

The continued misunderstanding of Diversity in the DoD
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To remain competitive in a global business environment, organizations rely on workforce diversity and inclusion to achieve mission success. A diverse workforce is equipped with unique capabilities, talents, knowledge and skills that can be utilized to accomplish organizational goals. In order to capitalize on these diverse skills and expertise, organizations must foster an inclusive work environment that values, integrates and embraces individual differences, as well as similarities. Due to the current combat mission, terrorism, shift in demographics, and projected labor shortfalls, the Department of Defense (DoD) has prioritized diversity and inclusion in its workforce management philosophy. In pursuing this objective, the DoD must ensure the attractiveness of a DoD career by providing an inclusive environment for all personnel (active and reserve military, civilian, and contractors) to reach their potential and maximize their contributions to the organization.

Currently, the number of ethnic/racial minority senior leaders in the DoD account for roughly 9 percent of commissioned officers (military ranks are the highest) while ethnic/racial minorities account for only 7 percentages of civilian Senior Executive Service (SES) leaders (Peterson, 2007; Turner, 2008). Taking into account that ethnic/racial minorities account for over 25% of the DoD workforce, such senior leader trends are troublesome. Given the disparate senior leadership trends in the DoD, a congressional committee, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MLDC) was established less than one year ago to investigate barriers to upward mobility for women and racial/ethnic minorities in the DoD. Specifically, the MLDC was tasked to "conduct a comprehensive evaluation and assessment of policies that provide opportunities for the promotion and advancement of minority members of the Armed Forces, including minority members who are senior officers" (The Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act, 2009). Within one year of initiation, the MLDC must submit a report to Congress and the President

which offers findings, recommendations, and other important information for improving diversity within the DoD.

Research and practice alike provide substantial evidence of the benefits associated with diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Herring, 2009; Richard, 2000). These benefits include increased effectiveness, competitiveness, and enhanced mission readiness, which are achieved by leveraging human potential and selectively tapping into the unique skill sets of organizational members. Unfortunately, some researchers and practitioners have incorrectly defined the term *diversity* by using it interchangeably with equal opportunity {(EO) (racial/ethnic or gender representation)}. EO generally ensures that an organization does not practice employment discrimination. On the other hand, diversity and inclusion programs are more strategic in focus and strive to capitalize on the strengths of the workforce, while minimizing the weaknesses that inhibit optimal organizational performance. Given this confusion, the authors recently supported the efforts of the MLDC and conducted a study to explore perceptions and understanding of diversity in the Armed Services.

A total of 3,943 personnel participated in the data collection in the winter of 2009. Military personnel from all services were represented (150 Air Force; 2186 Army; 130 Coast Guard; 705 Marine Corps; 771 Navy). They completed a 15-item measure of diversity leadership which was designed to evaluate the perceptions of military personnel in regard to the definition of diversity, importance/value of diversity, and leadership support toward diversity initiatives.

Findings demonstrated a significant difference in rank where *Military Officers* ($M= 3.69$, $SD= .51$) displayed stronger perceptions and understanding of diversity leadership in comparison to *Enlisted Members* ($M= 3.51$, $SD= .61$). Further, military personnel who held favorable perceptions of diversity leadership were more likely to hold more favorable perceptions of positive equal opportunity climate ($r = .19$), organizational commitment ($r = .47$), trust ($r = .53$), work group effectiveness ($r = .39$), workgroup cohesion ($r = .42$), leadership ($r = .50$), and job satisfaction ($r = .51$). On the other hand, favorable perceptions of diversity leadership were negatively related to the following variables, racist behaviors ($r = -.26$), differential command behaviors toward minorities ($r = -.23$), sexual harassment

($r = -.29$), religious discrimination ($r = -.25$), age discrimination ($r = -.25$), and disability discrimination ($r = -.20$).

During this session, the results of the study will be discussed along with independent interviews conducted with military members after the conclusion of this study. The findings will be used as a platform to integrate research with practice given the presenters will discuss and provide recommendations for how these findings can be of assistance to researchers and practitioners.

References

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