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Susan Yelich Biniecki

Kansas State University, susanyb@ksu.edu

Paul Berg

Kansas State University, ptcberg@ksu.edu

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Emerging Inclusion and Diversity Policies in Military Learning Environments: Supporting Organizational Change and Breaking Down the Status Quo

Susan M. Yelich Biniecki¹ and Paul Berg¹
¹Kansas State University

Abstract

Emerging inclusion and diversity policies within the US military require unique adult education approaches to break down the status quo, facilitate learning for social change, and strengthen force resiliency.

Keywords: military learning, diversity, inclusion

Organizational social changes often are initiated through top-down policy, regulations, and mandates. However, individual, team, and organizational learning need to occur at every level of the organization. High profile cases within higher education, civic organizations, and the military in the United States have spurred specific inclusion and diversity policies. Within the United States Army, tragedies such as Fort Hood, sexual assault scandals, a suicide epidemic, and extremist investigations within the ranks as well as organizational command climate surveys, have created urgency for cultural inclusion and diversity transformation only possible through adult learning and behavior change. The challenge for discussion is: How can adult educators most effectively facilitate individual, team, and organizational learning to support organizational change for inclusion and diversity within a United States military setting?

Inclusion, Diversity, and Army Leadership

A diverse organization is one that is reflective of society and an inclusive organization fully respects all members (Society for Human Resource Management, 2021). Behaviors such as extremism and sexual harassment are a detriment to cohesive teams, force resiliency, and individual well-being within the military. Data shows that organizations that have strong diversity in leadership and inclusive cultures outperform less diverse and exclusive organizations (Hunt et al., 2020).

Several important milestones from leadership have given direction for adult education initiatives to further inclusion and diversity in the Army. In the fall of 2020, Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. James C. McConville asked the force to fight against harmful behaviors. "If we have an Army that is a cohesive team, where everyone treats everyone with respect and takes care of each other ... everything else will follow," he said (Suits, 2020, para. 4). In April 2021, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin initiated steps within screening new recruits and disciplinary action to address extremism in the military (Department of Defense, 2021). Most recently, the military prompted changes towards legislation that would move certain criminal prosecution decisions, including sexual assault, from commanders' authority. These transformations involve not only understanding rules and policy, but a necessary shift in culture, a dramatic change in the status quo, which has not happened since the 1960's and integration. The learning necessary for this significant change can be especially difficult with a lack of bottom-up support and individual buy in, particularly from adult educators responsible for professional military education.

Education and Leadership Interventions

The overarching priority must be a climate change, which only can be led by current standing commanders in the force. Several key areas are necessary to initiate an organizational culture shift through organizational, team, and individual learning. First, incorporating the most

effective adult education facilitators to lead the change at different levels of the organization at specific times is key. Certain adult educators may have skills to initiate the change and other adult educators may have skills to sustain the change. Second, adult educators cannot work alone. Leaders, adult educators, and allies need to form communities of practice in order to break the status quo. Third, formative and summative feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, need to generate data consistently used to improve adult education processes that are visible to members of the organization.

Two specific examples demonstrate entry points for systemic change. At Fort Leavenworth Kansas, the Combined Arms Center declared 27 April 2022 as Denim Day Observance where every soldier, civilian, and contractor on post could voluntarily wear jeans to express support for sexual assault survivors and protest against these crimes. In 1999, an Italian Supreme Court decision overturned a 1992 rape conviction. The justices concurred the woman must have given consent because she was wearing tight fitting jeans. Symbolism can create culture change and Denim Day across the Army is an input into building a climate of dignity and respect as well as demonstrating a pledge to support survivors of sexual assault (Department of Army, 2022). A second example took place at the Command and General Staff College. Faculty and students invited Brigadier General (Retired) Ty Seidule to brief about his personal story on racism in the Army based on his book *Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause* (2022). The purpose of this mandatory event was to prompt critical reflection and enable a respectful discussion on challenging topics, part of the Army Profession Series to support student learning and facilitate difficult conversations.

Conclusion

Top-down policy often is necessary and can form important first steps within culture change. Best adult education practices are emerging to facilitate learning addressing harmful behaviors at all organizational levels within the United States military. Dialogue can create reciprocity of innovation among multiple sectors of adult education addressing similar challenges.

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