

What Can DoD Leaders Do to Improve Diversity?

Outline of a Strategic Plan

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Abstract

How can the Department of Defense increase racial/ethnic and gender diversity among its senior uniformed and civilian leaders? Developing a strategic plan that incorporates a vision, mission, goals, strategies, and evaluation is a necessary first move. Equally important is specifying the steps required to execute the strategic plan: defining diversity; identifying who would do what and according to what priorities; defining strategies for managing accessions and career development, involving leadership, and ensuring accountability; and establishing metrics to guide progress.

In 2006, the secretary of defense called on the Department of Defense (DoD) to develop a strategic plan to achieve greater diversity among its active duty and civilian leadership. Prompted by DoD forecasts indicating that the department had virtually no prospect of changing the representation of minorities or women in its highest ranks for the next decade, the secretary called for a strategic plan that would integrate Service strategies and programs into a department-wide course of action.

DoD turned to RAND for assistance in laying the initial groundwork for such a strategic plan. At DoD's request, researchers from the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) reviewed the scientific literature on diversity and in 2007 convened a diversity summit of representatives from DoD, other government agencies, universities, and the private sector to share research findings, best practices, and on-the-ground updates on diversity efforts. Drawing from these discussions and the literature, NDRI researchers outlined elements that DoD would need to incorporate in a strategic plan—vision, mission, goals, strategies,

and evaluation—and recommended necessary steps to put the plan in place. The effort suggests that to create an effective strategic plan, DoD leaders need to define diversity, explain how they intend to measure progress toward greater diversity, and articulate how they will hold themselves and others accountable for such progress.

Vision: Defining Diversity

As an initial step in developing a strategic plan, DoD needs to define *diversity*. The researchers identified three possible definitions:

1. The representation of certain groups, commonly based on U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and disability.
2. The representation of a multitude of attributes that can influence the effectiveness of DoD in executing its mission. These could be attributes such as religion, socioeconomic history, educational level, specialty, career field, or military experience.
3. The combination of 1 and 2.

The researchers found that managing along the lines of the *inclusion* approach outlined by Definition 3 would have historical credibility and a clear “business case.” Historical credibility is important, because internal and external stakeholders—minority and female civilian employees and servicemembers, members of Congress, and the public at large—may perceive a vision without historical credibility to be a way to avoid improving representation of minorities and women among the leadership. A clear business case is also essential; without it, a vision will fail to instill diversity as a core DoD value in the workforce.

Mission, Goals, and Strategies

DoD also needs to establish diversity mission and goals. This involves identifying who will

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implement the vision and prioritizing its activities. Implementation can be a responsibility either of DoD's Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity (ODMEO) or of DoD writ large. If ODMEO is exclusively responsible, the department's existing organizational infrastructure will require little change and will further cement diversity as a human resources issue. If DoD is responsible, it can choose to address diversity separately or to instill diversity into its overall system of values. Both approaches may require major institutional changes, but addressing diversity separately treats diversity as an end goal, whereas the latter approach treats it as a means toward inculcating a core value throughout DoD. Finally, the goals—derived from vision and mission—will communicate the leadership's priorities to the rest of DoD.

To implement its diversity vision, DoD can pursue two strategies:

- *process strategies* related to operational elements, including but not limited to accessions, development, career assignments, promotion, and retention
- *enabling strategies* involving functions that are further-reaching in nature, such as leadership engagement, accountability, and culture.

Enabling strategies are necessary conditions for the success of process strategies. This stems from the fact that diversity management requires individuals to go beyond the comfort of familiarity and uniformity. To enable supervisors to step outside their managerial comfort zones, for example, top department leaders need to provide clear directions to DoD unit managers that it is acceptable for them to take measured risks to achieve greater diversity.

Evaluation: Measures to Guide Progress

How should DoD measure progress toward diversity? Most organizations—even ones that have adopted broad visions of diversity—tend to measure progress by conducting headcounts of certain demographic groups or performing personnel surveys. But while headcounts may be appropriate for measuring representations of certain groups, they do not completely capture the most important aspects of a diversity vision that emphasizes inclusion. A more strategic approach for DoD would involve (1) determining what needs to be measured according to the leadership's vision and mission for

diversity and (2) employing and/or developing metrics that support the vision and mission.

Choices for DoD Leaders

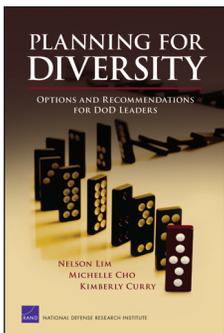
DoD leaders face critical choices in each aspect of the strategic plan. They may choose a strategic plan with a narrow scope, which is conventional and compatible with the current organizational structure. Or they may craft an expansive plan that will further integrate diversity management into all aspects of the organization. If DoD leaders adopt an expansive vision—one that goes beyond managing on the basis of representations of groups derived from EEOC categories, for example—they will need to involve top leaders from a wide range of professional/functional backgrounds in determining which attributes DoD wants to protect and foster.

Putting a Diversity Strategic Plan in Place

To get a strategic plan in place, we suggest that DoD leaders take the following steps:

- Have the Secretary of Defense spearhead the strategic diversity effort. The Secretary's personal involvement would clearly signal to the workforce that ensuring diversity is a core DoD value and that managing diversity is a top priority.
- Create an oversight committee with top DoD leaders from a wide range of professional/functional and personal backgrounds to oversee the development and implementation of the strategic plan.
- Adopt a vision that combines attention to traditionally protected groups with aims for creating an inclusive environment. This would involve defining diversity using attributes that are relevant to DoD's mission and shifting its management toward creating an inclusive environment.
- Expand strategies beyond accessions.
- Invest in and develop rigorous metrics on all dimensions that support the strategic vision.
- Design and apply a comprehensive accountability system with real rewards and consequences for individuals and groups.

These efforts may be most effective if they are applied to DoD as a whole, not just to a single policy office, such as ODMEO. They may also be most effective if they are pursued relatively quickly, so as to ensure that the next generation of leadership does not face the same diversity challenge. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Planning for Diversity: Options and Recommendations for DoD Leaders*, by Nelson Lim, Michelle Cho, and Kimberly Curry, MG-743-OSD (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG743/>), 2008, 130 pp., \$24.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4471-6. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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