

STUDENT READING

Diversity is a military necessity. Air and Space Force capabilities and war fighting skills are enhanced by diversity among its personnel. At its core, such diversity provides our Total Force an aggregation of strengths, perspectives, and capabilities that transcends individual contributions. Air and Space Force personnel who work in a diverse environment learn to maximize individual strengths and to combine individual abilities and perspectives for the good of the mission. Our ability to attract a larger, highly talented, diverse pool of applicants for service with the Air and Space Force, both military and civilian, and develop and retain our current personnel will impact our future Total Force. Diversity is about strengthening our force and ensuring our long-term viability to support our mission to Fly, Fight, and Win...in Air, Space, and Cyberspace.¹

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

Diversity is *a composite of individual characteristics, experiences, and abilities consistent with the Core Values and the Air and Space Force Mission*. There are two broad dimensions of diversity: primary and secondary (see Figure 1).

The primary dimensions of diversity is the one we are all most familiar with and includes characteristics that are relevant to who we are and that cannot be voluntarily altered (usually).

- Gender
- Age
- Race
- Sexual affiliation/orientation
- Mental and Physical abilities/qualities
- Ethnicity/Culture

On the other hand, the secondary dimension consists of characteristics that can be changed.

- Work ethic
- Income
- Marital status
- Experience
- Religious and Philosophical beliefs
- Personality
- Educational background
- Language abilities
- Strengths
- Temperaments

Diversity Awareness

Diversity awareness is the ability to recognize and respond to the needs of various groups within an organization to improve working relationships, productivity, customer satisfaction, and unit and mission effectiveness. Laws and regulation do not mandate diversity and it is not limited to any specific groups or categories.

DIVERSITY AND THE ORGANIZATION

AFI 36-2618 clearly states that the enlisted force is a diverse group of functionally and operationally specialized personnel. Just within our individual Air and Space Force specialty codes, we have diverse career fields, responsibilities, and expectations. So how do we operate harmoniously when we are so diverse? The answer lies within our training, continuous support, and awareness.

Social Sensitivity

We know that an organization must be supportive of diversity if it intends to be productive and successful. Just saying “we are supporting diversity” is not enough—we as individuals must genuinely internalize the essence of diversity and seek ways to incorporate diversity in our behaviors, daily routines, and operations. Being “socially sensitive” is another “must have” in our organizations as it enables the power and benefits of diversity to thrive. Achieving this requires all Air and Space professionals to develop keen awareness and understanding of others’ emotions, feelings, personality, temperaments, strengths, cultural differences, values, beliefs, etc.

Interpersonal communication is the most effective method for developing personal awareness of the diversity dynamics that exist within our organizations. Social sensitivity allows us to better understand the individual characteristics of who we work with, what each person brings to the mission, and improves our appreciation and respect for one another. Sensitivity leads to more appropriate conduct reducing those barriers and conflicts that “socially exhaust” and deteriorate work centers.

Diversity-Supportive Organization- A “diversity-supportive” organization embraces all aspects of diversity and exhibits the following five characteristics:

- **Act Proactively:** These organizations know the value of diversity and the importance of tapping into it. They integrate diversity into everyday thinking and action. Reactive organizations only deal with diversity when they have to (usually when something has gone wrong) and typically achieve temporary results.
- **Leadership-Driven:** Top-down management endorses and actively champions the organization’s diversity initiatives. In bottom-up organizations, isolated individuals and groups see the need for diversity initiatives but must struggle for solid support from the top.
- **Encourage Ownership of Initiatives:** When ownership is strong within an organization, everyone is committed to carrying out their role in valuing diversity, allowing it to flourish. In contrast, people in passive, complacent organizations do only what they must to stay out of trouble. Compliance is important, but it is only a starting point.
- **Think Inclusively:** Everyone is considered a valuable member of the organization. We all have the responsibility to give to, and receive from, the effects and benefits

of diversity. However, thinking competitively tends to pit one socially different group against another with intentions of only satisfying one group's personal interests. Therefore, we must recognize the neglected interests and needs of all groups that exist within our organizations. The goal is to make everyone's needs and concerns a part of the mainstream diversity effort.

Mainstream Diversity: These organizations make diversity a part of every effort, process, and procedure. Some organizations pay special attention to diversity and incorporate it into every training and developmental program they conduct. In fragmented organizations, diversity may be embraced in one department but neglected or not even considered in others.²

The Air and Space Force demonstrates the characteristics of a diversity-supportive organization by developing and maintaining comprehensive diversity initiatives to enhance the all-volunteer Total Force. It is through these initiatives that the Air and Space Force:

- Ensures all qualified personnel are welcome in America's Air and Space Forces.
- Educates and trains all personnel on the importance of diversity, including mutual respect.
- Promotes a culture that values inclusion of all personnel.
- Ensures that all personnel in the Total Force understand they are valued and have the opportunity to achieve their full potential while contributing to the mission of the Air and Space Force.

Socio-Behavioral Tendencies (SBTs)

SBTs are the thought processes we employ to help us make sense of the world we live in. Influenced by our beliefs and values, they define who we are, how we act, respond to situations, and treat others. Though there are advantages to each of these behaviors, these SBTs can negatively affect diversity (see Figure 2).

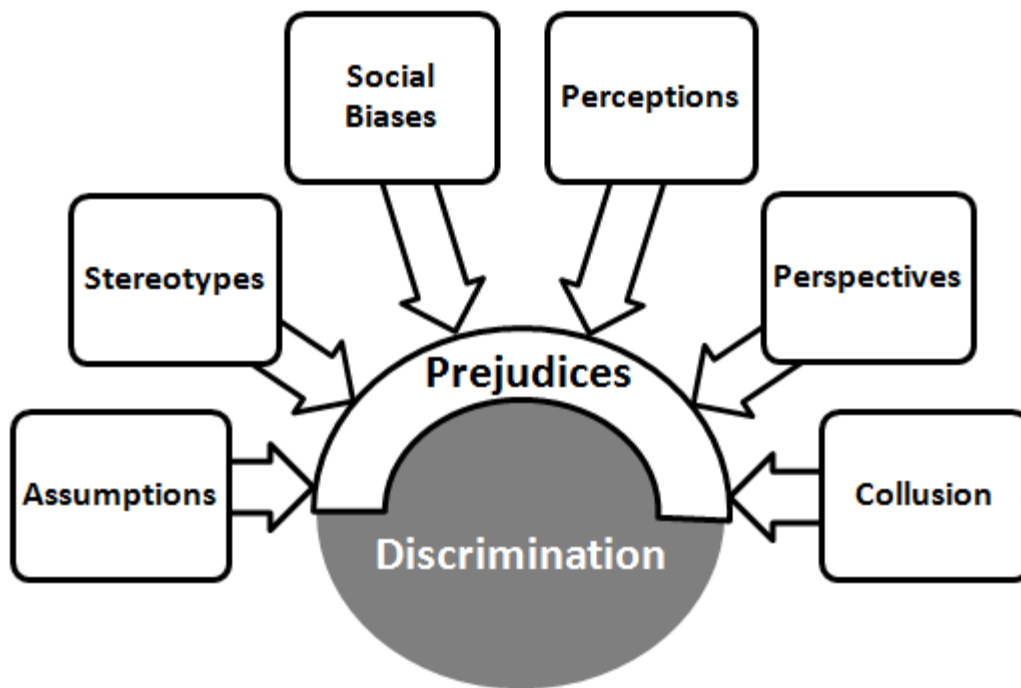


Figure 1. Socio-Behavioral Tendencies (SBTs)

Assumptions

Assuming occurs when we take the liberty of declaring something about a situation, item, or someone else that is not supported by fact. For instance, when you arrive at a new assignment, you assume that certain things will be as they were at your last assignment. The organization's structure, chain of command, policies, scheduling, and other activities should be relatively the same. In a way, we expect there will be similarities when we meet the personnel and how they will respond to us. We use assumptions to help develop an impression of elements in our environment that we are unsure of. Often, we do not even know we are doing it.

Promoting diversity requires that you remove yourself from your "comfort zone" and evaluate the assumptions you make every day. If not careful, false assumptions may become our personal "truths". These generate negative results by affecting how we think, treat others, and handle uncomfortable situations.

Stereotypes

A *stereotype* is a "fixed or distorted generalization about **ALL** members of a particular group that share a particular diversity characteristic (see Figure 1)." These images are often fueled by mass media, reputations passed on by parents, peers, and other members of society. Stereotyping is a way we simplify our social world by "chunking" people into sub-categories. This results in social categorization, potentially creating prejudice attitudes and what is known as *in-groups* and *out-groups* (otherwise known as the "Us and Them" mentality).

Social Biases

Merriam-Webster defines *bias* as “an inclination [predisposition] of temperament or outlook, a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment.”³ Being socially biased is where one unfairly favors or prefers one person, culture, group, or race to another. This is usually the effects of our upbringing, values, pre-existing beliefs, and interests and makes it impossible for us to be impartial. Social biases adversely affect many organizational processes like hiring and decision-making along with other areas like media, education, politics, policy-making, and basic social interactions. These highly influential and easily accessible venues have the potential to negatively affect how we perceive others.

Perceptions

It is said that, “*Perception is the reception and deception of your conception.*” In other words, what we observe and experience becomes our “reality” until we are convinced or proven otherwise. Our assumptions, prejudices, social biases contribute to our perceptions and shape how we think and feel. This can present life-long effects on how we live our lives. Remember, perception is our reality until convinced or proven otherwise. To change your perception, you may need a different viewpoint, or perspective.

Perspectives

We all have our own perspective or “take” on things based on our position on particular subjects, issues, and matters that relate or are important to us. It is how we mentally view or “see” a situation or the world around us from a particular angle. Otherwise regarded as opinions or personal views, our perspective is like prescription glasses in that the visions they help create can positively and negatively affect how we live, interact, react to others, and perceive the environment.

Consider the different perspectives that exist within your organization. From the commander’s point of view, he/she may perceive the organization is doing well based on performance and productivity whereas, from the Airman’s perspective, morale is suffering because the operations tempo is relentless and overwhelming. For diversity to add value to the workcenter, it is critical that we open our minds and make a sincere effort to understand the perspectives of others. There is never a guarantee that people with different perspectives will come to agreement, nor should there be.

Collusion

Have you ever heard a sexual or racially motivated joke at work? Did you laugh with the others? If not, did you attempt to correct the situation? If you overlooked the situation and did not confront the individual who told it-you are guilty of collusion. *Collusion* occurs when people cooperate with others, knowingly or unknowingly, to reinforce the behaviors that prevent others from fully entering into the workplace culture. It can take the form of *silence* (neither supporting nor defending the right to inclusion of a certain person or group), *denial* (ignoring the existence of problems), or *active participation* (assisting others to reinforce exclusion).⁶

Prejudices

Prejudice is “[the creation] of an adverse or unreasonable opinion about a person or group without [gathering] all the facts and is usually based on deeply held beliefs.” Most

prejudices develop early in life, influenced by acquaintances or attachments to specific groups such as family during childhood. These prejudices are often aimed at “those other groups” determined by our stereotypes. Prejudices are evident in behaviors from verbal slurs and ethnic jokes to blatant acts of discrimination.

Consider this when identifying a prejudice: when something is said about another person or group, determine the emotional intensity involved in what was said. If there is a lot of feeling involved, there is a good possibility that the message may not be a fair or accurate claim and could lead to the perception that the speaker is socially biased.

The difference between stereotype and prejudice is that stereotyping can be positive or negative and may include only a *general* opinion about ALL members of the group—ignoring individual differences. Imagine an iceberg with “stereotype” representing the top and “prejudice” representing the bottom. The top is easily changed by education or sunlight and the bottom is harder to crack because of deeply held beliefs with little to no light shed upon it.

Discrimination

Discrimination is the visible act, or consideration to act, in favor of or against a person or thing based on the group, class, or category to which that person or thing belongs to rather than on individual merit or value. It is important to understand that prejudice, when acted upon, usually results in discrimination. One example is prohibiting individuals who possess a specific diversity characteristic from participating in an activity, entering a facility, or performing a task because of that characteristic.

LEADING ACROSS THE LINES OF DIVERSITY

For diversity to add value to an organization, it is critical that we first open our minds and make a sincere effort to understand the perspectives of others. There is never a guarantee that people with different perspectives will come to agreement, nor should there be. Freedom of conscience is one of America’s oldest virtues and it exemplifies the ideals for which we serve and fight. However, what matters most is that we remain open-minded, listen to each other’s perspectives, and (when appropriate) share our own. Our goal should always be to seek a greater understanding and a mutual respect of our fellow Air and Space professionals as they too have sworn to give their lives in the defense of our country.⁴

Leadership commitment is the cornerstone of any successful diversity initiative. Every day, leaders are required to make difficult decisions that impact various levels of Air and Space Force operations in order to maintain morale, good order, and discipline. As explained in AFI 36-2618, the *Enlisted Force Structure*, junior enlisted and NCOs are expected to “*demonstrate effective followership by enthusiastically supporting, explaining, and promoting leaders’ decisions.*”^{5,6} Therefore, we must be very familiar with existing diversity issues and fully understand the decisions made by our leadership.

Leading through Feedback, Assistance, Inclusion, and Respect (the FAIR Way)

Effectively leading in a diverse environment or among diverse individuals is quite a challenge. No matter how you approach an issue, it is going to require you as a leader to demonstrate courage and take risks. As future NCOs and supervisors diversity is your responsibility. Experts from Alexander Consulting & Training offer a strategy for

managing a diverse workforce called the “FAIR Way.” In this strategy, cultural diversity is carefully considered because of what it brings to the workplace by way of our inherent genetic and ethnical differences.

Another area that could be argued as equally important is organizational diversity. Organizational diversity involves the differences created by an organization’s own structure such as the medical community, which involves family practice, pharmacy, medical records, and an administrative section. This requires an array of diverse skills and operating procedures, which are all part of the same workforce. The FAIR Way strategy provides a consistent approach to dealing effectively with diversity.

The FAIR Way employs four techniques for maximizing retention and productivity and maintaining effective working relationships in workplaces. These techniques are:

- Giving Feedback
- Offering Assistance
- Assuring Inclusion
- Giving Respect

Together these form an approach for working with and promoting the acceptance of diversity in the workplace. At the core of learning to accept and work in diverse workplaces is effective communication. The free flowing two-way exchange of information helps us understand one another’s differences. Good communication is essential for using the first technique of the FAIR Way strategy known as feedback.

- **Feedback** is giving and receiving information about expectations. It also includes information on how to meet expectations. NCOs should give this type of feedback given early and often, especially when it involves a new assignment or new people. This feedback can be formal or informal. Though the Air and Space Forces mandate formal feedback on a semi-annual basis, informal feedback concerning day-to-day operations helps keep organizational efforts headed in the right direction. NCOs need to give feedback, but they must also seek it as well. This giving and receiving of feedback reduces misunderstandings and provides clarity to all involved. In receiving feedback, find out what your people think and what they expect. Feedback may point out that they do not have the equipment they need to do the job or the necessary skills or confidence to succeed. This is how you know what assistance your people need to accomplish the mission, whether the assistance needed is information, training, or resources.
- **Assistance** is making sure workers have what they need to work to their fullest potential. It may also be about helping workers better manage their lives outside of work so they can be both mentally and physically present on the job. Effective use of this technique requires managers to reach out to workers in a proactive way and find out what assistance they need to do their jobs. Managers can also encourage workers to assist one another.
- **Inclusion** is making sure everyone has the opportunity to fully participate in the workplace. It involves responding to the needs of all workers so they feel valued and part of the team. It is important to make sure that work activities, including

work-related social activities, do not exclude or disadvantage anyone. If we continually select times for meetings that conflict with other's schedules, we are excluding them. As managers, we need to take every opportunity to include our people, especially when decisions are made that affect their area of responsibility.

- **Respect** is recognizing each person's unique value, contributions, and potential to the organization. We need to develop and show general respect by establishing work environments that are free of offensive practices and conditions.

Effective management of diversity recognizes that each person brings to the organization a unique perspective to issues we face and, in-turn, unique contributions to a solution. With this in mind, we can define effective management of diversity as recognizing the differences in individuals and welcoming those differences to provide new insights and innovative ways of solving problems. We need to treat people as they want to be treated and not as we think they should be treated. No matter how good a supervisor you are, you will not know what your people truly want unless you talk to them. Get to know them; their likes, dislikes, desires, needs, etc.

CONCLUSION

We must be committed to an environment of mutual respect that allows every member of the Air and Space Force team to reach his or her greatest potential. The Air and Space Force war-fighting capability is enhanced when every Air and Space professional is able to function effectively with fellow members regardless of their differences. Our force comprised of individual strengths, skills, and capabilities that transcend individual contributions. Air and Space professionals who work in diverse environments learn to maximize individual strengths by incorporating their abilities with others for the good of the mission. We must ensure every Air and Space professional is valued for who they are and the characteristics that make them different. In a letter written to all Airmen by former Secretary of the Air Force Michael W. Wynne, "Talent does not discriminate among any category of people, and neither can we."⁷

NOTES

¹ AFPD36-70, *Diversity*. 13 October 2010

² Lieberman, Simma; Simons, George F.; Berardo, Kate. *Putting Diversity to Work: How to Successfully Lead a Diverse Workforce*. Menlo Park, CA Course PTR, 2004. pg 10.

³ “Bias.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bias?show=0&t=1291045154

⁴ Parco, James E., & Levy, David A. “*Attitudes Aren’t Free, Thinking Deeply about Diversity in the US Armed Forces*.” Forward.

⁵ Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-2618, *Enlisted Force Structure*, Feb 2009. Ch 3 (3.1.7.), pg 7.

⁶ Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-2618, *Enlisted Force Structure*, Feb 2009. Ch 4 (4.1.7.), pg 10.

⁷ Wynne, Michael W., Former Secretary of the Air Force. “*Letter to Airmen: Air Force Diversity*.” <http://integrator.hanscom.af.mil/2007/april/04122007/04122007-28.htm>