

RESEARCH SHORT

OPPORTUNITIES An exploration of solutions
to challenges or problems

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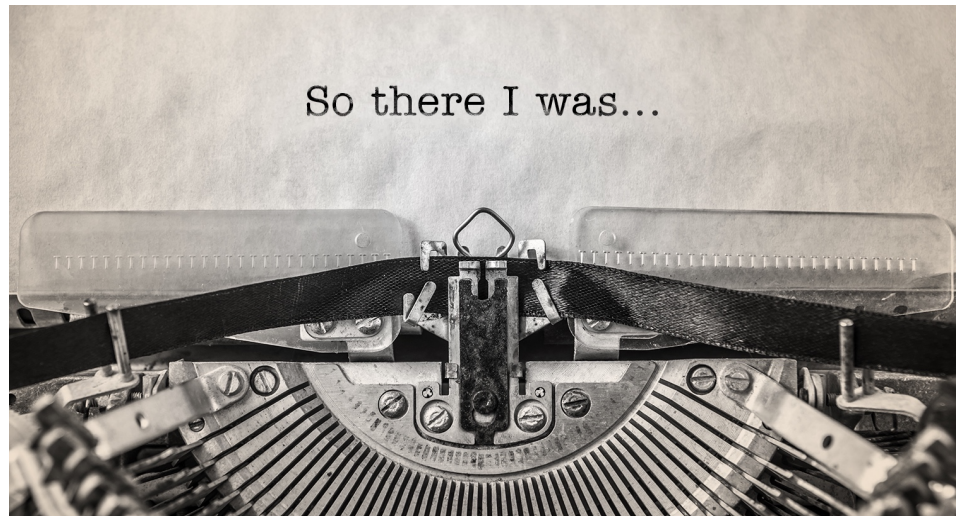


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Intelligence Integration War Stories Can Teach Inclusion

Julie Ferringer

This is the first in a series of Research Shorts that will explore how intelligence officers operationalize inclusion to advance the IC mission.

An inclusive culture can help integrate the unique talents of a diverse intelligence workforce, but the inclusion process is not well understood. The greatest knowledge gap is behavioral—what actions can intelligence officers take to include their colleagues and ensure they are an integral part of the mission? After the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) of 2004 mandated the IC integrate across diverse job functions and organizational cultures, intelligence officers learned firsthand that subtle actions can include—or exclude—diverse team members. Their integration war stories can help the IC understand the small but high-impact behaviors that build inclusive intelligence teams.

“Until physics says it’s impossible, we don’t count anything out.”

That’s how one DoD leader scoped the debate over how to remove 1,300 metric tons of chemical weapons from an unstable Syria.¹ The operation, which a former NCTC Mission Manager described as the “Super Bowl of WMD,”^{2, 3} required collaboration across diverse agencies, programs, and nations.^{4, 5} It was a complicated mission with a tight deadline; a former State Department official described it as “exactly on the borderline of being technically feasible and utterly insane.”⁶ During a multiagency meeting, someone suggested a wild, implausible solution: destroying the weapons at sea.⁷ A colleague countered, “That’s a really dumb idea,” and detailed why it would not work.^{8, 9} The DoD leader stepped in and said, “Let’s flip all our assumptions, build every possible plan; until physics says it’s impossible, we don’t count anything out.”^{10, 11}

War Story noun

: a story of personal experience involving conflict, hardship, absurdity, or adventure.

The experience might occur on an actual battlefield or anywhere people interact: at work, on an airplane, at a sporting event, or in a SCIF.

The Interpersonal Demands of Intelligence Teamwork

Intelligence has always been about the everyday work of making connections—among diverse pieces of information and people. After 9/11, the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) mandated the newly created Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and the other Intelligence Community (IC) member agencies foster more deliberate *intelligence integration*: the melding of intelligence officers from different job functions, agencies, and organizational cultures into one organizationally diverse, high-performing team, unified in its mission to protect the United States.¹² Integration improved both *among* agencies (e.g., the collocation of different IC elements at the National Counterterrorism Center) and *within* agencies (e.g., the FBI’s embedding of intelligence analysts on operational teams and CIA’s move to integrated mission centers).^{13, 14, 15, 16} IRTPA pushed the IC to develop these stronger interpersonal connections in pursuit of better connections between disparate bits of information.¹⁷

The IC’s culture of integration—more a process than an end-state—has evolved through trial and error, fighting and forgiveness, persistence, and a fierce commitment to the mission.¹⁸ The complexity of the 21st century threat environment¹⁹ demanded the IC integrate across boundaries, on a scale and at a pace without precedent.²⁰ In answering this demand, intelligence officers learned the small behaviors that help (or hinder) diverse teams working together to protect the nation. Their integration war stories—tales of the interpersonal challenges and triumphs of team building—can serve as case studies in how intelligence teams create inclusive climates.



KEY RESEARCH INSIGHTS

- Diversity of function, experience, demographics, or thinking can boost performance *potential* by adding to the team’s resources but requires complex communication across boundaries—a skill many diverse teams lack.
- Post-9/11 integration “war stories” are an untapped resource for overcoming these challenges. By sharing their experiences, intelligence officers can help the IC understand the small behaviors that build inclusive intelligence teams and advance the mission.

A recent National Intelligence University (NIU) study asked intelligence analysts about their experiences of being integrated into functionally diverse teams primarily composed of operational personnel. Although all team members supported the same overarching goal, the analysts' routine tasks, training, and tradecraft often differed from those of their operational teammates, creating barriers to integration.²¹ The analysts' experiences reveal integration of diverse roles and mindsets does not always come naturally. Introducing diversity into teams with deeply embedded identities, cultures, and traditions can cause discomfort as team members accommodate—or resist—new ideas and methods.^{22, 23} The analysts recalled the challenges of building trust with colleagues from different tribes: some teams worked through the tension and developed strong partnerships; others struggled to find common ground.

The Uncomfortable Truth About Diverse Teams

DNI Avril Haines recently stressed the strategic necessity of building an IC workforce “made up of people who think differently, see problems differently, and overcome challenges differently.”²⁴ Diversity—be it of function, experience, demographics, or thinking*—can offer a competitive advantage by boosting the team's available resources.²⁵ But research shows it is not enough to simply mix highly capable employees together and hope for the best.^{26, 27} Henrik Bresman and Amy Edmondson note an “uncomfortable truth” about diversity and team performance.²⁸ Although diversity increases a team's performance *potential* by adding to its resources, this potential is not always realized because accessing those resources requires complex communication across boundaries—a skill many diverse teams lack.²⁹

IC professionals observe this uncomfortable truth in their experiences with integration. An intelligence analyst working on a functionally diverse cyber team spoke about a team member who was “extremely knowledgeable, smart” but who withheld information, stifled debate, and was not open to his teammates' ideas.³⁰ By not sharing his knowledge, this cyber expert not only kept the team from benefiting from his unique skills, he also limited his access to the *team's* resources: the perspectives, ideas, and questions that might have increased his performance. Eventually the smart-but-exclusionary cyber expert left the team. When asked if the lost expertise hurt the team's effectiveness, the analyst said:

When he left, there was a knowledge gap and it freed people to get in the room and talk about ideas and propose ideas. The overall effectiveness may have dropped down a bit—he was a workhorse, he developed proprietary tools, knowledge ... but he would own all of that; he wouldn't share his tools with everybody. When he left, there was no one to go through [his data] so it was slower, but when the searches went through it was a more diverse set of information. There was a shift when he

* In its *Annual Demographic Report for Fiscal Year 2021*, the ODNI defined diversity as “the full range of experiences, perspectives, and affiliations that individuals share,” which include “characteristics such as national origin, language, race, color, mental or physical abilities, ethnicity, age, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression socioeconomic status, veteran status, and family structure.” (p. 5)

left; we saw it as “this is an opportunity,” and we made a rare arrest. In terms of teamwork, it felt better after the superstar left.

What made the team work once the superstar left? The analyst noted “a lot of mutual respect, people carved out their own interests. For example, I like big data; everyone would just allow me to work with that, and it was easier to do without him there.” A senior member of the team also took the lead on setting a new standard, telling her colleagues, “Everybody needs to find their own strengths, and everyone is going to have their own strategy, things are getting stale.”

Well-Integrated Teams Foster Inclusive Climates

The atmosphere the cyber analyst describes in the above example is what researchers call an inclusive climate—one where everyone is treated with respect, shares information, and is valued for their unique strengths.^{31, 32} Lisa Nishii further defined an inclusive climate as an environment in which individuals—regardless of their identity group status—have access to resources and can connect across organizational boundaries so their ideas are integrated in collective problem-solving.³³ Research has identified inclusion as the process that helps a diverse team integrate the unique talents of its members.³⁴ Building on this research, the IC defines inclusion as “a culture that connects each employee to the organization; encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness; and leverages diversity throughout the organization so that all individuals can participate and contribute to their full potential.”³⁵

Researchers identify two requirements for someone to feel included. First, the person must have a sense of *belonging*—a fundamental human need described as the “sense of being connected to and accepted by others.”^{36, 37} Second, belonging must be combined with valuing someone’s *uniqueness* or *authenticity*.^{38, 39} If intelligence officers’ belonging is contingent on their forsaking a key aspect of their work or personal identity, they will not feel included and will be unable to contribute their unique perspectives and ideas.

Table 1. Inclusion Requires Both Belonging and Uniqueness/Authenticity

	Low Belonging	High Belonging
High Uniqueness/ Authenticity	Differentiation: Individuals are not treated as insiders but are seen as having unique capabilities that are of value to the group.	Inclusion: Individuals are treated as insiders by the group and are valued for who they are and what they do.
Low Uniqueness/ Authenticity	Exclusion: Individuals are not seen as having unique value in the group and are not treated as insiders, but there are other individuals or groups who are insiders.	Assimilation: Individuals are treated as group insiders only when they conform to the dominant culture and downplay their uniqueness/authenticity.

This table is adapted from Shore et al.⁴⁰ and Jansen et al.⁴¹

How, then, does inclusion take hold in diverse organizations? Inclusion scholars propose organizations create inclusive climates by ensuring *integration of individual differences* and

inclusion in decisionmaking.^{42, 43} Robin Ely and David Thomas found the most inclusive climates are those that adopt an “integration-and-learning” approach that folds the diverse skills, experiences, and perspectives of the workforce into the organizational fabric.⁴⁴ This integration-and-learning climate is especially relevant for intelligence agencies, which Amy Zegart observes “are in the information learning business.”⁴⁵

If inclusion takes hold through integration, what does it mean to integrate? In his research on intergroup contact, J.W. Berry defined integration as a process of “mutual accommodation” where each group maintains some of its cultural identity while adapting to, and working with, the other group.⁴⁶ This continuous negotiation between groups enables the creation of a common identity that incorporates individual differences.⁴⁷ Berry distinguishes integration from alternative group processes: separation (differentiation), marginalization (exclusion), or assimilation, defined by inclusion scholars as “high belongingness and low uniqueness.”^{48, 49}

Integration, like inclusion, honors both belonging and uniqueness. Imagine an NSA officer embedded in a CIA counterterrorism team who, like the cyber expert in the earlier example, has unique knowledge that can help the team mission. In this case, the officer makes every effort to share her knowledge but will be unable to truly integrate unless team members show her that she belongs (by including her in conversations) and that they value her unique perspectives (by expressing interest in her assessments and using them in decisionmaking). The team would not have to do anything dramatic to prevent her integration—they could simply forget to include her, keep her on the outskirts of team interaction, or expect her to adopt their way of thinking.

IC Reform Chose Integration

IRTPA deliberately chose integration—not assimilation—as its process for IC reform.⁵⁰ The 9/11 and WMD Commission Reports made clear that the U.S. Government did not want to sacrifice mission-critical expertise in its pursuit of unification and connection.^{51, 52} Former DNI Jim Clapper observed “it requires certain unique skill sets to conduct SIGINT, HUMINT, GEOINT, etc., and integration shouldn’t equate to homogenization.”⁵³ To preserve the unique value brought by each IC element, IRTPA maintained the “confederated nature of the U.S. intelligence system.”⁵⁴ Individual agencies also retained—not without controversy—confederated teams when they integrated within organizations^{55, 56} by creating interdisciplinary teams comprising different functions (e.g., analysts, operations officers, data scientists, linguists) but maintaining each function’s distinct tradecraft standards and chain of command.^{57, 58}



“...then he said, ‘need to know?? How about you take your need to know and [redacted] it up your [redacted]!’”

With no handbook for how to communicate across boundaries on suddenly diverse teams, intelligence officers learned to integrate through crisis-driven, on-the-job training. Over time, IC agencies developed leadership training and guidelines to facilitate integration.⁵⁹ For example, the FBI's leadership competencies now include *Building Teams and Collaboration*, described as “inspires and fosters team commitment; motivates others to accomplish group goals; encourages an inclusive workplace where diversity and individual differences are valued; mediates concerns.”⁶⁰ This competency aligns with emerging models of inclusive leadership,^{61, 62, 63} but general categories do not always intuitively translate into practical action.⁶⁴ A front-line leader might read this competency and ask how, exactly, do intelligence officers “inspire team commitment?” What specific actions “encourage an inclusive workplace?” The IC is not alone in this quandary. Donna Chrobot-Mason and Quinetta Roberson observe the biggest gap in understanding how to create an inclusive environment may be the specific behaviors associated with inclusive leadership.⁶⁵ How can the IC translate abstract inclusion competencies into practical actions intelligence officers can embed in their everyday work?

Integration War Stories as a Prologue to Inclusion

Here is where integration war stories can help. Dr. Debora Pfaff, codirector of NIU's Center for Truth, Trust, and Transparency, recently wrote of the IC's need to “recast its story.”⁶⁶ Integration war stories are one way the IC might increase transparency and collective learning on inclusion, both within the intelligence enterprise and with the outside world. In two decades of integration, intelligence officers developed a ground-level understanding of the behaviors that build connections between diverse groups of people. Stephanie LaRue, the IC's Chief Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Officer, observed about inclusion, “a lot of folks are doing this every day and they don't even know it.”⁶⁷

In telling their integration war stories, analysts describe decade-long communication campaigns and other efforts to connect with teammates who told them, “I don't know what you do, I don't need you.”⁶⁸ They speak about using divergent approaches in a way that both honors and overcomes differences. One analyst supervisor recalled a contentious discussion on a functionally diverse team: “it was a tough meeting, there were a lot of feels in the meeting” but “it was left in a good spot, with humor.”⁶⁹ Another supervisor said her team members joke “uh oh, mom and dad are fighting” when she is sparring with her operational counterpart.⁷⁰ They talk about coming together in a crisis and of inclusive behaviors passed down through organizational muscle memory. One analyst, new to the IC, said she started including linguists after her operational supervisor reminded her to keep them updated on her work, explaining that linguists provide valuable perspective and are an integral part of the operational process.⁷¹ They detail the subtle, everyday things their leaders do to show they belong. Over and over again they insist, “the little things matter.”⁷²

This ground-level expertise is an untapped resource in the IC's quest to create a more inclusive culture as integration is a natural prologue for inclusion. By telling their stories, intelligence officers can help the IC identify the behaviors that both prevent and promote the integration of

diverse team members in support of the mission. These behaviors can be passed down informally, like the supervisor who reminded the new analyst to include linguists. They can also be embedded more formally in the IC's leadership training, diversity programming, and lessons-learned presentations. Intelligence officers' experiences with integration can show how sharing information is an act of interpersonal inclusion.^{73, 74} Their stories can inspire colleagues, shape the IC culture, and send the message: "This is the way we do things around here."

While IRTPA primarily focused on integrating organizational diversity, it was also the first legislation to mandate the IC diversify its workforce more broadly to improve its capabilities.⁷⁵ When fully integrated, diversity—be it organizational, demographic, or experiential—offers a competitive advantage. It can help the IC collect information from diverse sources, build coalitions, and connect with communities at home and abroad.⁷⁶ In the words of Jeff Fields, FBI leader and Intelligence Project Fellow with Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, "Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping can't recruit from West Indian communities in Brooklyn, Korean communities in the San Francisco Bay area, Great Sioux Nation in South Dakota, or from coal mining enclaves in Appalachian West Virginia. America's diversity has always been, and remains, an unmatched reservoir of creativity, talent, and innovation."^{77, 78} Integration war stories can teach the IC how intelligence professionals include each other and truly integrate this diverse talent.

Returning to the opening story about chemical weapons in Syria: in August 2014, the United States announced Syria's declared stockpile of chemical weapons had been destroyed—a victory that required cooperation among many U.S. agencies, an international coalition, and a series of consecutive miracles.^{79, 80, 81} One of those miracles was how disparate groups integrated diverse approaches to solve the problem. Members of the joint operation recalled how hard it was to develop trust among the groups—and how failing to include unique perspectives could have cost them the mission. In the end, the wild idea was the one that worked. Implementing what the arms control community called "Plan B," the chemical weapons were moved to international waters and destroyed at sea.^{82, 83, 84} The colleague who initially dismissed the idea reflected, "if the [DoD leader] had not said, 'Let's flip every assumption and build every possible plan,' there would have been no option."^{85, 86, 87} When the IC talks about inclusion, stories like this can show how it is done—and what is at stake.

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If you have comments, questions, or a suggestion for a *Research Short* topic or article, please contact the NIU Office of Research at Research@niu.odni.gov.

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