

The “Diversity” Myth

It is time to realize the dream
by CWO4 Jeff Rhea, USMCR(Ret)

As a former enlisted Marine recruiter and a retired Marine officer, I read with great interest, and sadness, Capt Scott A. Kates’ essay in the November 2014 edition of the *Gazette*, “How Effective is MCRC’s Diversity ‘Goal’? While I appreciate Capt Kates’ intentions, they only serve to highlight an antiquated and misguided philosophy of American social engineering that the Marine Corps still accepts as valid. Capt Kates points out that the Marine Corps is having a difficult time recruiting the number of high quality “diverse” (non-Caucasian male) officer candidates it desires. Capt Kates is correct in his assertion that it is time for the Marine Corps to make the ethical decision on this issue; but that decision requires that the Marine Corps make the strategic shift to aspire to the highest ideals of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution that all Marines are sworn to support and defend, and to finally bring to fruition that noble and transcendent dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. Capt Kates is wrong in perpetuating the myth that by simply recruiting females and men who are not Caucasian, the Marine Corps will achieve diversity.

Since the middle of the 20th century, there has been a tremendous effort in the United States to foster “diversity” in the workforce and all of the various institutions of society. But social engineering is contrary to our founding ideals, and in a free society, the goals of the diversity engineers are unachievable.

In his book, *It’s Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damned Ship in the Navy*, (Dublin, Ireland: Business Plus, October 2012), CAPT D. Michael Abrashoff, USN(Ret) touts the success of the diversity he achieved in the officer corps aboard the USS *Benfold* (DDG 65) during his tenure as commander of that vessel. While CAPT

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Which block did the recruiters check? (Photo by Cpl James Marchetti.)

All Marines are green! Some Marines are darker shades of green than others, but we are all green! So we will treat each and every one of you equally, because we hate each and every one of you equally!

– SSgt Denny Norris to the recruits of Platoon 2077, MCRD San Diego, 25 August 1980, pick-up day.

Abrashoff makes many valuable observations about a wide variety of leadership and management subjects, thus making his book a worthwhile read on leadership, sadly, he, too, was misguided on one subject—diversity. CAPT Abrashoff tells the story of how, when he assumed command of the *Benfold*,

the officers were all Caucasian males and many of the enlisted sailors were of various races and ethnicities. He believed his officers should be reflective of his crew; therefore, he set out to rectify the racial disparity between the commissioned and noncommissioned sailors on his ship. After 2 years of command,

his officer corps contained 2 females and men from racial minorities. A great success! Except that he failed to recognize two very important factors:

One. He had become that which he outwardly abhorred: a sexist and a racist. He sought to staff his ward room with diverse officers (as Capt Kates puts it) and women on the misguided notion that they represented the much-celebrated diversity. Selecting people based on race and assuming things about them makes him a racist, no matter how noble his intentions.

The same is true of his sexism. CAPT Abrashoff similarly discriminated against his Caucasian male officers. Nowhere in his book does he address the background of those officers. He leads the reader to presume that, by virtue of their race and gender, the Caucasian officers were all the same and they all were benefactors of some advantage the Filipinos working in his galley did not have. He also presumes it is his responsibility to avenge his perception of a social injustice. He indicts the qualifications and character of his officers without ever addressing whether or not they were from the same social class and educational institutions; or whether they had to struggle to put themselves through night school at a local college in order to get out of some impoverished circumstance; or had possibly been pulled from the engine room by the Navy as a seaman because they had demonstrated exceptional talent and were enrolled in the Navy Enlisted Commissioning Program. No matter how his officers came by their commissions, he infers their behavior must be bigoted because of their race and gender. CAPT Abrashoff is the only person in his book who not only openly demonstrated bigotry, but embraced it as socially responsible.

Two. If all of his officers, regardless of race or gender, held the same life experiences, training, and same thought processes, then he did not have diversity at all. *It is diversity of thought, skill, and perspective that is the leadership imperative;* not diversity of race, ethnicity, genealogy, or gender for its own sake. It is the content that matters, not the package.



Are we recruiting less qualified for the sake of diversity? (Photo by Cpl Jose D. Lujano.)

Good teams require homogeneity and diversity. The two are not mutually exclusive; they can, in fact, be complementary and, in highly successful organizations, they are. The art of team building, like the art of metallurgy, is finding just the right mix and maximizing the strength of the team through amalgamation. For Marines, it is diversity of strength that is the imperative, not the color of the mettle. We only need to look to Marine staffs to see this concept at work. All of the officers on a staff bring to the table the perspective of their discipline of war, and they add to the group effort from that perspective. Commanders want to hear what the battlespace looks like to the logisticians through the logistics lens and not because the officer's genealogy is _____ (fill in the blank). Is logistics really different for a Caucasian officer than it is for an Asian officer?

Homogeneous organizations share a common value system and common goals. Successful leaders seek to develop group homogeneity, not diversity. While diversity is vital to a well-rounded group, it is not the two dimensional demographic diversity so widely practiced and touted as a success by the likes of CAPT Abrashoff. For Marine officers in particular, diversity has nothing to do with what someone looks like and everything to do with what he brings to the organization. Individual identity is influenced far more by social demographics than DNA demographics.

My son-in-law is a Marine sergeant. He and I get along famously, but that is because we are very similar. We grew up in the same community. Our family histories are very similar. Our ancestral differences are only evident at family gatherings when he prepares traditional Mexican food and I prepare traditional Okie food. Culinary tastes and skills aside, he is a younger version of me. Our distant ancestry has not significantly differentiated our life experiences or world view; our recent ancestry and common geography have made us the same.

As a recruiter, I would sign anyone who could qualify to be a Marine and, therefore, I recruited men and women, Caucasians, Hispanics, African-Americans, and one Filipino. But they were all the same: middle class, from the same farming communities, from the same high schools, from the same American experience with only minor to moderate non-American influences that were, in the final analysis, irrelevant to the mission of the Marine Corps. Recruiters in New York recruit different people than recruiters in Yuma, regardless of race. An officer selection officer in the Bronx could check the "H" box by recruiting a Puerto Rican-American, but that candidate's experiences and perspective would reveal little resemblance to a Mexican-American officer candidate recruited from Yuma—also an "H" in the diversity box. So what is the point? The Marine Corps should seek a variety

of perspectives and talents in order to avoid the perils of group think; *that* is diversity in its purest and most noble form. Individually, officer selection officers and enlisted recruiters generally do not have a diverse pool from which to recruit because they are limited by their recruiting territory.

The real reason for most organizations to pursue diversity is to prove a negative. They simply seek to prove that they are not prejudiced against one group or another. This, too, is folly. One cannot prove a negative. By hiring someone who is _____ (fill in the blank) in order to prove one is not prejudiced does just the opposite.

The fact that any labor force does not reflect the demographics of a population is not in and of itself evidence of discriminatory hiring practices. In free societies, people may congregate where they please. People can, and do, congregate in the labor force and create demographic clusters. Whenever a demographic over representation exists anywhere, there cannot be equal representation everywhere. Therefore, it is folly for the Marine Corps to seek to have a labor force that is equally representative of the general population. It is also a fact of life that a military career is not attractive to many demographic groups. Females represent slightly more than half of the population, yet we know intuitively that half of all women do not desire to serve in the military, even as officers. That does not make our recruiters and officer selection officers sexist.

The objective of equal employment opportunity is equal access, not equal representation. People of all qualifying demographic groups should have the same opportunity to compete for a position. No one should be given an advantage for any reason that is not based on an objective mission need of the Marine Corps. One of the Marine Corps' strengths is that it is a meritocracy. Marines are judged based on their performance and nothing else.

Marine officers take an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. The 14th Amendment to the Constitution guarantees equal protection under the law. That protection

should begin at the recruiting station. Marines should have every confidence that their leaders hold their commissions because they are qualified and not because they are _____ (fill in the blank with diversity data). Clearly, one could not make that assumption if serving under CAPT Abrashoff's command. And that situation does a disservice to both the leader and the led. CAPT Abrashoff was right in believing his officers should be reflective of his crew, but that reflection should have had everything to do with Navy values and mission and nothing to do with DNA.

Some still hold to the original affirmative action argument that disparate treatment in order to achieve racial and gender diversity or "equality" is justified in order to redress past discriminatory practices. This argument that holds that someone should be treated better or worse because of something that may have happened to someone

else at some other time in some other place based solely on the race or gender of the contestants. This thought process is the sheer antithesis of what modern America is supposed to represent. Those of us who came of age during the affirmative action era know all too well how detrimental a question about the qualifications of a diverse officer can be to leadership. Race and gender should never cause Marines to question the qualifications of their officers.

It is time for the Marine Corps to realize a great man's dream that one day his children would be judged based on the content of their character and not on the color of their skin. That would be a strategic shift which would benefit our Corps and our Nation.



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