

Getting Past the “Woke” Noise

Why diversity, equity, and inclusion are leadership imperatives

by LtCol Susan E. Upward

Woke: aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).¹

Woke. No doubt you have heard the word before. Turn on mainstream media or click on any social media platform and it will be there. Added to the dictionary in 2017, woke was one of the top ten searched terms for 2021, rivaling other much-politicized terms such as vaccine or insurrection.² Just by reading this word you may have had a visceral reaction to it, as it is often used to evoke such a response. The term is bastardized to be used as a noun, adjective, verb, or adverb, but regardless of form, it is pejoratively misused to describe any discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives to paint them all with a broad negative brush. Pundits and politicians continue to decry DEI programs as creating “a woke, emasculated military” and accuse the military’s generals of being “woke corporate bozos” who are “pushing questionable policies on our troops just to satisfy the ideological agenda of a minority of Americans.”³ As a result, a recent survey found that “half

>LtCol Upward is a prior-enlisted Marine and deployed twice in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM as an Air Support Control Officer before becoming a Judge Advocate. She currently serves as the Law Center Director at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, NC, and is also a published author and speaker on DEI topics.

of Americans believe woke practices are undermining military effectiveness.”⁴

But strip away the rhetoric and the white noise, or as I call it, the woke noise. Separate the term from the tweets and the sound bites and the raw emotion the word is intended to elicit, and what we are left with is the hard truth that being woke, by the true definition of the word, is a vital part of being a military leader. The concept behind wokeness is essential—if not required—by our doctrine, leadership principles, and the critical thinking necessary for effective warfighting.

As quoted above, woke is simply defined. Yet, since its inclusion into the mainstream vernacular, it is the par-enthetical of that definition that has subsumed the word’s entire meaning.

At face value, the definition of woke should garner positive attention as achieving more inclusive and equitable ends for *all* through DEI. Instead, “wokeness” pigeonholes DEI into a merely dismissible equal opportunity phenomenon encompassing policies whose sole focus is on race, gender, sexual orientation, or one of the other protected classes. But DEI is a much broader topic that incorporates considerably more individual qualities that have far-reaching implications. DEI is necessary to truly

get after the real challenges we are facing as an organization, both internally in our ranks and externally in effectively projecting military power. DEI actually encompasses:

- Diversity: *All the different characteristics and attributes* of individuals that complement our core values, contribute to our warfighting capabilities, and ensure our connectedness to the American public.
- Equity: The fair and equal treatment, access, advancement, and opportunity for *all* Marines, sailors, and civilian Marines based on individual skills, abilities, aptitudes, performance, and merit.
- Inclusion: The integration of *each individual’s* differences into the way an organization functions and makes decisions.⁵

Looking through that lens, it is clear that DEI initiatives are about more than just a particular demographic, political ideology, or word of the day. Instead, they are a tool to make Marines more aware and actively attentive not only to cultural differences but cognitive diversity as well.

Regardless of what it is called, exploring societal and cultural facts and issues is not something new to the Marine Corps. In fact, we have been

acutely aware of and actively attentive to culture and the human dimension of warfare for some time. Our cornerstone foundational document, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, recognizes that “war is shaped by human nature and is subject to the complexities, inconsistencies, and peculiarities which characterize human behavior.”⁶ This is echoed in *MCDP 7, Learning*, that states because “conflict is a human phenomena,” it is necessary for Marines to educate themselves and “prepare for the complexities of each conflict by studying social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors.”⁷ It is within this framework that the Regional, Culture, and Language Familiarization Program was introduced in 2012 as a career-long curriculum “to provide the foundation for a cross-culturally competent general purpose force with diverse regional and cultural understanding” in order to increase effectiveness while “operating in culturally complex environments.”⁸

It would be shortsighted to believe that the premise behind *Warfighting* was only referencing human behavior as it applies externally in the operating environment and not internally within our own in our ranks. Indeed, *MCDP 7* reflects that internal focus, demanding that “the Marine Corps must also foster a culture of learning, understand their own Service culture, those of other Services and allies, the human dimension of the operational environment, and the cultures of those we operate among.”⁹ In this context, DEI training and policies are a complimentary corollary to Regional, Culture, and Language Familiarization—an opportunity to reflect on our own social and cultural factors to effectively leverage the mosaic of individuals that make up our organization.

This view is in line with our bedrock leadership principles. *MCRP 6-11B, Marine Corps Values: A User’s Guide for Discussion Leaders*, believes that knowing your Marines and looking out for their welfare is “one of the most important of the leadership principles.”¹⁰ But the mandate to “get to know and *understand* the Marines under your command” takes more cog-

nitive awareness and mental fitness than simply recalling a Marine’s name, rank, and hometown.¹¹ To truly “determine what your unit’s mental attitude is,” a leader must “develop a genuine interest in people” to understand an individual’s background, experiences, and how their unique history and culture have shaped their particular point of view.¹²

For instance, it is informative to note that the majority of age groups that make up our ranks expect, if not demand, to be part of a diverse organization that is both genuinely concerned for their welfare and appreciative of individual uniqueness. A 2021 study into what people want from their employers found that being part of an organization that truly cares about employees’ well-being was the number one issue for younger Millennials and Gen Z (born 1989–2001) as well as older Millennials (1980–1988), and was the second most important issue for Gen X (1965–1979).¹³ Additionally, another top priority for younger Millennials and Gen Z respondents was for an organization to be “diverse and inclusive of all people” because they consider DEI “not a ‘nice to have’ ... [but] an imperative that is core to their personal identities.”¹⁴ Of course, we cannot simply shape our policy based solely on popular opinion, but we nevertheless need to pay attention to these salient points.

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Armed with a comprehensive knowledge of the authentic diversity of our Marines, a leader can effectuate another leadership principle: employ your command in accordance with its capabilities. It is only by having a diverse pool to draw from, and then truly knowing the Marines that comprise that group, that a leader is best equipped to bring their unique talents to bear on the task

at hand. Nowhere is that premise more evident than in the balance between the art and science of warfare described in *Warfighting*:

Various aspects of war fall principally in the realm of science, which is the methodical application of the empirical laws of nature ... [but that] does not describe the whole phenomenon. An even greater part of the conduct of war falls under the realm of art, which is the employment of creative or intuitive skills.¹⁵

Certainly, there are aspects of our profession in which uniformity is critical to ensure that we are all using the same terminology and methodology to proverbially “row the boat” in the same direction—that is the science. But there is one area that we cannot afford to ignore the tangible benefits of our differences, and that is in the realm of diversity of thought. The ever-changing face of the future fight dictates “the same way of framing a problem, the same opinion, or the same perspective just won’t do.”¹⁶

The art of warfare requires creativity that thrives in diverse groups, where individuals from different backgrounds—whether it is race, gender, national origin, MOS, Service, or any other defining characteristic—are both included and actively participate in “open, dynamic, and respectful collaboration to understand, frame, and solve problems.”¹⁷ This is not just a sugges-

tion, but a duty prescribed by *MCDP 1* to have honest and frank discussions “regardless of disparity” in rank and “provide honest, professional opinions” even when they differ from the senior’s opinion.¹⁸ Moreover, it is a practice born from hard lessons. Since the early 1960s and the Bay of Pigs debacle, the military has been committed to avoiding the groupthink that dominated that

flawed approach.¹⁹ Historically our focus has primarily been on how our biases may skew our thinking toward our adversaries. It seems only logical that similar awareness and scrutiny need to be exercised internally, using DEI training to discuss the possibility of bias, intentional or unintentional.

To avoid the harm of groupthink and gain the advantage of DEI, there is another leadership principle at play, and it is perhaps the most difficult to apply: know yourself and seek self-improvement. Our human tendency is to believe that we are objective, when in fact “we see the world, not as it is, but as we are—or, as we are conditioned to see it.”²⁰ Accordingly, *MCDP 7* tells leaders to develop a level of introspection coupled with “self-awareness of the personal factors that can detract from learning, such as hubris (i.e., ego) and bias.”²¹ This is echoed in the recently released *Training and Education 2030* strategy, where the Commandant reiterates the importance of out-thinking our adversaries by “forcing Marines to contend with their assumptions, perceptions, and concepts.”²² Again, we have long endeavored to do hard critical thinking when it comes to our enemies, but we must also do the much harder task of turning those same critical thinking skills to assess ourselves, especially when it comes to how we deal with our own people. DEI allows us to apply the same concepts to what the Marine Corps has long considered to be our greatest asset—our Marines.

Both parts of Sun Tzu’s famous maxim apply here: as a military leader, you must know the enemy *and* know yourself. To be a more effective fighting force, we must accept the reality that our blind spots apply equally to our view of the world outside and inside our organization. Harnessing the power of diversity requires that we actively think about the way we think—to get different answers, we must include and listen to different perspectives in the room. “Woke” is merely a buzzword, used like a talisman to ward off any discussion of the inherent value of DEI. But to listen to those who use woke as an invective is missing the point, turning away from the fundamental tenets of

Marine Corps leadership and practices we have already been using for years. Being aware and actively attentive to societal facts and issues is not undermining military effectiveness—it is an essential component of it.

Notes

1. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “woke,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke>. The definition is preceded by a description of the term as “slang,” as discussed further infra.

2. Staff, “Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year 2021,” *Merriam-Webster*, n.d., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2021-vaccine/woke>.

3. Risa Brooks, “The Right Wing’s Loyalty Test for the U.S. Military,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/right-wings-loyalty-test-us-military>; and Leo Shane III, “Democrats Scuttle Debate Over ‘Woke’ Military Policies ... For Now,” *Military Times*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2022/12/13/democrats-scuttle-debate-over-woke-military-policies-for-now>.

4. Jennifer Hlad, “Woke-ism ‘Not a Factor’ in the Marine Corps, Commandant Says,” *Defense One*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2022/12/woke-ism-not-factor-marine-corps-commandant-says/380635/>. Internal quotations omitted.

5. Manpower and Reserve Affairs, *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan* (May 2021). Emphasis added.

6. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 7, Learning* (Washington, DC: 2020).

8. Headquarters Marine Corps, MARADMIN 619/12, (Washington, DC: October 2012).

9. *MCDP 7*.

10. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 6-11B w/CH 1, Marine Corps Values: A User’s Guide for Discussion Leaders*, (Washington, DC: 1998). Although this publication has been canceled, the traits and principles it discusses are timeless staples of Marine Corps leadership.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ed O’Boyle, “4 Things Gen Z and Millennials Expect From Their Workplace.” *Gallup*, November 10, 2022. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/336275/things-gen-millennials-expect-workplace.aspx>. Gen X respondents only ranked ethical leadership above an organization caring about well-being, which was the second most important issue for Young and Older Millennials, and Gen Z.

14. “4 Things.”

15. *MCDP 1*.

16. *DEI Strategic Plan*.

17. Keith T. Holcomb, “How Marines Can Fight the Stifling of Independent Thought,” *National Interest*, October 3, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-marines-can-fight-stifling-independent-thought-205154>.

18. *MCDP 1*.

19. Keith Vore, “Understanding Groupthink,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 8, 2013, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/understanding-groupthink#_ftn4. President John F. Kennedy famously said, “how could we have been so stupid?” after the ill-conceived invasion formulated by his advisors who “stumbled over the most common traps lurking in the group decision-making terrain. ... Inadvertently, they gave each other biased feedback that made the group as a whole feel certain that it was making the right choice. They discouraged each other from looking at the flaws in their assumptions. And they ignored dissenters who tried to speak up.”

20. Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

21. *MCDP 7*.

22. Gen David H. Berger, *Training and Education 2030*, (Washington, DC: January 2023).

>Author’s Note: The views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the DOD or the Marine Corps.

