



by Brian C. Gerardi

**Author's Note: Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals mentioned.*

The unprecedented times we have faced as a planet over the [last two years](#) have largely encouraged people to [turn inwards and focus on themselves](#). This inward focus fuels our internal biases and may hinder our ability to appreciate the lived experiences of others. However, as leaders, a high degree of empathy and understanding of other people is critical to leading them ([ADP 6-22, Army Leadership and The Profession](#) even cites *empathy* as a characteristic of “special interest to the Army and its leaders”).

As an instructor at the [United States Military Academy](#), I teach a class [on moral leadership and military ethics](#). West Point's [deliberate 47-month developmental process](#) is well underway for my students, all of whom are seniors in their fourth year of their [undergraduate studies](#) and [military training](#). Last week one of my students, Cadet Jones,* asked me if there were any female officers that worked in my department; she had been approached by a female Captain offering mentorship but failed to get her name and wanted to follow up on the offer. I asked her to describe the officer because, frankly, there aren't many women in my department and I expected I could narrow it down.

She paused and said, “Sir, I only saw her from the nose up with our masks, but she was short, had dark hair, and she looked...well, like me.” She gestured to her own mask-covered face with an air of resignation. Jones is a black woman who chose not to emphasize her

complexion to her white male instructor; an attribute that could have rapidly identified the officer in question.

I smiled back and said, “Yes, I know exactly who you’re talking about. Captain Johnson* is really wonderful and it doesn’t surprise me that she encouraged you to seek her out.” She nodded emphatically and said, “I was just so surprised to see someone like me that I didn’t already know. We sort of stick out and I know a lot of the other [black servicemembers]. It was especially nice to see a woman.”

I’ve never consciously experienced a positive emotional reaction to seeing others that look like me in the way Jones had articulated.

I am in the majority group of every major demographic category; as a heterosexual, white, Christian, able-bodied, and cisgender man, I can’t open my eyes without seeing an abundance of people like me. My lived experiences that support my ideas, opinions, and biases are informed by these external markers of sameness. This type of experience congruence [absolutely affects team problem-solving efficacy](#). It is for this reason that *firsts* are so important.

It’s easy for someone in a majority group to dismiss a first accomplishment of a particular group of people because the accomplishment in and of itself may not seem so revolutionary; soldiers have been completing [Ranger school](#), [Sapper school](#), and ascending to the [highest levels of military](#) and [government leadership](#) for years. It’s different, though, when it’s a [woman](#), or a [person of color](#), or a [woman of color](#).

Such representation gives tacit permission for others to follow; it allows those who might have overlooked the opportunity, or have been overlooked themselves, permission to dream and to dare to be great. It allows them to see themselves in those roles in a way that has not until recent memory been possible. The gravity of this may escape you if, like me, [you never had a lack of similar-looking protagonists](#) in all areas of arts and media from which to select role-models.

Jones is one such role-model. She’s an attentive student, and a diligent cadet, one who spends a significant amount of time seeking feedback both from myself and from the [Mounger Writing Center](#); I know this because whenever she attends specifically for my class, I get a notification from the staff there. Despite her relief at having found a role-model, the deliberate approach she takes to her studies is exemplary and precisely what we desire from our junior leaders. Dedicated professionals like Jones will be my literal replacement, as she will be a lieutenant in a matter of months.

Very soon, her mentor will not be a captain seeking to refine her writing skills, but a Sergeant first class giving her tips on how to project fuel and ammo requirements for a multi-day mission, or a Staff sergeant giving her feedback on what will likely be an ugly first attempt at a coordinated fires plan. [Statistically speaking, these mentors will not look like her either](#), but they will be just as [pleased to have a lieutenant willing to humble herself and seek expertise in order to get better](#).

There are a lot of things we seek to instill in our officer candidates before they head to the operational Army. Apart from the knowledge and tools that will inform their decision-making, arguably the most important skills we can sharpen are their resilience and critical thinking skills: their ability to attempt, to fail, to rebound from failure, to seek feedback, to critically assess it, to refine their approach, and to try again. Likewise, we must hone our own skills, especially as we use them to address our own biases.

Identifying our unconscious biases is the first step to understanding them, which is the only way to overcome them. In a TEDx talk that's garnered millions of views, author and diversity advocate [Vernā Myers offers three strategies](#) for addressing our implicit biases:

1. **Get out of denial.** Myers acknowledges her own biases, even as a woman of color and someone with extensive professional experience as a [diversity and inclusion educator](#). We must [assess ourselves critically](#), and seek to understand how our backgrounds, our upbringings, and even our current networks [may contribute to our unconscious biases](#). Skeptical? [The Harvard Implicit Bias Tests](#) are one highly accessible tool, and while no researcher would defend a [single iteration of the test as a clear predictor of bias](#), it's a starting point.
2. **Move towards authentic relationships amidst differences.** We must coach and mentor those who look different from us, which will greatly benefit both ourselves and our mentees. Retired Colonel Dwayne Wagner encourages [cross-racial mentorship](#), and in an article describing the evolution of race relations in military service, [outlines his own highly diverse mentorship journey through his service as a US Army officer](#). Our understanding of the different roles we play is critical to best developing those we lead (be it [coaching, counseling, or mentoring](#)).
3. **Speak out.** The ever-popular mantra of, "If you see something, say something!", has evolved from [Department of Homeland Security anti-terrorism](#) call-to-action to the [US Army SHARP Program slogan](#). Being able to respectfully but deliberately address [elements of a harmful environment](#) within our organizations starts with having the courage to attend to it in the moment. [Kim Scott's Radical Candor](#) puts human interaction along two dimensions that are useful here: [Care Personally and Challenge Directly](#) (or as she says, "Give a damn" and "Be willing to piss people off").

Our ability to truly listen to others and to understand them is what allows us to establish trust and to lead well. For those of us in the field of leader development, modeling the attributes we seek to inculcate in our students is a major part of our instruction; we must find ways to identify, label, and address our own biases in a way that emboldens our students to do the same.

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