



by Lianhao “Howard” Zhou

In mid-2020, Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) [Mark Esper](#) stated his intent to “pursue equal opportunity and aspire to true meritocracy” via a video address to the force regarding diversity and inclusion. On December 18, 2020, the Department of Defense (DoD) released its “[Diversity & Inclusion Report](#)” that provided six focus area recommendations to improve the military’s ability to “ensure that the military across all grades reflects and is inclusive of the American people it has sworn to protect and defend.” Shortly after SECDEF Esper stated his intent, the Army announced Project Inclusion, which is how it nests within the DoD’s D&I efforts. The stated [purpose](#) was to build cohesive teams to enable overall mission effectiveness.

After the guidance was put forth, units across the Army began implementing education and training to help understand D&I and its importance for mission readiness, which included learning about racial inequality. However, these efforts evoked [mixed feelings](#) about how to

achieve the desired end state in terms of the type of education and training Soldiers would receive, especially after the [extremism stand-down](#) ordered by current SECDEF Lloyd Austin. Most recently, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Mark Milley received [criticism](#) for defending why he believes Critical Race Theory (CRT) should be taught in the military. GEN Milley argued that although he has studied communist leaders such as Mao Zedong and Lenin, that does not make him a communist and he views studying CRT as a way to allow Service Members to have better situational understanding of the country they have sworn to defend.

GEN Milley's conversation with members of Congress is fairly representative of the types of conversations regarding racial inequality and D&I that take place at every echelon in the military. Understanding multiple perspectives is important to developing a clearer picture of the current socio-political dynamics within our country and will provide Service Members a better understanding of the "why" behind these ongoing initiatives. However, because these are sensitive topics, I would like to highlight some guidelines on how to approach D&I education and training :

1. **Utilize a "show" versus a "tell" approach.** The guidance given for conducting [extremism stand-down](#) focuses on addressing our commitment to our respective oaths, impermissible behaviors, and reporting extremist behavior. There are case studies included in the training but leaders of all ranks can improve upon the training by providing personal and relevant vignettes that they have dealt with. They can use their personal experiences to ask Soldiers how they would handle a certain situation, tell them how it was handled in actuality, and what could have been done better as well as what was done well. This is similar to an After Action Review (AAR) and is a great hands-on learning technique that adds an element of realism to the training. Another useful technique for addressing situations that have caused a positive or negative emotional response is the [FBI Feedback Formula](#), which stands for feeling, behavior, and impact. Framing personal vignettes in accordance with the FBI Feedback Formula can help others understand a situation they have not personally encountered and also provide them with a way to develop stronger [EQ](#).
2. **Address the "elephant in the room."** Every organization has its own culture and set of challenges, which is why it is important for leaders to address both challenges to the Army as a whole as well as specific challenges. One example that comes to mind is

the perception of race based favoritism or cliques. Leaders can encourage subordinates to discuss topics such as the aforementioned either in an open forum (i.e. sensing session, Leader Professional Development) or behind closed doors but it must be focused on the issue, not individuals, similar to an AAR. Oftentimes perception becomes reality and perceptions of race based favoritism and cliques can quickly degrade unit morale and cause distrust, neither of which are conducive to mission readiness.

3. **Encourage learning and reading from multiple sources.** In the intel community, Soldiers are cautioned against going off single-source reporting. Although not an absolutism, there is some truth behind this line of thinking. Corroboration is typically preferred when it comes to reporting and the same goes for learning about topics such as racial inequality, extremism, and other D&I related issues. Encourage Soldiers to fact check their sources and see what information is corroborated by multiple sources as well as what type of biases their preferred news sources have historically demonstrated. In addition, inform them of how cognitive biases work and how biases such as the [frequency illusion](#) can skew judgment and thought processes.

Overall, the best way to achieve a better shared understanding of D&I and its effect on mission readiness is through improved dialogue at every echelon. Although training and education play an important role in achieving this shared understanding, day-to-day conversations will still play a more salient role in achieving the end state because of the frequency and personal nature of these types of conversations. Leaders have a responsibility to arm their subordinates with the right resources and tools to help ensure these conversations are productive and compound positively on the training they provide.

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