

## MISUNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: MILITARY STAND-DOWNS DON'T STAND ALONE

ALLISON ABBE, CHARLES D. ALLEN, TOM GALVIN, MICHAEL HOSIE,  
AND MAURICE SIPOS

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COMMENTARY



Organizational change doesn't and can't happen through stand-downs and education alone, no matter how well-executed. Organizational change requires sustained implementation beyond the schoolhouse, not just conversations within professional military education. A [recent article](#) by two of our U.S. Army War College colleagues criticized this year's Department of Defense extremism stand-

down in an indictment of stand-downs more broadly. The authors offer examples of problematic stand-downs and some insightful suggestions. Unfortunately, their message gets lost among inflated expectations of what stand-downs can accomplish.

Some have criticized the extremism stand-down as “insufficient.” Although an accurate description, it’s a feature, not a flaw. A stand-down isn’t supposed to be sufficient. It is supposed to get people’s attention and convey a leader’s prioritization of an issue by investing substantial time, energy, and focus to it. A stand-down helps to create a sense of urgency for change, setting the conditions for subsequent action. It largely worked. The extremism stand-down prompted far more internal discussion and external media coverage than the secretary of defense memo that preceded the Jan. 6 insurrection, which had already directed actions to address extremism in the ranks, among other recommendations from the Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion.

## BECOME A MEMBER

The Army and other organizations use stand-downs routinely to call attention to important issues. Initial reports indicate the extremism stand-down received mixed reviews across the force. Some organizations executed the stand-down poorly and facilitators were unevenly supportive. While stand-down outcomes would certainly benefit from additional planning and more careful facilitator selection and preparation, those efforts take time. The initial extremism stand-down was ordered to occur within 60 days, shortly after Secretary Austin transitioned into the job. An agile response to emerging leader priorities sometimes comes at the expense of well-coordinated design and assessment.

Although stand-downs in general have much room for improvement, no stand-down will solve organizational problems on its own. Even the best learning event can only accomplish so much and represents a missed opportunity if leaders do not or cannot reinforce learning through practice. To impact performance, stand-downs and education should be used in conjunction with tools for organizational change and shaping organizational culture. The organization has to specify the expected follow-on behaviors and then embed them in the reward, incentive, and other formal and informal structures of the organization. For example, a stand-down on sexual assault may raise awareness but is likely the least impactful step in the change process. More important is that leaders learn skills for prevention, collect data for assessment and monitoring, hold perpetrators accountable, and reinforce the message that sexual assault will not be tolerated.

Extremism is a systemic problem and therefore requires a systemic solution. In addition to a stand-down and conversations in professional military education, a truly systemic approach includes a vision of the intended end state, a plan of action, leader accountability, appropriate resources, and useful measures of performance and effectiveness. None of this is easy. It takes both persistence and a multi-pronged approach that mutually reinforces both the vision and organizational norms. Providing such top-down guidance, the Army has published diversity and inclusion goals in an annex to the *Army People Strategy*. While professional military education has already taken the initiative to contribute solutions, implementation and resources now must align across the Army, both within and beyond education, to make the strategy a success.

Professional military education plays an important enabling role in addressing social issues impacting the profession. For example, the U.S. Army War College adopted an enterprise change approach in addressing suicide prevention in response to the Army stand-down on suicide in September 2012. The entire

resident class worked together to develop and present a comprehensive list of recommendations to Army leaders. The Army War College has taken similar enterprise change approaches on other personnel and social challenges.

We agree with concerns that curriculum changes to address extremism and diversity may be subject to reversal, but all of our curricula components are essentially “reversible” in subsequent academic years by subsequent curriculum committees, or as executive orders direct us to avoid or include certain topics. A curriculum responsive to senior leader priorities will change over time, and leader emphasis is needed to ensure important topics are sustained in program learning outcomes. As specific topics shift, the Army War College maintains a continuing focus on providing tools for leading change and skills to navigate any complex social issue affecting the whole enterprise. These skills include systems thinking and data and analysis skills to assess ill-defined problems like extremism, which currently lack clear measures to indicate scope. It also requires students to develop a plan of action for transfer so that they don’t leave the learning in the schoolhouse when they graduate. Setting goals for transfer of learning to their future roles and responsibilities can help bridge the gap between classroom dialogue and the demanding leadership roles students take on afterward.

In addition to instruction on enterprise systems and change, we aim to improve and expand our curriculum on extremism, diversity and inclusion, and other social concerns affecting the force. We see these efforts as a part of a longstanding commitment of the institution to these issues and not just as a recent trend. Our strategic leadership course has included a lesson on diversity since the 2006 academic year and recently has included more women authors and speakers. The focus has changed over the years — gender diversity; cultural diversity; don’t ask/don’t tell repeal; gender, ethnic, and racial inclusion; and, most recently, extremism. Faculty and student feedback have resulted in continuous updates to the curriculum as we aim to improve instruction and dialogue on challenging topics. Student feedback this year indicated that students valued these topics and

would like more time and depth on them. Capstone projects in the strategic leadership course and individual student research projects have provided more opportunities to explore these issues in depth.

More coverage came in the form of a commandant-directed series of diversity, equity, and inclusion discussion events. These resulted in enhancements to our leadership curriculum for similar efforts in the upcoming academic year. Key among those changes is to ensure that students have more voice in shaping these events. Faculty have also been discussing these issues with students in electives and complementary programs for many years. Though true that these are voluntary activities outside the core curriculum, research has shown that voluntary, rather than mandatory, diversity instruction is more effective.

But it is not enough to talk about the issues. We want our students prepared to act. All students complete required instruction and experiential exercises on organizational change, and many students pursue greater depth in organizational change in a change management concentration in their electives. This intense focus on organizational change is essential if professional military education hopes to influence graduates addressing these complex challenges. The curriculum further prepares students to address complex, ill-structured problems through instruction in systems thinking and ethical reasoning. In this academic year, students will benefit from a capstone exercise addressing priority issues from the Army's *People First Task Force* (e.g., sexual assault and extremism) within problem-based learning on systems thinking, organizational culture, and change.

Some required instruction on social issues in the core curriculum is necessary, and we welcome continuing debate in the professional military education community about the balance of required versus voluntary instruction on social issues in the context of top-down guidance. Meanwhile, professional military education must also be responsive to bottom-up demands from students, who in our experiences are equally concerned over the health of the profession and social issues that could affect the future military. In an environment of rising societal and political

polarization, these conversations are increasingly challenging and important. We are proud of our faculty and students' efforts to continue engaging in civil discourse on these issues when some Americans are now unwilling to do so.

While we encourage and will continue conducting difficult conversations in the classroom, we caution against expecting culture change to result from these conversations on their own. To that end, we recommend that professional military education and leader development programs provide instruction and practice in managing organizational change and shaping organizational culture as fundamental to addressing personnel challenges. Stand-downs and dialogue are among the first steps, not the last words.

## BECOME A MEMBER

*Allison Abbe is professor of organizational studies and deputy chair of the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College.*

*Charles D. Allen is professor of leadership and cultural studies in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College.*

*Tom Galvin is professor of resource management in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College.*

*Michael Hosie is chair of the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College.*

*Maurice Sipos is director of the strategic leadership course in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College.*

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