of difficult conversations.

While the broader social project may include ongoing dialogue between different groups and viewpoints, there is the prospect of real harm in asking people from underrepresented and minoritized groups to work alongside others who may hold discriminatory or bigoted views in the name of continuing hard conversations. Adopting Cosmopolitan Communication approaches is not a magic bullet, but these tools offer a framework for engaging in the hard conversations that leaders are calling for. It asks military leaders and military members to work through these moments of discomfort and disagreement rather than striving to eliminate the source of the discomfort altogether. Even so, the military, given its particular mission and requirements, may need to draw some red lines for expressing views or supporting organizations that are antithetical or hostile to its values or to the United States and its government.

We agree with military senior leaders that hard conversations are necessary, but hard conversations alone are insufficient to create and sustain lasting organizational cultural change. Hard conversations are worthwhile, but leaders must be careful to avoid two traps: one, that the burden of these hard conversations falls disproportionately on minoritized members of the community and second, that leaders mistakenly believe that conversation is sufficient to remedy historical and contemporary inequities due to race, gender, ethnicity,

religion, sexual orientation, region, language, or a host of other characteristics.

The Dangers of Feeling Unheard - A Call to Inclusive Leadership

Jada Johnson, a black woman currently serving in the US Navy, has written pointedly about these challenges from her own perspective and experience. In response to previous, less sophisticated efforts to build bridges and discuss issues of race and gender, Johnson reminds readers that such conversations are often unequally burdensome, given significant power differentials within the service. She writes, “What happens when I tell the truth about the racism I have experienced in the Navy? I’ll tell you: it does not go well” (2020, para. 8). She lists a litany of responses that she has experienced based on such encounters including defensiveness, dismissiveness, denial, and antagonism. All of these are indicators of the pervasiveness of monocultural and ethnocentric viewpoints. When the burden is on individual service members—and often those who are in positions of relatively less power—and conversations are not skillfully facilitated, the results can be harmful rather than helpful.

Johnson calls these burdensome conversations, coffee conversations, from the practice of someone reaching out, to informally talk over coffee, just one-on-one. The initiator assumes “that such discussions take place on neutral ground, where equal conditions exist, and where each person can share their experiences and thoughts openly and freely in an environment that is presumably free from the very racism we are discussing” (2020, para. 9). But coffee conversations are often not experienced in that way. Instead, these types of conversations center on, and reinforce, the majority perspective on the topic of discussion, rather than the lived experiences of the minoritized group. As Johnson points out, this imbalance leads to further divisiveness

and fuels a sense of not belonging or resentment that can undermine morale and cohesiveness.

Conclusions - Cosmopolitan Communication as a 21st Century Leadership Imperative

Building successful teams is at the heart of military effectiveness and readiness (Goodwin et al., 2018). The literature, particularly from the corporate world, suggests that more diverse teams can produce better results when difference is embraced and purposefully leveraged. At the same time, diverse teams may experience more friction and less social cohesion than homogenous ones (Rock et al., 2016; Selvadurai & Dasgupta, 2016). Without a proactive effort to create a sense of common purpose, diverse teams may not feel as comfortable as homogenous ones, and trust and empathy may be harder to develop. The key is that diverse teams must be carefully managed, trust built over time, and empathy developed, so the team can reap the rewards of diversity (Shemla & Wegge, 2019; Boisjoly et al., 2006). Indeed, building teams is a fundamental task for military leaders, who have always been called to create unity and reinforce common purpose amidst competing narratives, especially since the emergence of the all-volunteer force. What we are suggesting and offering is a set of conceptual tools and strategies for doing so in the current environment.

With the importance of communication and trust to effective team-building, especially among high-performing teams, clearly identified (Hakanen, Hakkinen & Soudunsaari, 2015; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Erdem & Ozen, 2003), we further see benefits for individuals using cosmopolitan communication strategies to engage in hard conversations. The work of facilitating these conversations using the tools of Cosmopolitan Communication means that the burden for such conversations, and subsequent action, is on

the group and its leader—not on any one individual. Individuals are expected to speak for themselves, rather than to speak for their imagined group. Furthermore, understanding oneself as part of a community, with a common purpose and identity, is essential for mental health and resilience (Seng et al., 2012; Cacioppo et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2016; Yamada et al., 2013). Military members who do not feel fully integrated into the group, who perceive their experiences as being atypical or outside the norm, may suffer stress and anxiety related to their minoritized position.

Conversations based in the principles of Cosmopolitan Communication center the experiences of all involved and demand careful listening. The movement towards a cosmopolitan sensibility is not a simple matter, and it does not occur overnight. It involves deliberate and sometimes uncomfortable engagement of different worldviews, cultivating mindsets and skillsets that involve respect for difference and perspective-taking—which does not necessarily imply agreement with or approval of others' positions, but rather the ability to hear them as valid and meaningful to them. These processes, of course, are not new to military contexts. In fact, military leaders who are familiar with the concepts of red-teaming, wargaming, and intelligence analysis of adversaries may have some of the mindset and mental habits already required. The work of hard conversations, requires leaders to focus this effort internally to draw from the wisdom of different experiences and perspectives within their own teams. Framing such conversations as essential to the development of a professional identity and warrior ethos, rather than as tangential to the military's mission, is also important to create trust and buy-in from all members of an organization.

As Penman and Jensen (2019) point out, the development of cosmopolitan capacities requires hard

work “made harder because the skills necessary for being cosmopolitan are not part of a normal school curriculum, they are not encouraged or cultivated as part of the process of becoming adults and they are not supported by the mainstream cultural values of a Western way of life” (p. 69). Nonetheless, the attempt to instill such perspectives and skills is a worthwhile one for military communities and organizations, one that we believe will result in a strengthened, more cohesive military and ultimately, we hope, a more perfect union.

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