Leader Prototypes and Assimilation: A Challenge to the Promise of Diversity

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The culture that we are embedded in inevitably influences our views about leadership.

—Hofstede, 1993[1]

The Army's emphasis on diversity and inclusion is important in maintaining a future competitive advantage in today's global security environment; understanding differences is central to the effective employment of landpower (soldiers and equipment) in and amongst different cultures. However, individual assimilation to cultural norms and embedded leader prototypes undermine the promise of diversity by suppressing individual identity. This paper examines this premise by analyzing the value and challenge of diversity, assessing the influence of leader prototypes and assimilation on individual identity, and by analyzing current educational approaches towards diversity and culture education. The paper concludes with recommendations for senior Army leaders to consider as they seek to fulfill the promise of diversity.

As a preface to this paper, it is important to define the term prototype and to distinguish diversity management from diversity leadership. In its purest form, a prototype is an original model on which something is patterned; an individual that exhibits essential features, or a standard or typical example.[2] Prototypes are decisive in forming organizational and individual identities. They enhance the salience of a group and make it appear to be a distinct and well-structured entity with clear boundaries, and with members that share a common fate.[3]

Diversity leadership and management are closely related. The difference is, diversity management refers to the development of policies and plans designed to drive and or affect the impact of diversity on key outcomes, while diversity leadership involves direct leadership practices that allow leaders to influence how people and groups relate to differences.[4] Management practices are central in regulating behavior, but leadership influences behavior.

The Promise of Diversity

The promise of diversity does not infer entitlement; instead, it is an idealistic concept that when realized, enables greater innovation and creativity in diverse and inclusive organizations. This is in comparison to cognitively homogeneous organizations that are constrained by similarity and habitual thought patterns pertaining to individuals and ideas that are valued. This idealistic concept results in all members feeling valued and allows them to demonstrate greater commitment to organizational outcomes. Well led and well managed diverse organizations increase the variety of perspectives brought to a problem, because individual diversity in organizations creates relationships between people with different life experiences, thereby enabling greater access to an array of information sources and perspectives. Diversity can also create conflict, lead to strained communication between people that are different, intensify social divisions, and result in an overall lack of trust.[5] The common thread between these two viewpoints is individual identity because identity dictates how individuals respond, either favorably or unfavorably, to differences. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22 explains the relationship between identity and leadership by noting that identity influences how leaders behave and learn, and how others perceive them, and notes that effective leadership begins with developing and maintaining a leader identity.[6]

The Influence of Prototypes and Assimilation on Individual Identity

Several leader attributes and competencies espoused in doctrine and enacted in leader practices characterize prototypical Army leaders. ADRP 6-22 provides a comprehensive framework that articulates what the Army desires in leaders by describing the types of attributes a leader must possess to apply competencies that allow them to lead and develop individuals and organizations and achieve results. The publication emphasizes an adherence to Army values, being empathetic, disciplined, physically fit, mentally agile, and possessing expertise as important attributes that enable leaders to apply competencies such as building trust, fostering esprit de corps, and creating effective unit climates.[7] Army doctrine provides a foundational base for leadership, but enact-

ed leader behavior is paramount in conveying desirable prototypes.

Organizationally endorsed credentialing and certification, and institutional feedback assist in influencing perceptions of the ideal and prototypical leader. These factors imbue desirable qualities on an individual and mark them with enhanced ability, distort perceptions, and affect predictions of performance and potential. This circumstance is consistent with the concept of embedding mechanisms outlined by Edgar Schein in his research on organizational culture. Schein notes that organizational culture formation begins with leaders imposing assumptions and expectation on followers, which in turn influences beliefs pertaining to prototypes.[8] Prototypes create a self-perpetuating cycle, particularly as junior leaders use them to construct their own leader identity. These prototypes constitute a social reality grounded in consensual views and are continuously reinforced.[9]

In salient organizations, leader prototypes bestow greater influence on the most prototypical leaders.[10] The appearance of the legitimacy of the prototype becomes a reality through a depersonalization process that compels followers to comply with norms that are valued.[11] This cognitive process results in individual members suppressing their uniqueness and transforming their identity in three ways. First, they place value judgments on themselves based on defining characteristics of the group prototype. Next, they cognitively and behaviorally assimilate with these characteristics by developing normative perceptions and attitudes. Finally, they view others through the lens of features that characterize organizationally sanctioned prototypes.[12]

Depersonalization is influenced by similarity attraction and self-categorization. Similarity attraction suggests that similarities in characteristics and attitudes facilitate positive relationships. Individuals that perceive others as similar are more likely to assess those individuals as being intelligent, and well adjusted.[13] Conversely, individuals perceived as different are trusted less, difficult to communicate with, and less adjusted.[14] Similarity attraction shapes perceptions of what a leader is, and must do, and can influence evaluation and promotion selection processes because it creates an unconscious bias in senior leaders. This bias results in discrimination against organizational members that are different.[15] This is natural in meritocratic-based organization, because meritocracies promote and award members based on achievement and potential consistent with organizational norms and prototypes.

Similarity attraction may have some influence on the current profile of Army General Officers. Of the 15 current General Officers, 12 are West Point graduates, and only three are not Maneuver, Fires and Effects (MFE) officers.[16] Highlighting this fact does not devalue the worth of these senior leaders rather it questions the prototype. Are the common qualifications of these senior leaders central to success at the highest levels of senior leadership, or are there other characteristics and different career experiences that make others just as capable? The profile of Army Generals represents a belief system in the Army that is influenced by legitimized prototypes.

Being different from others impedes career advancement, and similarities between subordinates and superiors are positive factors in selection decisions.[17] Similarity attraction leads to raters developing self-based schemas pertaining to performance and potential that reinforce their own favorable image, and positively bias their evaluation of subordinates perceived as similar.[18] The consequence of similarity attraction in the context of promotion and advancement is consistent with Schein's fifth embedding mechanism, how leaders recruit, select, and promote members.

Self-categorization is a process by which individuals define themselves in terms of membership in a given group, and causes individuals to develop self-concepts and provoke behaviors consistent with group membership.[19] Two effects of self-concept stem from self-categorization. Individuals begin to view their membership in a certain group as a significant dimension of their self-identity, and the perceived and actual interests of the larger group take precedence over their views. These effects strongly influence the development of in and out-groups, and further stimulate depersonalization.

Similarity attraction and self-categorization are consistent with the leader member exchange (LMX) theory, which centers on the concept of senior Army leaders establishing a special exchange relationship with subordinates that share perceived or actual similarities, and results in the formation of in-groups and out-groups.[20] Out-group members are less likely to commit to an organization or share minority viewpoints because they believe their perspective will not be valued. Conversely, in-group members are given favorable tasks, and the senior leader will often influence assignment processes in an effort to enhance the careers of these favored subordinates. LMX influences the suppression of individual identity and compels members to assimilate into group norms.

Assimilation is a process whereby individuals gradually adopt the practices of a dominant group, while simultaneously struggling to retain their unique individual identity. However, in the Army there is little incentive for members to retain portions of their individual identity that are not consistent with organizational norms. As a result, the Army is less likely to embrace differences deeply embedded in individual identity. Conversely, conformity emerges as an important and idealistic goal, and a reward and punishment system is codified that is initially transactional in nature. Individuals that assimilate well benefit from rewards in exchange for compliance to norms, and those that struggle to do so are marginalized. This socialization process is aligned with Schein's fourth embedding mechanism—the allocation of rewards and status.

Recommendations

Overcoming the effects of leader prototypes and assimilation requires leaders to effectively lead and manage diversity to create unit climates, and an organizational culture that allow the Army to transition from simply tolerating diversity to realizing the promise of diversity. Tolerating diversity is not a sufficient approach for the Army because by definition tolerance simply means "the willingness to accept feelings, habits, or beliefs that are different from your own."[21]

Dr. Milton J. Bennett in his article titled *Becoming Interculturally Competent* suggests that individuals experience a major change in their interaction with different individuals by moving from a state of ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism. Ethno relative world views enable individuals to seek differences by accepting and adapting their own perspectives and then integrating differences to create a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of reality.[22] This mindset change begins when senior Army leaders view their own perspective, and similar perspectives, as simply one among a number of complex world views. Creating a more holistic

and comprehensive understanding of reality creates tremendous opportunities for individual and organizational growth, and will require senior Army leaders to strike a balance between adhering to long standing organizational norms, and integrating divergent perspectives to foster innovation and creativity. Achieving this elusive degree of equilibrium requires leaders to alter their mental models of exacting prototypes, enhance the influence of the minority perspective, and place greater emphasis on diversity and culture education. By focusing on these factors as catalyst for change, senior Army leaders will become "entrepreneurs of prototypicality," and alter institutional views of what is normative.[23]

Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions and generalizations that influence how individuals respond to differences.[24] Senior Army leaders must broaden their mental models of prototypical leaders, adjust self-based schemas of effective subordinates, and challenge their notion of the ideal leader. This is important in establishing mutual trust, and building cohesive organizations. For many senior Army leaders this will cause discomfort and uncertainty, because the Army is heavily reliant on bureaucratic policies and regulations designed to avoid uncertainty. An aversion to uncertainty can result in a degree of cognitive dissonance for an organization that espouses the importance of adaptable leaders. However, discomfort and uncertainty often serve as necessary and effective means of change. An important idea to consider, is the Army is adopting more inclusive personnel assignment policies that enable female Soldiers to serve in combat specialty branches. However, it is important to ensure the integration of females in these branches serves a functional purpose as opposed to providing females with greater opportunities to align with existing prototypes associated with the institution's most senior leaders.

In further adjusting mental models, the Army must alter some organizational protocols associated with key selection board processes. Doing so will serve as a reinforcing mechanism and aid in changing organizational culture.[25] The Army should sterilize board records during key selection processes by removing all unit identification, commissioning sources, names of raters and senior raters, and official photographs. These specific means of identification engender biases, stereotypical beliefs, and stigmas that influence board members.

Adjusting senior Army leader beliefs and behavior will also require leaders to enhance the influence of minority and divergent perspectives, which are dismissed often in organizations heavily dependent on assimilation and conformity. Creative and innovative thoughts often emerge from ideas and concepts not aligned with prevailing norms or majority influenced ideas. The reluctance to embrace counter-insurgency doctrine early on during Operation Iraqi Freedom serves as a salient example.[26] Therefore, one of the most important roles a leader has, given the command and leader centric nature of the Army, is establishing a unit climate that embraces and fosters divergent thought. On the surface, this idea may seem blatantly obvious, but in practice, it is quite challenging because leaders often become overly wedded to their own beliefs and are influenced by confirmation bias. This thought highlights the importance of educating current and emerging junior leaders early on in their developmental process on the importance of critical and creative thinking skills, and the continued emphasis on these cognitive skills at the intermediate and senior service college level.

The Army Leader Development Strategy (ALDS) highlights education as one of the three pillars of leader development and is a testament to the Army's commitment to and reliance on education. The strategy's emphasis on critical and innovative thinking skills, emotional intelligence, and broadening experiences highlight its relevance, however, the ALDS does not place enough emphasis on the importance of diversity and culture education. These two words appear once in the entire document but not in the context of education.[27] Placing greater emphasis on diversity and culture education will greatly improve existing leader development strategies; therefore, the Army should consider the following recommendations.

The Army must integrate diversity education at all levels of leader development. At the junior leader level, diversity education should include education on the different types of diversity, the benefits and challenges of diversity in organizations, and provide basic knowledge on identity formation. At the intermediate and senior service college level, diversity education should emphasize the difference between diversity leadership and management, the value of embracing minority and divergent perspectives, and emphasize how LMX, self-categorization, similarity attraction, and social representation influence behavior and decision making. Furthermore, diversity education at these levels should include instruction on leader prototypes, and unconscious and confirmation bias. Finally, culture education should emphasize how culture influences behavior, beliefs and decision making, educate leaders on cultural frameworks that assist in understanding how cultures are organized and function, and identify the types of skills and attributes required to operate and lead effectively in multi-cultural environments.

Conclusion

Conformity to organizationally sanctioned norms and behaviors is not simply a matter of superficial compliance; rather it represents internal cognitive change, and the legitimacy of a prototype in a salient organization like the Army becomes crystallized and embodied in personal belief and value systems. Therefore, senior Army leaders, as entrepreneurs of prototypicality, must model the type of behavior that values individuality, enables trust and the development of cohesive teams, and ultimately allows the Army to realize the promise of diversity. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this paper, senior Army leaders will demonstrate astute diversity leadership and management practices and exemplify the type of leader current and emerging junior leaders must emulate. Ultimately, this will allow the Army to "develop adaptive leaders for a complex world, remain globally responsive and regionally engaged, facilitate commitment to the Army profession, and remain the world's premier volunteer Army."[28]

Endnotes

1. This quote is attributed to Gerard (Geert) Hendrik Hofstede and is derived from The Book Leadership in a Diverse and Multicultural Environment, by Mary Connerley and Paul Pedersen, Published by Sage Publications, 2005.
2. Merriam Webster dictionary.
3. Michael A. Hogg and Scott A. Reid, Social Identity, Self Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms, Communication Theory ISSN 1050-3293, International Communication Association, 2006, page 10.
4. Military Leadership Diversity Commission, Decision paper # 6: Diversity Leadership, February 2011, page 4-5.
5. Ibid, 33.
6. Headquarters Department of the Army , ADRP 6-22, August 2012, page 1-5.
7. Ibid, see leadership requirements model, page 1-5.
8. Schein's five embedding mechanisms include; what leaders pay attention to, measure and control on a regular basis; how leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises; how leaders allocate resources, rewards and status; deliberate role modeling, teaching and coaching; and how leaders recruit, select, promote and excommunicate group members.
9. Hogg and Reid, page 11.
10. Hogg, A Social Identity of Leadership, Personality and Social Psychology Review, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001, page 184.
11. Ibid, 184.
12. Ibid, 184.
13. Mannix, page 39.
14. Ibid, 40.
15. Ross Howard, Exploring Unconscious Bias, CDO Insights, Diversity Best Practices, Volume 2, Issue 5, August 2008, page 2.
16. General Officer Public Roster, General Officer Management Division, Senior Leader Division, United States Army, as of October 2013.
17. Schaubroeck, John and Lam, Simon S.K. How Similarity to Peers and the Supervisor Influences Organizational Advancement in Different Cultures, Academy of Management Journal, 2002, page 3.
18. Ibid, page 7.
19. Mannix, 40.
20. Gerras, 2004 Division Commander's Survey, Department of Command Leadership and Management, selected readings, United States Army War College, Fall 2013.
21. Mariam Webster definition of tolerance.
22. Milton J. Bennett, Becoming Interculturally Competent, Towards multiculturalism: A reader in multicultural education, 2nd edition, page 68.
23. Hogg and Reid, Social Identity, Self Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms, page 15.
24. Senge, Peter, The Fifth Discipline, page 8.
25. In addition to the five embedding mechanisms described by Schein, he also presents the following six secondary articulation and reinforcing mechanisms; Organizational design and structure; Organizational systems and procedures; Rites and rituals; Design of physical space and buildings; Stories about important events and people; and Formal statements of organizational philosophy, creeds and charters.
26. Gerras and Wong, Changing Minds in the Army: Why it's So Difficult and What to do about it, United States Army War College, June 2013.
27. In the current version of the ALDS, dated 13 June 2013, the word diversity appears on page 4 as a descriptor of emerging threats in the context of the current and anticipated future operating environment. The word culture also appears once in the document, and is used to within the context of conveying the importance of broadening assignments.
28. In October of 2013, CSA General Odierno promulgated his strategic priorities to the force. These priorities include: Adaptive Army Leaders for a Complex World; A Globally Responsive and Regionally Engaged Army; a Ready and Modern Army; Soldiers Committed to Our Army Profession; The Premier All Volunteer Army.

A longer version of this article that was published in the Profiles in Diversity Journal in their January/February 2014 issue—http://www.diversityjournal.com/12591-challenge-promise-diversity/.