The US Army is among the most diverse of organizations. A myriad of races, religions, and socio-economic statuses exist throughout its ranks. Despite its kaleidoscopic nature, at times the Army’s rank hierarchy inhibits diversity of thought. Most Officers are far less experienced than their enlisted counterparts are. Worse, an elitist culture among Officers often pervades, where one’s rank implicitly determines permission to voice feedback. This exclusivity can result in toxic groupthink.

Fifteen hours in to what was supposed to be a six-hour training event, my unit struggled to digitally link two dozen communication systems over an encrypted network. As midnight approached, we had exhausted all standard troubleshooting approaches. One of my Soldiers suggested a solution for the connection issues to our headquarters. To my disappointment, the Officers in the headquarters would not even let my Soldier speak until my Commander and I, both Officers, demanded their attention. Within minutes of implementing the Soldier’s solution, all systems successfully connected. I was incredulous that our organization had such myopic leaders who refused to entertain that a Private could know more than they did.

As an Officer and leader, I resolved to welcome diverse opinions when facing complex problems, believing that rank has no claim on intelligence or good ideas. In time, our Soldiers became confident enough to speak up without fear of rejection. Moreover, by treating subordinates and peers alike with respect, we cultivated not only a more inclusive environment, but one more conducive to positive results.