Confronting Racism and Discrimination in the U.S. Army

By Sgt. Maj. Jason L. Barton

III Corps

Our ability to defend this country from all enemies, foreign and domestic, is founded upon a sacred trust with the American people. Racial division erodes that trust. Though we all aspire to live by the Army values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage, the Army has sometimes fallen short. Because just as we reflect the best of America, we reflect its imperfections as well. We need to work harder to earn the trust of mothers and fathers who hesitate to hand their sons and daughters into our care. How we respond to the anger that has ignited will chart the course of that trust.


Currently, we find ourselves facing an invisible threat. Intolerance, prejudice, racism, and denigration is present in our communities and playing out on our televisions across the nation. The solution lies within each of us as Soldiers, Department of Defense (DOD) Civilians, and contractors. By acknowledging these issues, we can begin to identify, address, and resolve these problems within our organizations and build a better future. The solution requires awareness, education, bystander intervention, and self-reflection.
Awareness

Awareness is more than just having knowledge or perception of a situation; it also includes self-awareness. Leaders must be self-aware of any stereotypes or implicit bias they or their Soldiers may have. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), “Implicit bias is a form of bias that occurs automatically and unintentionally, that nevertheless affects judgments, decisions, and behaviors” (n.d., para. 2). Whether it’s intentional or unintentional, leaders should encourage honest and respectful dialogue about race and diversity within our units. In doing so, they foster awareness and trust within their squads (Watkins, 2020; White, 2020).

A great resource is the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI). They create and provide multiple resources for the DOD regarding human relations training and awareness. DEOMI also provides posters for download and print for every special and ethnic yearly observance. These posters can be printed and posted in high-traffic areas such as dining facilities or company headquarters to assist in raising awareness (Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, n.d.). Awareness, formal education, and training are invaluable in preventing discrimination and racism.

Education

Every unit has two EOLs (a primary and alternate) formally educated on racism and discrimination by attending the Equal Opportunity Leaders Course (EOLC). The EOLC is a 60-hour course covering topics such as conflict management, perceptions and stereotypes, racism and sexism, and bystander intervention. The EOLC incorporates numerous practical exercises with different scenarios to encourage critical and creative thinking and to view different situations from other’s perspectives (Department of the Army, n.d.).

Once certified, EOLs assist commanders in addressing EO climate detractors, preparing and facilitating EO training, and helping Soldiers file informal EO complaints. EOLs are the first line of defense in identifying, addressing, and resolving issues at the lowest level within their organizations. EOLs also educate other Soldiers on how to be an active bystander and intervene when a situation warrants.

Bystander Intervention

According to Banyard (2015), “Most definitions describe bystanders as witnesses to negative behavior who by their presence have the opportunity to step in to provide help… Or stand by and do nothing but observe” (p. 8). Underscoring the Army Value of Personal Courage, it is imperative noncommissioned officers are active bystanders who act when others will not. They should encourage other Soldiers, as well as be role models, to always do what is right legally and morally, regardless of the situation (Department of the Army, n.d.b.).

Reflection

Leaders at all ranks should take time to reflect on their command climate, as well as their own personal leadership qualities. Here are some questions NCOs should ask themselves:

• How good is the command climate within my organization?
• What am I doing as a leader to make the climate better?
• Do I encourage my Soldiers to be active bystanders when they hear or see something that conflicts with the Army Values?
• Are Soldiers in my unit encouraged to attend special and ethnic observances?
• Do Soldiers in my unit trust me enough to come forward with a problem?

Conclusion

The U.S. Army is not just built for combat. It’s also an organization of dignity, respect, equality, opportunity, and professionalism. It’s an institution where diversity and inclusion are shared values regardless of location. By promoting awareness, education, and bystander intervention, we, as Soldiers, become part of the solution.


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