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Interrupting Bias in Army Talent Management

Danielle Holt and Susan Davis

ABSTRACT: This article addresses the impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion on talent management. It explains how systemic bias impairs the US Army's ability to harness cognitive diversity. It stresses the value of cognitive diversity among teams and senior leadership and how cumulative bias impacts the entire career cycle of an individual. It concludes by offering practical suggestions to reduce bias in the assignment, promotion, and selection processes.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, talent management, unconscious bias

The modernization of US Army talent management must include the development of a more innovative and inclusive culture to meet future threats. The Army ethic represents the primary advantage over near-peer adversaries, requiring processes and transparency in senior leadership selection to reflect the diversity of the Total Force. Future threats will blur the lines between competition and conflict and physical and cognitive warfare. The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments of the future will require the Army to harness its collective cognitive diversity to achieve situational awareness and create narratives of purpose. All will require flatter, highly innovative, and inclusive teams to integrate team capabilities and talents.

Unconscious bias within assignment and evaluation processes is a potential threat and an opportunity for enhanced meritocracy. Assessments should move toward the identification of desired knowledge, skills, and behaviors and the evaluation of potential using relational analytics. Army talent management must foster the selection of cognitively diverse leaders who demonstrate competencies of confident humility and mental agility to generate organizational psychological safety. Only by leveraging the complete scope of diversity through an inclusive culture will the Army be able to prevail in the cognitive dimension.

The year 2020 marked a significant shift in Army personnel management as the service embraced a series of changes (including officer assignment) using a regulated, market-based approach and command selection through a series of standardized, in-person assessments.¹ The impetus for change included growing concern over attracting people to and retaining them in an all-volunteer force,

1. Michael A. Grinston, James C. McConville, and Ryan D. McCarthy, *The Army People Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, October 2019), 3–4.

increasing reliance on innovation in the growing knowledge economy, and the maintenance of economic and technical competitive advantages over near-peer adversaries. In acknowledging people as the “greatest strength and most important weapon system,” the Army has sought transformational change to attract and retain the talent best suited to meet the nation’s future threats.

The Army has embraced talent management transformation amid the backdrop of a global pandemic that has altered the way Americans work, and the Army has done so amid civil unrest that has resulted in part from systemic racism. As the Army embarks on personnel management modernization, the service risks unintentionally amplifying systems of inequality that may impede diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in a values-based organization. Addressing DEI in the selection of senior leaders is critical in both interpreting and influencing the cognitive dimension of the information environment.² The cognitive dimension encompasses how senior leaders perceive, evaluate, and ultimately act on information. Confronting prospective systemic threats that arise from potential biases within talent management offers opportunities to create a more inclusive Army culture.³

Future talent management processes will use big data and artificial intelligence to optimize promotion, assignment, and leader selection at the individual rather than cohort level. In the practice of people analytics, data can be used to predict markers of success and drive human resources practices to become more evidence-based.⁴ Automated systems and algorithms that leverage data are also prone to the biases of the humans who developed them; thus, caution is advised at every step of process development.

The Case for DEI in the Army

Whereas other services place a premium on technology and warfighting platforms, people represent the essential component of future Army multi-domain operations. Rather than rigidly managing personnel with predetermined career timelines, new Army talent management practices capitalize on individual knowledge, skills, and behaviors (KSBs) and preferences using a more flexible career model to accommodate changing household structures and demographics.⁵ The workforce has shifted to include more women, dual-career households, single parents,

2. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Information Operations*, Joint Publication 3-13 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, updated November 20, 2014), 20, 34.

3. E. Casey Wardynski, *Army People Strategy: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Annex* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, September 1, 2020).

4. Iris Bohnet, *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 15.

5. Grinston, *Army People Strategy*, 1.

and racial and ethnic diversity.⁶ A 2019 demographic profile showed 53 percent of active-duty Army servicemembers were married, 5 percent were in dual-military marriages, 41 percent had children, and 5 percent were single parents, reflecting a variety of household structures differing from the traditional nuclear family.⁷ Talent management processes should support, to the greatest extent possible, a wide range of changing family concerns, such as spousal employment, health care, childcare, and education.⁸

The composition of military servicemembers reflects the shifting demographics of the US population. As discussed in the 2020 *New York Times* article “African-Americans Are Highly Visible in the Military, but Almost Invisible at the Top,” minority groups remain underrepresented in the officer ranks compared to the enlisted corps.⁹ Underrepresentation is attributed to decreased matriculation at the service academies, preferences for noncombat arms specialties, a lack of mentors, and episodes of racism and extremism within the military. Data indicate 71 percent of officers and 52 percent of enlisted personnel reported as White, 11 percent and 23 percent reported as Black, 8 percent and 18 percent reported as Hispanic, and 7 percent and 5 percent reported as Asian in the active-duty Army.¹⁰ At the most senior levels, disparities increase, with general officers reported as 84 percent White, 9 percent Black, 3 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian.¹¹ Considering gender, women make up 14 percent of enlisted personnel, 19 percent of officers, and 11 percent of Army general officers.¹²

A 2012 RAND study found Black and Hispanic officers were promoted at lower rates than White officers, particularly at the O-4 to O-5 level, suggesting the field-grade officer step represents a key promotion milestone.¹³ The same RAND study found female officers are less likely to be promoted at the O-2 through O-4 ranks, which coincides with childbearing years.¹⁴ With future US demographic trends predicting a minority-White population in 2045,

6. Deborah L. Plummer and C. Greer Jordan, “Going Plaid: Integrating Diversity into Business Strategy, Talent Management, and Work Design,” in *Handbook of Diversity Management: Inclusive Strategies for Driving Organizational Excellence*, 2nd ed., ed. Deborah L. Plummer (Boston: Half Dozen Publications, 2018), 317.

7. Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Military Community and Family Policy, *2019 Demographics Profile of the Military Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020).

8. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment Characteristics of Families—2020,” news release no. USDL-21-0695, April 21, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>.

9. Helene Cooper, “African-Americans Are Highly Visible in the Military, but Almost Invisible at the Top,” *New York Times* (website), May 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/us/politics/military-minorities-leadership.html>.

10. Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff Strength Analysis and Forecasting Division, *Army Demographics: FY20 Army Profile* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2020), 2.

11. Wardynski, *Annex*, 2.

12. CFR.org Editors, “Demographics of the US Military,” Council on Foreign Relations (website), July 13, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/background/demographics-us-military>.

13. Beth J. Asch, Trey Miller, and Alessandro Malchiodi, *A New Look at Gender and Minority Differences in Officer Career Progression in the Military* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), x.

14. Asch, Miller, and Malchiodi, *New Look at Gender*.

individuals whose backgrounds include two or more races are expected to grow by 226 percent.¹⁵ Consequently, the non-White, multiracial population will represent the “primary demographic engine of the nation’s future growth.”¹⁶

A case even more compelling than simple representation or changing demographics is the Army’s requirement to create shared understanding and mutual trust to enable mission command.¹⁷ As a values-based organization, the Army necessitates diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environments. The Army ethic reflects the core values and beliefs that guide the “conduct of Army professionals bound together in common moral purpose.”¹⁸ The Army ethic is codified legally in the US Constitution; the Uniform Code of Military Justice; Titles 5, 10, and 32 of US Code; and the Oath of Commissioned Officers and morally in the Declaration of Independence, creeds, mottoes, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁹

To maintain the trust of the American people and demonstrate the accountability of the nation’s institutions, the selection of senior Army leaders requires transparency. Confidence in the military as an institution—typically rated as one of the most trustworthy organizations—decreased from 70 percent in 2018 to 56 percent in 2021, with the greatest decline in individuals under the age of 30.²⁰ Millennials (people aged 25 to 40 in 2021) and Generation Z (people aged 6 to 24 in 2021) increasingly value DEI. Forty-seven percent of millennials, the largest and most diverse generation in the US labor force, considered DEI an important factor in choosing a job, whereas only 33 to 37 percent of people over the age of 40 did so.²¹ Generation Z, representing incoming military recruits, valued increasing racial and ethnic diversity as a positive social trend.²²

Diversity can refer to both demographics and thought. Diversity of thought, termed “cognitive diversity,” may arise from variations in background, experience,

15. Jennifer Brown, *Inclusion, Diversity, the New Workplace & the Will to Change* (Hartford, CT: Publish Your Purpose Press, 2016), 85–87.

16. William H. Frey, “The US Will Become ‘Minority White’ in 2045, Census Projects. Youth Minorities Are the Engine of Future Growth,” *Avenue* (blog), March 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects>.

17. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Mission Command, Command and Control of Army Forces*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 2019), 1-3–1-6.

18. Thomas P. Galvin et al., *Strategic Leadership Primer for Senior Leaders*, 4th ed. (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2019), 90–91.

19. HQDA, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 2019), 1-6–1-7.

20. Ronald Reagan Institute, *Reagan National Defense Survey* (Simi Valley, CA: Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, November 2021).

21. “Millennials at Work: Perspectives on Diversity and Inclusion,” Weber Shandwick (website), December 6, 2016, <https://www.webershandwick.com/news/millennials-at-work-perspectives-on-diversity-inclusion>.

22. Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Ruth Igielnik, *Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019).

and perspective. One framework for diversity consists of primary dimensions, such as age, sexual orientation, physical abilities, race, gender, spiritual beliefs, and class, and secondary dimensions, such as work experience, geographic location, education, first language, cognitive style, and political beliefs.²³ Everyone possesses a unique combination of dominant and nondominant primary and secondary dimensions of diversity. Varied nondominant attributes across teams generate shared understanding of lived experiences, which builds trust in an inclusive environment. Cognitive diversity enables different approaches for gaining understanding of, analyzing, and solving problems. Cognitive diversity can be defined as “differences in information, knowledge, representations, mental models, and heuristics.”²⁴

Cognitive diversity empowers mental agility within the current operational environment. Teams with cognitive diversity collectively possess a variety of analytical tools for enhancing problem solving in response to current and future threats in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments.²⁵ Racial injustice, income inequality, and political polarization threaten trust in the ability of democratic institutions to resolve conflict and equitably provide public services.²⁶ Technology allows for the rapid dissemination of information, increasing individual empowerment either for good or for bad, while social media amplifies collective group identities and identity politics. According to General Martin Dempsey, US Army retired, the digital echo resembles an echo chamber consisting of information that reinforces established beliefs while dismissing conflicting data. The digital echo can distort information and situational awareness, making the interpretation of information by leaders critical to creating narratives of purpose and meaning.²⁷

The future operational battlespace will likely include multiple dimensions. Cyberwarfare increasingly moves armed conflict from the physical space to the cognitive. In addition, hybrid warfare blurs conventional and special operations while technological advancements create weapon systems with instantaneous effects, resulting in convergence across domains.²⁸ Convergence—or the creation of simultaneous effects—demands cognitively diverse and inclusive

23. Marilyn Loden, “Transforming Organization Cultures: Notes from the Field,” in Plummer, *Handbook of Diversity Management*, 252.

24. Scott E. Page, *The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 14–15.

25. Page, *Diversity Bonus*, 172–73.

26. Ministry of Defence, *Global Strategic Trends: The Future Starts Today*, 6th ed. (London: Ministry of Defence, October 2018).

27. Martin Dempsey and Ori Brafman, *Radical Inclusion: What the Post-9/11 World Should Have Taught Us about Leadership* (Arlington, VA: Missionday, 2018).

28. JCS, *Joint Operating Environment 2035: The Joint Force in a Contested and Disordered World* (Washington, DC: JCS, July 14, 2016), 36.

teams able to integrate actions rapidly across multiple domains.²⁹ Success will be determined by both victory in the physical domain and the timely ability to craft narratives of purpose and to identify critical information deftly across the spectrum of competition to conflict. The cognitive dimension of the information environment “encompasses the minds of those who transmit, receive, and respond to or act on information” that is largely influenced by elements of the primary and secondary dimensions of diversity. In creating desired effects to gain dominance, the cognitive dimension “constitutes the most important component of the information environment.”³⁰ Within the cognitive dimension, the Army ethic represents the decisive advantage in multi-domain operations and separates the United States from near-peer adversaries. Thus, to ensure mission success, the Army must address potential barriers to achieving cognitive diversity by considering processes that select, assign, and offer developmental opportunities.

Unconscious Bias Constrains Cognitive Diversity

Heuristics and unconscious bias complicate the selection of cognitively diverse teams. Heuristics represent mental shortcuts that enable decision making. The two systems of decision making are “fast,” snap judgements and “slow,” voluntary deliberation, referred to as System-1 thinking and System-2 thinking, respectively.³¹ Driven by emotional and situational cues, System-1 (fast) thinking involves impressions or intuitive thoughts. System-2 (slow) thinking entails focused concentration to derive solutions methodically. As a result of System-1 thinking, everyone has unconscious biases that are reinforced to varying degrees by their cultures, experiences, and environments. Time-restricted or time-pressured conditions such as combat increase one’s reliance on System-1 thinking to make decisions intuitively with incomplete information.

In a talent management context, System-1 thinking contributes to four heuristics that impair critical thinking: priming, affinity bias, confirmation bias, and the representativeness heuristic.³²

29. Tom Greenwood and Pat Savage, “In Search of a 21st-Century Joint Warfighting Concept,” *War on the Rocks*, September 12, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/in-search-of-a-21st-century-joint-warfighting-concept/>.

30. JCS, *Information Operations*, I-3.

31. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), 20–22.

32. Mark Kaplan and Mason Donovan, *The Inclusion Dividend: Why Investing in Diversity & Inclusion Pays Off* (Brookline, MA: Bibimotion, Inc., 2013), 112–13.

- Priming is the triggering of thoughts or emotions that may subconsciously affect candidate assessment or selection (for example, endorsement prior to assessment).
- Affinity bias causes people to select others with similar attributes (for example, selecting someone because he or she matriculated at the same university).
- Confirmation bias serves to reinforce previously held beliefs about the attributes of successful applicants (for example, selecting a candidate because other members from his or her branch have been successful).
- The representativeness heuristic estimates the likelihood of a candidate's success based on stereotypes such as physical fitness alone.³³ The combination of these heuristics that unintentionally and often negatively influence decisions over time. Common stereotypes reflect assumptions surrounding both observable attributes and invisible attributes, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, and job role.

The accumulation of biases toward nondominant attributes at every decision point over the course of a career exponentially impacts senior-leader selection in a closed talent management system.³⁴ These often-unintentional slights are insidious and difficult to control without systematic processes in place. As an example, the removal of photos from the board process may help reduce unconscious bias toward gender, race, or body type on the day of the board. Simply removing photos, however, does not fully eliminate the unconscious bias that may have impacted assignment opportunity, evaluations, and schooling, highlighting the importance of talent management system design throughout the career life cycle.

Organizational cultural norms hamper the building of cognitively diverse teams. Individuals in nondominant or stigmatized groups often downplay their group identities by altering their appearance or behavior, changing their manner or the content of their speech, or avoiding talking about their personal lives.³⁵ These individuals engage in this behavior to assimilate into or maximize the comfort of the dominant group. This phenomenon is referred to as “covering” or “code-switching.”³⁶ Whereas authentic self-expression within accepted military

33. Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Jessica D. Blankshain, and David A. Cooper, *Decision-Making in American Foreign Policy: Translating Theory into Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 103–8.

34. Gvosdev, Blankshain, and Cooper, *American Foreign Policy*, 18–22, 274.

35. Brown, *Inclusion*, 91–93.

36. Courtney L. McCluney et al., “The Costs of Code-Switching,” *Harvard Business Review* (website), November 15, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-costs-of-codeswitching>.

norms and culture allows for the full employment of individual talents, covering wastes energy better spent innovating, collaborating, and problem solving. Code-switching decreases performance, weakens commitment to one's organization, and contributes to burnout.³⁷ The challenge lies in continually reassessing military norms that unnecessarily result in code-switching or worsening conditions for nondominant groups. The change in acceptable hairstyles due to disproportionate alopecia or hair loss in Black women due to tight hairstyles, such as a bun, is an example of a reassessment.³⁸

Examples of how cultural norms and stereotypes may continue to drive individuals in nondominant groups to cover and assimilate into the dominant group abound. Although lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer servicemembers can now serve openly after the ban on transgender individuals was rescinded in 2021, many may still feel the need to cover in the context of a predominantly cisgender, male, heterosexual population.³⁹ Women, who can now serve in any Army branch, still often face a double bind when displaying leadership traits traditionally stereotyped as masculine, like ambition and dominance and risk, and expose themselves to a likeability penalty for not displaying communal traits, such as compassion and helpfulness.⁴⁰ Women may also face gender hierarchy threat because research shows female officers are more likely to receive lower performance ratings from superiors close to them in rank than their male peers.⁴¹ Although tremendously positive, policy changes allowing qualified soldiers (regardless of gender, race, or sexual identity or preference) to serve in all aspects of the Army only represent the first step in fully assimilating and harnessing the cognitive diversity of all servicemembers.

Although the Army supports DEI principles, it is also vulnerable to the discrimination and fairness paradigm in which an organization focuses on demographic representation within a code of conformity. The discrimination and fairness paradigm inadvertently overlooks the competitive advantage of cognitive diversity, hinders the speaking of truth to power, and undermines organizational learning.⁴² The Army expression "I only see green" invalidates visible differences and disregards the unconscious bias that has systematically

37. Bernardo M. Ferdman and Laura Morgan Roberts, "Creating Inclusion for Oneself: Knowing, Accepting, and Expressing One's Whole Self at Work," in Plummer, *Handbook of Diversity Management*, 91.

38. Jessica Korona-Bailey et al., "Free the Bun: Prevalence of Alopecia among Active Duty Service Women, Fiscal Years 2010–2019," *Military Medicine* (website), July 9, 2021, <https://academic.oup.com/milmed/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/milmed/usab274/>.

39. "Enabling All Qualified Americans to Serve Their Country in Uniform," Exec. Order 14004, January 25, 2021).

40. Alice Hendrickson Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2007), 86.

41. Bohnet, *What Works*, 29.

42. David A. Thomas and Robin J. Ely, "Making Differences Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity," in *HBR's 10 Must Reads: On Diversity*, ed. *Harvard Business Review* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2019), 6–7.

led to underrepresentation. According to Sergeant Major of the Army Michael Grinston, “I just see green” ignores differential treatment of soldiers when they are not in uniform.⁴³ More importantly, the paradigm silences the conversation necessary for validating the experiences of group identity and incorporating this knowledge into inclusive organizational practices. The art of command lies in simultaneously balancing the tensions resulting from the enforcement of uniform codes of conduct and fostering mutual respect to capitalize on the diversity of thought.

DEI Structural Models

Improving DEI requires an understanding of insider-outsider group dynamics in which the insider (or dominant) group has the most power and less awareness of challenges faced by nondominant groups and the outsider group has an acute awareness of insider group norms but less influence for changing or challenging norms without fear of repercussions.⁴⁴ The Army addresses diversity with established policies typically emphasized through legal precedents and federal mandates.⁴⁵ Programs such as Military Equal Opportunity emphasize education, training, and reporting at the individual level.⁴⁶ Successful DEI programs must prioritize the inclusion of all individuals, including insider groups, as part of the solution and limit the extent to which other groups feel like outsiders by creating psychological safety. Mandatory diversity training has been shown to raise animosity toward outsider groups, particularly when the training is perceived as shaming and blaming White males.⁴⁷

Strategic DEI models include policy reviews and diversity councils. The Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion provides policy oversight for the Department of Defense.⁴⁸ The Defense Culture Institute, administered by the Office of People Analytics, produces the Defense Organizational Climate Survey, which is routinely administered to help commanders assess unit climate.⁴⁹ In 2020, then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper removed photos from

43. Dontavian Harrison, “Army Senior Leader Town Hall,” US Army (website), July 22, 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/237512/army_senior_leader_town_hall.

44. Kaplan and Donovan, *Inclusion Dividend*, 131–38.

45. Department of Defense (DoD) Board on Diversity and Inclusion, *Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion Report: Recommendations to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the US Military* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2020).

46. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *DoD Military Equal Opportunity Program*, DoD Instruction 1350.02 (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, September 4, 2020).

47. Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, “Why Diversity Programs Fail,” in *Harvard Business Review, On Diversity*, 32.

48. “About ODEI,” Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (website), n.d., <https://diversity.defense.gov/About-ODEI/>.

49. “DEOCS: Frequently Asked Questions,” Defense Culture Institute (website), updated December 28, 2020, https://www.defenseculture.mil/Portals/90/Documents/A2S/OPA-DEOCS-Survey_Admins_FAQs-20201230.pdf?ver=duUEjU3taRCECamowSlzA%3D%3D.

consideration by selection boards.⁵⁰ Esper also established the Defense Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion in the Armed Services to mirror the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, established in 1951.⁵¹

Highlights from the Defense Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion in the Armed Services report include robust recommendations to monitor demographic trends in performance evaluations, ensure diverse pools for nominative positions, standardize human resources data for analysis, and release demographic data from promotion board results.⁵² Implementation of these practices would be a step in the right direction. The Army is leaning forward on these issues through Project Inclusion, the service's strategic DEI plan introduced in 2020.⁵³ In addition to removing Department of the Army photos, the service plans to redact race, ethnicity, and gender data from Officer and Enlisted Record Briefs; conduct listening sessions; and review military justice cases for racial disparities.⁵⁴

Systematic organizational approaches are most notably missing from current DEI initiatives targeting either the interpersonal or strategic level. Grinston's "This Is My Squad" initiative builds cohesive teams at the tactical level.⁵⁵ The DEI annex of the *Army People Strategy* outlines the strategic goals of leader commitment, talent management, organizational structure, training and education, and equitable and inclusive environments. To inform the way ahead and operationalize these strategic goals because work is increasingly performed by teams, the Army should consider organization-level dynamics and relational analytics.

- Organizational dynamics addresses how information is shared, how teams are constructed, how influence is applied through networks, and how cross-functional groups interact.
- Relational analytics describes how human social networks contribute to forming ideas, changing behavior, completing tasks, creating silos, and forming critical human links and nodes to accomplish organizational missions.⁵⁶ Both approaches will assist

50. Mark T. Esper, memorandum, "Immediate Actions to Address Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity in the Military Services," July 14, 2020.

51. "Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services," Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (website), n.d., <https://dacowits.defense.gov/>.

52. DoD Board on Diversity and Inclusion, *Diversity and Inclusion Report*.

53. Assistant Secretary of the Army (Manpower and Reserve Affairs)/Deputy Chief of Staff G-1, "US Army Project Inclusion," US Army (website), June 29, 2020, <https://www.army.mil/standto/archive/2020/06/29/>.

54. US Army Public Affairs, "Army Unveils New Initiative to Promote Diversity, Inclusion across the Force," US Army (website), June 25, 2020, <https://www.army.mil/article/236766/?st>.

55. Christopher Dunlap et al., "Ownership: This Is My Squad," *NCO Journal* (website), September 2, 2020, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2020/September/This-is-My-Squad/>.

56. Paul Leonardi and Noshir Contractor, "Better People Analytics," in *HBR's 10 Must Reads: On Reinventing HR*, ed. Harvard Business Review (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2019), 62–70.

the Army with identifying organizational actions to reach the established strategic goals.

Traditional workplace inequities stem from a dominance model in which certain characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity are preferred.⁵⁷ Dominance models can also emerge in functional areas, where some professional backgrounds are routinely favored, stifling contributions from people in less-favored functional areas. A strong cultural preference exists for leaders from combat arms branches; this preference likely stems from the view combat arms officers are best prepared to lead large-scale combat operations. Present-day conditions, however, suggest the growing complexity of future operations along the spectrum of competition to conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic, the global supply-chain crisis, worsening climate change, and disruptive technology are a few challenges the Army may face in the operational environment of the future.

Multi-domain operations will require leaders with diverse backgrounds and knowledge both to lead and to collaborate effectively in a cohesive environment. Currently, almost 70 percent of general officers come from occupations related to tactical operations, creating the potential for engaging in groupthink about complex problems.⁵⁸ Operations across land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace require dominance in the physical, informational, and cognitive dimensions. Multi-domain operations necessitate cognitive diversity and require reassessment of the composition of the desired skill sets, experience, perspectives, and backgrounds of strategic leaders.

Leader attributes should be identified through KSBs and deliberately sought out in the talent management processes. Considering power models to help define these attributes is beneficial. Two models of power are the dominance or “power-over” model and the functionalist or “power-with” model.⁵⁹ According to Melanie Joy, power-over behaviors prioritize the leader’s self-importance at the expense of the team, resulting in followers experiencing shame. Toxic and counterproductive leadership styles directly “prevent diversity numbers from improving.”⁶⁰ Power-with dynamics include earning trust through actions that benefit the group, emphasize humility, and recognize the worth of all group members. Leaders must rethink and interrupt System-1 (fast) thinking while

57. Deborah L. Plummer, “Overview of the Field of Diversity Management,” in Plummer, *Handbook of Diversity Management*, 8–9.

58. Military Leadership Diversity Commission, *Military Occupations and Implications for Racial/Ethnic and Gender Diversity*, Issue Paper no. 23 (Arlington, VA: Military Leadership Diversity Commission, March 2010), 2.

59. Melanie Joy, *Powerarchy: Understanding the Psychology of Oppression for Social Transformation* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2019), 27–30.

60. Brown, *Inclusion*, 113.

reinforcing power—with behaviors that are characterized by confident humility.⁶¹ Individuals with the most power need to do the most rethinking about design that inadvertently but systematically favors one group over another in a values-based organization. This rethinking would place the responsibility on Army strategic leaders to consider whether talent management processes support the assignment and selection of cognitively diverse leaders throughout the career life cycle.

Assignment Distribution Design

The Army must target the cumulative effect of unconscious bias that leads to visible disparities between the Army's senior leaders and the Total Force. The new Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP) modernizes talent management using an information-driven, market-based approach that considers soldier and unit preferences.⁶² Units are expected to advertise and provide job descriptions and desired KSBs, and officers are expected to complete an accurate résumé and interview in a manner comparable to practices in the civilian job market.

As designed, the ATAP may succumb to the same forces that contribute to underrepresentation among nondominant groups (for example, minorities and women in civilian-sector leadership positions) if the process is not used within a deliberately inclusive organizational framework. Currently, neither organizational leaders nor soldiers have fully developed skill sets for fostering optimal hiring practices and interview techniques. The ATAP User Agreement explicitly prohibits questions about age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and marital or family status and recommends standardized, behavior-based questions.⁶³

The biggest concerns acknowledged by the Army Talent Management Task Force about the ATAP market system included diversity, nepotism, and variable performance distribution across units.⁶⁴ In the context of DEI, employing processes that consistently evaluate and transparently report the selection of a diverse slate of officers is crucial. Without processes to counter unconscious bias, units and leaders are prone to favoring officers they know, look like, or with whom they share similar backgrounds. To enhance organizational performance and enable inclusive environments, the Army

61. Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (New York: Viking Press, 2021), 121–42.

62. "Army Talent Alignment Process," US Army Talent Management (website), 2016, <https://talent.army.mil/atap>.

63. HQDA, *Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP) User Agreement*, Executive Order 241-21 (Washington, DC: HQDA, September 30, 2021).

64. US Army, *Army Talent Management Leader Professional Development Briefing* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0C8WG4Z5fTw>.

needs processes that force diversity and interrupt the tendencies resulting from unconscious bias.

Leaders can take practical steps to promote diversity and mitigate unconscious bias. Officers charged with selections should consider two or more individuals from underrepresented groups when they rank a list of potential candidates. Candidates should be transparently scored to allow for objective comparisons, which help leaders to employ methodical, System-2 (slow) thinking.⁶⁵

As the identification of KSBs matures, cognitive diversity could be assessed by the combination of KSBs, demographics, education, and assignment history. The Army could use artificial intelligence to review job descriptions for language that may reflect the bias of the writer or deter underrepresented groups from applying. The Army could require units to transparently publish the number and composition of applicants considered for career-enhancing positions. The current market system requires regulation to prevent gaming of the current business rules.

Data usage and transparency are essential for understanding the impact of unconscious bias and holding organizations accountable for equitable selection processes. In a future ideal system, leaders and organizations would be informed by modern people analytics to understand the diversity needs of their organizations.⁶⁶ Preferable to subjective assessments, data-driven personnel selection can identify top performers. Leaders responsible for selecting officers should receive education and training on conducting interviews, creating objective evaluation criteria, and assessing and selecting soldiers to meet organizational cognitive diversity gaps.

The Army's Command Assessment Program executes a comprehensive battery of evaluations to assess talent for command positions while taking measures to minimize bias. First implemented in 2019 for the Battalion Command Assessment Program, the four-day, in-person program evaluates candidates across five dimensions: verbal communication, written communication, physical fitness, cognitive and noncognitive skills, and manner of past performance reflected on the Centralized Selection List order of merit.⁶⁷ A panel conducts double-blind interviews of the candidates behind a screen to limit unconscious bias related to race and ethnicity.⁶⁸ Panel members participate in antibias training just before the initial interview process and receive a shorter refresher

65. US Army Talent Management, *Commander's Guide to ATAP* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2020), 13.

66. Leonardi, "Better People Analytics," 62–70.

67. J. P. McGee and Ryan Evans, "The Army's New Approach to People," December 16, 2019, War on the Rocks, mp3, 41:08, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/the-armys-new-approach-to-people/>.

68. Association of the US Army, *Noon Report – MG Joseph P. McGee – 8-13-2020* (Arlington, VA: Association of the US Army, August 13, 2020), YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vd3dagl3hcA>.

each day they serve on the panel. Individuals who have previously worked with candidates are asked to complete the Army Commander Evaluation Tool, which is intended to reflect fitness for command and identify counterproductive behaviors.

These processes (double-blind interview, bias training, and anonymous peer and subordinate feedback) are notable examples of processes put in place to combat bias and should be considered best practices. The Army should consider formally implementing a shortened version of the Army Commander Evaluation Tool at frequent career milestones to identify leaders who are most effectively leading in a manner consistent with the Army ethic. Aggregate demographic information of selected officers should be published for all selected commanders. Transparent practices engender trust, allow for the assessment of diversity needs, and further the mission of the organization.

Performance Evaluation Design

Performance evaluations reflect the largest threat and greatest opportunity related to unconscious bias. The officer evaluation report—specifically, the senior rater narrative and forced distribution components—play a primary role in selection boards for professional military education (PME), command, and promotion. Performance evaluations in the private sector have been shown to reflect the biases and tendencies of the rater more than the performance of the rated officer, with 62 percent of the variance accounted for by the rater and 21 percent by the rated officer.⁶⁹ Tim Kane, author of *Bleeding Talent* and *Total Volunteer Force*, both of which fueled congressionally directed talent management initiatives, argues evaluations “are one of the weakest categories of talent management for the military” because inflated evaluations do not provide enough granular information to differentiate individuals for promotions or assignments.⁷⁰ Army officer evaluation reports have open-ended components that have a forced distribution influenced by the size of the rating pool. Favoritism shown by the rater, senior rater, or the organization, or the conflicting loyalties of these entities, may influence these components. Open-ended evaluations that lack predetermined assessment criteria have been shown to be most prone to bias.⁷¹

The Army should consider replacing open-ended statements of performance with assessments of an officer’s strongest KSBs, as demonstrated

69. Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall, “Reinventing Performance Management,” in *Harvard Business Review*, *On Reinventing HR*, 49.

70. Tim Kane, *Total Volunteer Force: Lessons from the US Military on Leadership Culture and Talent Management* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2017), 95–99.

71. Lori Nishiura Mackenzie, JoAnne Wehner, and Shelley J. Correll, “Why Most Performance Evaluations Are Biased, and How to Fix Them,” *Harvard Business Review* (website), January 11, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/01/why-most-performance-evaluations-are-biased-and-how-to-fix-them>.

by performance. Predefined measures of performance and desired KSBs must be created, either universally to address the attributes and competencies described in *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, or by the rater and distributed at initial counseling. Employing more frequent, standardized performance assessments; transparency in expectations; and aggregate consistency checks across populations would interrupt bias and shift Army processes toward a true meritocracy.

During World War I, the US military developed a “merit rating,” or forced distribution, system that served as the basis for performance appraisals, a practice largely abandoned by corporate America over 15 years ago.⁷² Employee performance has been shown to decline when an employee is rated relative to others (also known as “social comparison”) and to improve when the employee’s performance is compared to his or her previous performance (also known as “temporal comparison”).⁷³ The US Air Force, US Marine Corps, and US Coast Guard have abandoned forced distribution rankings; only the Army has kept the practice.⁷⁴ As work in the knowledge economy increasingly becomes team-oriented, peer feedback is critical for leader development.⁷⁵ By the early 2000s, many US companies prioritized agile leadership techniques that emphasized “individuals and interactions over processes and tools” and “responding to change over following a plan” to enhance innovation.⁷⁶ Adaptability requires performance evaluations to align with team-based performance.

In the Army’s current officer evaluation report, the senior rater describes an officer’s potential by comparing the officer to his or her contemporaries and assessing his or her potential for Headquarters Department of the Army boards, such as PME and promotion.⁷⁷ Instead of the senior rater recommending selection for PME, it should be widely accessible via distance learning to the greatest extent possible to accommodate competing professional and personal demands, such as deployment or family considerations. Selection for in-person or degree-producing PME could remain competitive by including application requirements. Since many courses require passing a physical

72. Peter Cappelli and Anna Tavis, “The Performance Management Revolution: The Focus Is Shifting from Accountability to Learning,” *Harvard Business Review* (website), October 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/10/the-performance-management-revolution>.

73. Jinseok Chun, Joel Brockner, and David De Cremer, “People Don’t Want to Be Compared with Others in Performance Reviews. They Want to Be Compared with Themselves,” *Harvard Business Review* (website), March 22, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/03/people-dont-want-to-be-compared-with-others-in-performance-reviews-they-want-to-be-compared-with-themselves>.

74. Kane, *Total Volunteer Force*, 101.

75. Peter Cappelli and Anna Tavis, “HR Goes Agile,” in *Harvard Business Review, On Reinventing HR*, 33–39.

76. “Manifesto for Agile Software Development,” [Agilemanifesto.org](http://agilemanifesto.org), 2001, <https://agilemanifesto.org>.

77. HQDA, *Evaluation Reporting System*, Army Regulation 623-3 (Washington, DC: HQDA, June 14, 2019), 21.

fitness test, temporary physical limitations such as injury or pregnancy—events that facilitate the furthering of one’s education—should not hinder participation in PME.

Objectively defining future potential is difficult and particularly prone to bias if aggregated data and sources are not used. Senior-rater evaluation of potential should incorporate data-driven assessment, such as peer feedback and temporal comparison, rather than evaluation against peers. *Evaluation Reporting System*, Army Regulation 623-3, defines potential as judgment about whether the soldier can perform at a higher responsibility or grade.⁷⁸ According to Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, Information Age potential requires a learning orientation and the ability to “adapt and grow into increasingly complex roles and environments.”⁷⁹

Evaluations need to move toward assessing subordinate leader development, a leader’s learning orientation, and the leader’s ability to build networks as fundamental leadership competencies. Key metrics for potential include behaviors and attributes demonstrated both to supervisors and to peers and subordinates. These behaviors and attributes include motivation, curiosity, insight, creativity, engagement of networks, and perseverance and determination.⁸⁰ Senior raters may apply relational analytics to assess the strength and diversity of an individual’s network and ability to exert influence outside of the organization.⁸¹ Codified as an essential leader competency in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, one who extends influence beyond the chain of command creates shared purpose through negotiation, consensus building, and conflict resolution—skills critical for creating an inclusive environment.

Psychological Safety for Inclusive Talent Management

The processes for assignments, command selection, and evaluations can interrupt bias, but, ultimately, inclusion reflects a sense of belonging built through mutual trust and psychological safety. Diversity inherently introduces conflict through differences in perspective. Whereas people experience trust at the individual level, psychological safety exists at the organizational level.

In *The Infinite Game*, Simon Sinek explains the relationship between performance and trust.⁸² Team members with high performance and low

78. HQDA, *Evaluation Reporting System*, 198.

79. Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, “21st-Century Talent Spotting,” in *Harvard Business Review*, *On Reinventing HR*, 80–86.

80. Fernández-Aráoz, “21st-Century Talent Spotting,” 80–86.

81. Leonardi and Contractor, “Better People Analytics,” 62–70.

82. Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (London: Portfolio, 2019), 109.

trust characterize typical toxic or counterproductive leadership styles. Today, Army evaluations reflect performance and one person's estimation of future performance in different environments. The evaluations prioritize short-term accomplishments rather than long-term soldier development, engagement, and sustainability. More easily assessed than trust, performance can hide leadership traits employed to generate team performance and simply reflect technical competence. Trust, in contrast, stems from leader integrity, honesty, and accountability for the good of the team. Brené Brown emphasizes the importance of trusting others to respect boundaries and demonstrating reliability, accountability, confidentiality, integrity, nonjudgment, and generosity to establish belonging.⁸³

Belonging also requires organizational leadership that creates psychological safety to benefit from cognitive diversity fully. Amy Edmondson describes psychological safety as an environment in which individuals are “not hindered by interpersonal fear” preventing them from sharing information or ideas.⁸⁴ Psychological safety involves establishing a culture in which people can ask questions or discuss mistakes without experiencing shame or humiliation. It is not about being nice or lowering standards; rather, it is about the maintenance of high standards in an honorable environment, which, in turn, promotes high-quality performance and reduces risk.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Changing workforce demographics and justice imperatives in a service-oriented, values-based organization make inclusion and diversity in talent management an Army-mandated requirement. Solutions to complex problems in future, multi-domain operations will demand success in the physical, informational, and cognitive dimensions, making diversity and inclusion in talent management synonymous with achievement of the Army's mission. Mission command requires maximizing the human potential to thrive in ambiguity through shared understanding and mutual trust. Organizational leaders must be primed to interrupt bias by ensuring consideration of diverse slates, standardized interview processes, and use of predefined metrics or criteria for assignments and evaluations. Data analytics will be needed to assess aggregate trends across subpopulations and to verify internal consistency, and transparently published board results will provide organizational accountability. These changes are needed to

83. Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Random House, 2017), 75–79.

84. Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019), 17–19.

85. Edmondson, *Fearless Organization*.

ensure DEI within the Army are reflective of the doctrinal Army ethic, and ultimately allow the Army to retain top talent and prevail in the cognitive dimension.

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