

How Can the Department of the Navy Cultivate More Women Innovators?

Maura Sullivan, Ph.D. **

Coming from the private sector I was struck by the conspicuous lack of female voices participating in SECNAV's Taskforce Innovation (TFI). Women currently constitute less than 10% of The Hatch innovation crowdsourcing community and innovation organizations like the CNO's Rapid Innovation Cell (CRIC) have been overwhelmingly male. The women involved in TFI have provided a disproportionately large contribution in terms of content, commitment, and ability to catalyze larger networks, highlighting the need to cultivate more women innovators. The value of women innovators has been demonstrated in the private sector, where according to a Kauffman Foundation report women technology entrepreneurs achieve a 35 percent better return on investment than male counterparts.

Both in the private sector and the military women have worked to be recognized for their skillsets alone, often by attempting to remove gender from the equation. The Department of the Navy (DON) diversity agenda has largely focused on eliminating differences in perception and opportunity between the genders, such as opening all operation billets and gender-neutral uniforms. The DON may have moved beyond the active intent to exclude or discriminate, but cultural norms still prevent women from fully contributing to activities that take them off the prescribed path.

Scarce numbers increase visibility and scrutiny, and humans are less likely to try things when there is a potential of being threatened. As Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant pointed out in a Jan 2015 New York Times op-ed, when male executives speak up, they receive 10% higher competence ratings; when female executives do the same, their ratings from their peers are 14% lower. In male dominated fields men and women are held to a different standard when it comes to proving initial competence. Men are assumed competent at the core functions until proven otherwise, whereas women are forced to spend time proving core competence prior to being allowed to push boundaries. One private sector manifestation of this is the fact that women are often excluded from positions on technology boards because they lack STEM backgrounds, however a significant proportion of the male board members of technology companies also lack STEM backgrounds, but are assumed to be competent.

Innovation requires the ability to question norms, synthesize different views, and collaborate to develop unique and powerful solutions. Diversity is the DNA of innovation, but the current DON focus on diversity is simply about bringing women to the table, not providing the environment to ensure they are included in the conversation. Inclusion is about ensuring diverse voices are heard, recognized, and rewarded. Below are three suggestions for more fully incorporating women innovators throughout the DON.

Create space:

An often cited Hewlett-Packard internal report found men apply for jobs when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women will not apply until they meet 100% of them. The fact that women make up less than 1% of writers at the Naval Institute Blog is likely an artifact of this fact. Women are less likely to present ideas in progress in a male dominated environment. Encouraging women to innovate requires creating safe space to develop ideas and experiment. Additionally, creating a sense of community where women can talk openly and take risks without being judged prematurely is critical. Women specific initiatives, such as discussion groups and women in writing week, can create the sense of community and the critical mass necessary to push women innovators into taking risk.

Research also shows that when women come to the table the ideas are more likely to be more developed comprehensive solutions. Innovation programs need to ensure they are not primed to give more consideration to ideas that are brought to the table first.

Support the First Followers:

Derek Shivers gave a TED talk on how the first followers are critical to starting a movement and transforming a lone nut into a leader. In a hierarchical organization followers are generally those that have less authority and influence than their superiors. They may try and get along to preserve career or simply because it is the path of least resistance. Leadership in the innovation space is being the lone nut, a place women are often uncomfortable in that role due to the reasons discussed in this blog post. Good followers are the key to driving innovation. They empower people, remove obstacles, and catalyze implementation. They support good leaders and are willing to actively oppose bad leadership. Valuing, actively encouraging, and rewarding first followers are critical to the success of any innovation agenda and give those outside of the cultural majority a place to engage, refine ideas, and if desired step into leadership positions.

Maximize Strengths:

As an organization the DON spends a significant amount of the manpower effort getting the workforce to a minimum acceptable standard. This was critical in an industrial era military when force structures were optimized for homogeneity and interchangeability. However, research suggests that the most successful individuals capitalize on their innate dominant talents and develop those strengths by adding skills and knowledge. Rethinking who and how people come together to collaborate and solve problems is critical to avoiding group-think, a condition which has created past national security failures. Innovation requires intentionally cultivating views that are outside the cultural norms.

In order to be an innovative organization, the DON needs to embrace the fact that individuals have different strengths and weaknesses and that a model based on interchangeability is not tenable in today's world. There are biological distinctions between the genders, it is a fact, and not something organizational conversation should shy away from. Scientific breakthroughs occur in teams with more women because of increased creativity and fresh approaches and according to research published in Science increasing the collective social sensitivity by adding women

increased the collective intelligence of teams. Creating a culture that values individuals and emphasizes organizational constructs that maximize cognitive diversity will allow the DON to maximize the innovative potential of its workforce irrespective of gender.

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