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### **Inclusion Behaviors and the Impact of Inclusion within the Fleet**

December 2022

**Capt Ivan J. Covarrubias, USMC**

Thesis Advisors: Dr. Kathryn J. Aten, Associate Professor  
Simonia L. Blassingame, Lecturer

Department of Defense Management

**Naval Postgraduate School**

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Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Naval Postgraduate School, US Navy, Department of Defense, or the US government.



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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores sailors' perceptions and reactions to sending and receiving communication pertaining to nationally controversial sociopolitical incidents (e.g., race, domestic politics, and the COVID-19 pandemic) that occurred from 2020–2021. The study develops a database of vignettes that leaders within the Navy can use to prepare sailors to communicate about controversial sociopolitical issues and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the Navy. This thesis presents a qualitative analysis of data gathered from open-ended interviews designed to solicit first-hand experiences of naval officer and enlisted personnel. The analysis explores the initial conjecture, derived from existing literature: To promote productive discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents, Navy leaders should focus on fostering an environment marked by trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen. The findings are consistent with this conjecture. The study concludes with a discussion and recommendations.



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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BLM	Black Lives Matter
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
DEI	diversity, equity, and inclusion
DOD	Department of Defense
DON	Department of the Navy
I&D	inclusion and diversity
LOE	lines of effort
LT	lieutenant
LCDR	lieutenant commander
LTJG	lieutenant junior grade
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
NPR	Naval Research Program
NSBE	National Society of Black Engineers
SHPE	Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers
STEM	science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
TF1N	Task Force One Navy
USN	United States Navy
USNI	United States Naval Institute
WHO	World Health Organization



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## I. INTRODUCTION

According to a 2020 report entitled *Managing Tensions Between Individual Participation and Organizational Control in Online Workplace Communities*, Kathryn Aten and Anita Salem found that “heated discussions regarding race, gender, and politics exposed the need to support organizational values while still fostering individual identity expression” (p. 1). Furthermore, in a 2020 statement to the fleet addressing the death of George Floyd and the associated social unrest, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Mike Gilday, encouraged sailors to tackle racism in their daily lives by having honest conversations with potential offenders while preserving the core tenets of dignity and respect during such interactions (U.S. Navy Office of Information, 2020). To facilitate discussions on controversial sociopolitical incidents, leaders need to understand how to effectively communicate and guide discussions regarding such topics.

Insufficient research has explored sailors’ perceptions and reactions to communications sent and received over the course of two turbulent years (2020-2021). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore sailors’ perceptions and reactions to sending and receiving communications that took place in the Department of the Navy (DON) from 2020–2021 pertaining to sociopolitical (e.g., race, domestic politics, pandemic) incidents that resulted in national controversy and to develop a database of vignettes that leaders within the Navy can use to communicate and promote inclusion and diversity (I&D) across various levels of command.

### A. PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This project addresses the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges identified by Navy supervisors and team members (subordinates) when responding to critical events — Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the attack on the Capitol (January 6th)?



- What strategies could equip Navy supervisors to lead and engage others in discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents?

## **B. SCOPE**

This project provides a qualitative analysis of data gathered from open-ended interview questions designed to solicit first-hand experiences of naval officers and enlisted personnel. The goal of this project is to explore perceptions and reactions to sending and receiving communications that took place in the DON from 2020–2021 pertaining to sociopolitical incidents that resulted in national controversy such as the summer 2020 BLM protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Additionally, this project provides a database of vignettes to support education and training of Navy leaders to better prepare them for leading and engaging others in discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents.

This project contains six chapters. Chapter II provides background information pertaining to the topics of 21st Century Sailor (N17), Navy’s I&D initiatives, and three controversial events that took place between 2020 and 2021. Chapter III reviews literature regarding organizational communication, guided discussions, crisis communication, and the role of I&D and healthy command environments. Chapter IV describes the research method employed. Chapter V presents the results from thematic analysis of interviews. Chapter VI summarizes the findings, presents impactful themes, introduces the vignettes generated from the interviews found in the Appendix, and offers recommendations to prepare naval leaders to facilitate discussions on controversial topics while promoting I&D across various levels of command.

## **C. LIMITATIONS**

Qualitative research allows for in-depth exploration of perceptions and experiences and is thus appropriate to address the research questions. The approach also poses some limitations.

First, the approach relies on participants to share their experiences. The researcher assumes that sailors reflected on and shared genuine experiences to the best of their





recollections. Furthermore, the researcher assumes that a safe space was created to allow participants to express themselves freely. Interviewees were encouraged to describe events to the best of their recollection and were discouraged from fabricating or embellishing stories.

Second, a key limitation of this research is the lack of a representative sample. In-depth interviews take considerable time for both researchers and participants to conduct, and participation is limited by researcher constraints and participant availability. Most of the participants were Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) students who were mid-grade officers. Thus, the participants in this study are not representative of Navy demographics at large. Although this project aims to incorporate a variety of first-hand accounts from across ranks, officer and enlisted, it is important to recognize that the results can suggest implications for the Navy but cannot be generalized to make direct conclusions about the Navy population.



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## II. BACKGROUND

This chapter provides background information pertaining to the 21st Century Sailor Office on Inclusion and Diversity's (N17), on contemporary Navy I&D initiatives, and on three controversial sociopolitical events from March 2020–March 2021. Some researchers define controversial sociopolitical issues as “issues that provoke ideological conflicts between politically opposing individuals or groups and affect society as a whole” (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2012; Lee et al., 2014 as cited by Hong et al., 2020, p. 4891). Consequently, other scholars claim that “these divisive and polarizing issues tend to trigger strong emotions and moral judgments from people with different political identifications, religious beliefs, and demographic backgrounds (Nalick et al., 2016 as cited by Hong et al., 2020, p. 4891).

In the aftermath of nationwide social unrest during the spring and summer of 2020, the CNO, Admiral Michael Gilday, in the 2021 *Task Force One Navy (TF1N) final report*, encouraged dialogue about controversial sociopolitical issues among sailors. He asserted that “we needed to seize this moment to engage in conversations about race, diversity, and inclusion within our force more than ever before” (p. 4). Provided that the Navy is in some respects a microcosm of American society, Navy leadership understands that their institution is not immune from the societal issues that plague American society at large. Furthermore, Navy leadership acknowledged the value of bringing these issues to light via open communication and discussions in the workplace among active-duty service members.

Although top Navy leadership encouraged its sailors to conduct discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical topics, leadership provided no or very limited guidance on how such conversations should be facilitated. Given the divisive nature of controversial sociopolitical topics (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2012; Lee et al., 2014 as cited by Hong et al., 2020, p. 4891) there is the potential that discussions may unintentionally exacerbate miscommunication, bias, and insensitivity across the ranks. Research on organizational communication and guided discussions suggest means to facilitate productive conversations regarding difficult and sensitive topics.



## **A. 21ST CENTURY SAILOR (N17)**

The mission of the 21st Century Sailor Office on Inclusion and Diversity (N17) is to “Shape Navy policy, strategy, and program execution, strengthening Navy’s inclusive and diverse culture. Utilize best practices, collaboration, and data-driven decisions, ensuring all sailors have the opportunity to succeed and contribute to mission success” [sic] (OPNAV N17 I&D, 2022). N17’s functions include providing I&D advisors, promoting inclusive culture, and developing and implementing strategy. In line with N17’s additional responsibility to “communicate current information regarding inclusion and diversity matters and programs” (OPNAV N17 I&D, 2022), on March 2022, N17 commissioned a qualitative Naval Research Program (NRP) project aimed at assisting Navy leaders to improve communication on emotionally charged and divisive sociopolitical events.

## **B. NAVY INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY INITIATIVES**

An N17 2020 report entitled *U.S. Navy Inclusion and Diversity: Goals & Objectives* highlighted the importance of addressing I&D across the Navy. The report outlined three goals as part of the Navy’s new approach in expanding I&D. The goals were intended to institutionalize I&D across the Navy by “attracting, recruiting, and retaining a diverse talent” (p. 5). Furthermore, the report defined inclusion as “valuing and integrating each individual’s perspectives, ideas and contributions into the way an organization functions and makes decisions” (p. 17). The report defined diversity as “all the different characteristics and attributes of our Navy Team, which are consistent with Navy core values, integral to overall readiness and mission accomplishment and reflective of the Nation we serve” (p. 6).

The CNO, Admiral Michael Gilday, stood up TF1N in July 2020. According to the TF1N final report, “TF1N set out to analyze and evaluate issues in our society and military that detract from Navy readiness, such as racism, sexism and other structural and interpersonal biases, to attain significant, sustainable I&D-related reform” (*Task Force Once Navy Final Report*, 2021, p. 4). TF1N generated four lines of effort (LOEs) led by flag officers. These LOEs focused on recruiting, talent management/retention; professional development; and innovation and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics



(STEM). According to United States Naval Institute (USNI), the TF1N final report laid “out specific, granular changes to how the service recruits and retains sailors as well as develops tools for professional development that open opportunities for women and minorities—particularly in the officer ranks” (LaGarone, 2021). Additionally, the Navy’s increased commitment to I&D can be demonstrated in its cultural collaboration with multicultural professional affinity groups like the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) and the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE).

## **C. 2020–2021 CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS**

### **1. COVID-19 Pandemic**

COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The highly transmissible virus caused respiratory illness spreading via air droplets or aerosol particles (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). As a relatively new disease, risk factors, symptoms, and preventative measures were discovered and evolved in the early stages of the pandemic. According to the CDC (2021), mask wearing was an important preventative measure to avoid the spread of COVID-19. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2022b) states that “in March 2020 the World Health Organization [WHO] declared the outbreak a pandemic, and travel to, from, and within many countries was severely restricted in an effort to control its spread. In many areas, schools and numerous businesses closed, and stay-at-home guidelines were implemented which strongly encouraged people not to leave their place of residence.”

### **2. Death of George Floyd and BLM Protests**

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was started in 2013 by three Black female organizers. However, the movement expanded nationally, according to Encyclopedia Britannica (2022a), in “2014 after the police killings of two unarmed Black men, Eric Garner and Michael Brown. ... In May 2020 George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was pronounced dead after Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, knelt on Floyd’s neck for more than nine minutes, despite Floyd’s repeated protests that he could not breathe.” The widespread circulation of a bystander’s video showing Mr. Floyd’s arrest



which ultimately resulted in his death, caused nationwide protests. The encyclopedia also notes that, “[t]he tragedy also brought to national attention the earlier deaths of two other African Americans: Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor” (Encyclopedia, 2022a).

### **3. January 6, 2021, Capitol Riot**

According to Duignan (2021), a mob of President Donald J. Trump’s supporters stormed the United States Capitol building on January 6, 2021. The unprecedented attack came after a speech by the president in which he encouraged his crowd of supporters to march to the Capitol to challenge the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. Duignan notes that soon after the election results were revealed in November 2020, Trump began peddling falsehoods regarding the election results, in which Joseph R. Biden defeated the incumbent president. In a series of tweets in mid-December 2020, Trump incited his supporters to attend a rally on January 6th the following year. On January 6th, Duignan indicates, “shortly after 2:00 PM the rioters shattered windows to break into the west side of the building, and for the next few hours they vandalized and looted the interior and ransacked offices as they searched for their perceived enemies in Congress.” All major news networks covered the events which shocked the nation still reeling from the most devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic the previous year.

## **D. CHAPTER CONCLUSION**

This chapter provided general context regarding the mission and intent of N17, explored major Navy I&D initiatives, and provided background information on the 21st Century Sailor Office on Inclusion and Diversity’s (N17), Navy I&D initiatives, and three largescale controversial events that took place between 2020 and 2021.



### **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. The first purpose is to examine some of the existing literature surrounding organizational communication, guided discussions, crisis communication, and the role of I&D and healthy command environments. The literature reviewed ranges from macrolevel communication areas of study to more germane Navy topics in order to enhance the researcher's understanding about the breadth and depth of communication surrounding controversial sociopolitical issues. The second purpose of this chapter is to identify strategies used by leaders to facilitate productive discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents. This review focuses on scholarly literature, which is not Navy-centric; however, some of the literature speaks to large institutions that are comparable in size and make up (i.e., schools and major corporations). The chapter concludes with a summary of command characteristics likely to support productive discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents.

As described by Barton & McCully (2007), the notion that “modern democratic societies depend on the ability of citizens to take part in reasoned discussions with those whose opinions differ from their own” (p. 1) extends to democracies' armed forces, especially to such large and diverse organizations like the DON. Additionally, in a 2007 study, Kathryn Baker asserted that “the study of organizational communication recognizes that communication in organizations goes far beyond training managers to be effective speakers and to have good interpersonal communication skills. Moreover, it recognizes that all organizations, not just business organizations, have communication needs and challenges” (p. 2). This illustrates the salience of communications regarding perceptions and reactions to nationally controversial sociopolitical incidents across the DON.

#### **B. ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

According to Kathryn A. Baker (2007), organizational communication “spans communication at the micro, meso, and macro levels; formal and informal communications; and internal organizational communication practices (newsletters,



presentations, strategic communications, work direction, performance reviews, meetings) as well as externally directed communications (public, media, inter-organizational)” (p. 1). Organizational communication’s diversity, that is the broad range of elements it incorporates, is simultaneously its greatest strength and weakness. Critics note that organizational communication is overly fragmented and lacks coherency. Having most experts view organizational communication as a dichotomy, as presented by Baker, either “as one aspect of an organization” or “as the underlying basis of the organization itself.” (p. 2). Either definition of organizational communication points to the makeup or culture of an organization and therefore establishes the importance of its being. Put another way, organizational communication involves important elements of an organization including its people; hence, people centric organizations cannot afford to ignore it.

Julie Zink (2019) provides a more succinct definition of organizational communication asserting that “the interaction required to direct a group toward a set of common goals is called organizational communication” (p. 3). She goes on to suggest that ineffective organizational communication occurs if interactions are frustrated by incompetence, insensitivity, lack of coordination, and red tape (p. 3). Paynton and Hahn (2018) provide a similar definition of organizational communication, describing it as “interactions among a stable system of individuals who work together to achieve, through a hierarchy of ranks and divisions of labor, common goals.” Paynton and Hahn (2018) describe five key features of organizations that affect communication: they include being systemic, hierarchical, having divisions of labor, collective action by employees, and layers of goals. It can be inferred that the aforementioned characteristics are trademarks of large private and public organizations including the Department of Defense (DOD).

Despite similarities across the academic field of organizational communication, a consensus regarding the definition of organizational communication is still lacking. Baker (2007) asserts that “the study of organizational communication recognizes that communication in organizations goes far beyond training managers to be effective speakers and to have good interpersonal communication skills. Moreover, it recognizes that all organizations, not just business organizations, have communication needs and challenges” (p. 2). Conversely, Lammers (2011) claims that “empirically, organizational





communication scholarship contributes too little to the explanation of core problems in organized life such as exploitation, organizational and leadership failure, or global competition” (p. 155). While experts have devoted much of their time and energy toward expressing organizational communication in a normative sense, descriptive examples of such topic remain absent.

### **C. GUIDED DISCUSSIONS**

Clarke (2005) asserts a de-mystification strategy of teaching offers participants a method to make sense of a complex world while removing the facilitator’s bias from the discussion. A de-mystification strategy provides a methodology “of analyzing an issue, considering the merits of an argument, and forming an opinion on the basis of critical analysis” (Clarke, 2005, p.2). This is accomplished through a four-step approach (Clarke, 2005, pp. 2–4):

1. What is the issue about?
2. What are the arguments?
3. What is assumed?
4. How are the arguments manipulated?

The end result of a de-mystification process is participants being less certain of their position on a controversial issue because the process presents more information on the issue, requires critical reflection on the issue and encourages open-mindedness (Clarke, 2005). The most important aspect of a de-mystification strategy, according to Clarke (2005), is participants will arrive at their own conclusions about controversial issues through their own deliberation while facilitators provide a “lamp of learning not the pointer and the answer book” (Clarke, 2005, p.5).

According to Gregory (2014), procedurally directive teaching “offers an alternative to explicit directive teaching because it derives from the intention to guide inquiry rather than persuade” (p. 627) In procedurally directive teaching, Gregory asserts that there is neither explicit endorsement of a preferred position nor guidance for the participants to favor one position over another. On the contrary, according to Gregory (2014), this method promotes autonomy and enables participants to think critically and independently while working collaboratively to reach a common understanding.



## D. CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Zink (2019) suggests that “as the ultimate unplanned activity, a crisis does not lend itself to conventional “command and control” management practices” (p. 94). However, as stated by Svensson (2009), it is also important to recognize that “crises do not appear in a social vacuum but should be understood as social phenomena, represented, defined, and experienced in certain social and cultural situations” (p. 556). Hence, crisis must be understood as situational, interpreted and defined by organization’s different audiences (Svensson, 2009, p. 557). Crisis communication literature asserts that not all crisis byproducts are negative. According to Ulmer (2012), “for instance, crises provide the opportunity for open and honest exchange of information, for communication that engages stakeholders in mutual sensemaking processes, and for communication that can help people protect themselves from the impact of the event (p. 525). Once more, the importance of organizational communication within large organizations cannot be overstated, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Dolamore et al. (2021) asserts that during times of crisis, as experienced by the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest calling out systemic racism, “communication is often reduced to one-way information distribution” (p. 9). Such communication method is at odds with the organizational communication perspective rooted in empathy and advocating for a two-way communication process. Similarly, Zito et al. (2021) claimed that “beside being addressed to manage the information flow, organizational communication aims to motivate and support human resources especially during periods of change and crisis” (p. 3) like that of the pandemic.

According to Zink (2019), although, “few circumstances test a company’s reputation or competency as severely as a crisis” (p. 95), organizations can and should devote some of their resources to prepare for communication during crisis. Ulmer (2012) asserts that “organizations such as the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that training and research needs to be ongoing due to the complexity and changing nature of the world” (p. 535). He argues that ideally, training should incorporate “...simulations and case studies that provide vicarious learning about how to communicate effectively in a crisis” (Ulmer, 2012, p. 535). The adverse



effects of crisis on an organization's communication should not be taken lightly, it is thus incumbent on leaders to prepare their respective organizations on how to mitigate and address unforeseen crisis events.

#### **E. THE ROLE OF I&D AND HEALTHY COMMAND ENVIRONMENTS**

According to an Army research unit, diversity enhances organizational effectiveness, "a climate for inclusion is one-way organizations can manage and leverage their diversity" (Ratcliff & Key-Roberts, 2018, p. 1). TF1N Final Report (2021) echoes a similar sentiment claiming that "ensuring inclusion and connectedness among every Sailor, family member and Navy civilian promotes organizational trust and transparency throughout their Navy journey (p. 12). Effective communication is not limited to military environments. Okoro and Washington (2012) claim that communicating effectively "in a diverse workforce ensures a high level of performance and productivity for human and intellectual capital and provides business organizations a competitive advantage in their expanded markets and in the global economy" (p. 57).

Both Army and Navy researchers found that an inclusive environment is characterized by trust and leaders that are willing and able to listen and advocate for change if necessary (Ratcliff & Key-Roberts, 2018; Navy, 2020). Zito et al. (2021) note that "abundant research confirmed these evidences [sic] stressing the need to adopt a communication style based on active listening, on participation to develop team effectiveness and to promote teamwork." TF1N highlights that the "focus should be on listening to hear, to understand, to empathize and to show respect vice listening to respond" (2020). The ability to feel heard and empathize fosters an environment in which mentorship is the norm and mentees feel safe and included (Jackson & Caballero, 2021). In response to a survey on assessing healthy command environments, participants affirmed that "all persons (and ranks) should receive equal respect throughout the command. This application of respect led to increased trust and a sense of dignity within the command" (Cooper et al., 2021, p. 53). In short, leveraging the benefits of I&D produces healthy command environments.



Inclusive environments are therefore better postured to deal with crisis and controversial sociopolitical issues that may affect regular organizational functions. Scholars contend that participating in difficult arguments and debates in the workplace can be accomplished. Otherwise, heated debates and arguments can be circumvented by setting ground rules to the discussion and reminding all participants of organizational values and codes of conduct (Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Caliendo, 2020). Hence, addressing controversial sociopolitical topics can be done in a respectful and inclusive manner thus facilitating organizational sensemaking.

## **F. CHAPTER CONCLUSION**

This chapter provided an overview of literature surrounding organizational communication, guided discussions, crisis communication, and the role of I&D and healthy command environments. The literature review identified strategies that could equip supervisors to conduct discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents. It informed the following conjecture: To promote productive discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents, Navy leaders should foster an environment marked by these seven command characteristics: trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen.



## **IV. METHODS**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, the researcher describes the interview participants, the interview structure and questions, data analysis approach, and sample selection issues.

### **B. INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

The population represented in this study are active-duty Department of the Navy (DON) both officer and enlisted personnel. Participants were recruited through individual solicitation via email and text message. Recruitment solicitations included a summary of the purpose of my research and requested a response as to their willingness to participate and availability for either a remote or in person interview. During the scheduling process verbal consent was obtained to record and produce a written transcript of the interview. Data was collected from 26 Navy personnel.

### **C. INTERVIEW STRUCTURE AND QUESTIONS**

Each interview was conducted individually and was broken down into four sections. On average, interviews ranged from 20–40 minutes. They were both recorded and transcribed using the Microsoft Teams application. Most interviews generated approximately eight single-spaced pages of transcribed text. Section one asked participants to provide the following demographic information:

- Age range (18-25, 26–40, 41+)
- Gender (M, F, Non-specific)
- Rank (E 1–3, E 4–5, E 6+, O 1–2, O 3–4, O 5+)
- Service (USN)
- Community (Air, Sea, Land, Other)



- Ethnicity for Inclusion (African American, Non-Hispanic White, Asian or Pacific Islander, White Hispanic and Latino, Native American)

Table 1 details the responses of the participants to the demographic questions.

Table 1. Interviewee Demographic Data

Category	Demographic	Number of Participants
Age	18-25	1
	26-40	24
	41+	1
Gender	Male	18
	Female	8
Rank	E6	2
	O1-O2	3
	O3-O4	20
	O5	1
Service	Navy	26
Community	Air	6
	Land	2
	Sea	5
	Other	13
Ethnicity	Non-Hispanic White	15
	African American	6
	White Hispanic and Latino	2
	Asian or Pacific Islander	2
	Native American	1

Section two consisted of open-ended questions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

The line of questioning was as follows:

1. Tell me about a time(s) in which the COVID-19 pandemic was discussed or communication was presented by your leadership. You may recall experiences in the early stages of the pandemic and subsequent government mandates.
2. Please describe the situation in which this interaction took place.



3. Did you encounter conflict or stress as a result of the experience?
4. What were the power dynamics like? (i.e., who was saying what?, identify the sender and receiver)
5. What was the setting like? (i.e., all hands meeting, small group discussion, or one-on-one discussion)
6. Were additional topics discussed?
7. As a follow up, what would you have done differently to make such experience more positive.

Section three consisted of open-ended questions regarding the BLM protests. The line of questioning was as follows:

8. Tell me about a time(s) in which the BLM protests following the death of George Floyd were discussed or communication pertaining to said topic was presented by your leadership.
9. Please describe the situation in which this interaction took place.
10. Did you encounter conflict or stress as a result of the experience?
11. What were the power dynamics like? (i.e., who was saying what?, identify the sender and receiver)
12. What was the setting like? (i.e., all hands meeting, small group discussion, or one-on-one discussion)
13. Were additional topics discussed?
14. As a follow up, what would you have done differently to make such experience more positive.

Section four consisted of open-ended questions regarding the January 6th Capitol Riot. The line of questioning was as follows:



15. Tell me about a time(s) in which the January 6th Capitol Riot was discussed or communication pertaining to said topic was presented by your leadership.
16. Please describe the situation in which this interaction took place.
17. Did you encounter conflict or stress as a result of the experience?
18. What were the power dynamics like? (i.e., who was saying what?, identify the sender and receiver)
19. What was the setting like? (i.e., all hands meeting, small group discussion, or one-on-one discussion)
20. Were additional topics discussed?
21. As a follow up, what would you have done differently to make such experience more positive.

#### **D. DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH**

The researcher analyzed the data in four phases. First the researcher read each transcript to get a detailed understanding of the responses. Second, the researcher coded responses using codes based on the seven command characteristics derived from the literature review. This phase resulted in 168 segments of coded text from 26 transcripts. Third, the researcher reviewed the coded transcripts to identify themes and explore the conjecture that fostering an environment marked by trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen can facilitate productive discussions of controversial sociopolitical events. During this step, the researcher also identified specific stories or examples and labeled them with the following codes: General descriptor, genders involved, location, setting, power dynamics, themes present, and controversial issue. The researcher identified fifteen stories. Forth, the researcher selected examples that illustrated positive, negative, and mixed practices involving communications about the COVID-19 pandemic, summer 2020 BLM protests, and the January 6th Capitol Riot and drew on the coded transcripts to develop fifteen vignettes.





## **E. CHAPTER CONCLUSION**

The objective of this research method was to collect accurate and relevant data from Department of Navy personnel on their perceptions, experiences, and challenges when responding to controversial sociopolitical incidents such as COVID-19, BLM protests, and the January 6th Capitol Riot. The results from the data collected will provide an understanding of what themes and command environment characteristics contribute to positive and negative experiences from unguided discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents. Furthermore, the data collected will also contribute to the development of a database of vignettes that leaders within the DON can use to communicate and promote diversity and inclusion across various levels of command.

The objective of this research was to collect in-depth accounts from DON personnel on their perceptions, experiences, and challenges when responding to controversial sociopolitical incidents such as COVID-19, BLM protests, and the January 6th Capitol Riot. Qualitative analysis of interviews is an appropriate method for this objective but also poses some limitations. This study's research population consisted of 26 DON personnel both enlisted and officer. The number of participants was relatively small and concentrated primarily amongst O3–O4 officers attending NPS. Future research is warranted to create a larger participant pool to include more enlisted personnel, senior-ranking officers, and non-student military personnel. Furthermore, the researcher recognizes that there was likely a self-selection bias in the participant pool. The group that chooses to respond may not be equivalent to the group that opted to not participate.

Analysis of the data explored command environment characteristics that may contribute to positive and negative experiences regarding discussion of controversial sociopolitical incidents. Vignettes generated from the analysis provides leaders within the DON tools to support productive communication and promote diversity and inclusion.



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## V. DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the thematic analysis of the 26 interviews. As described in Chapter IV, the 26 interviews conducted for this study consisted of open-ended interview questions. The researcher also captured demographic data pertaining to participants' age, gender, rank, service, community, and ethnicity. The purpose of the open-ended interview questions was to capture the interviewees' perceptions and reactions to workplace communications surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests, and the January 6th Capitol Riot. The analysis explores the conjecture suggested by the literature review: To promote productive discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents, Navy leaders should focus on fostering an environment marked by trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen. To protect the identities of the interview subjects, all quotes are anonymous. Then the analysis presents overarching themes and vignettes.

### A. CODES AND EXAMPLES

The researcher coded the interview transcripts by selecting relevant segments of text and grouping the segments using the codes describing command environment characteristics likely to support productive conversations, which were derived from the literature.

#### 1. Trust

Most interviewees suggested that trust fosters a healthy command environment. One lieutenant (LT) noted that frank discussions “where we are all just talking about the situation and everything going on with it amongst peers,” following the January 6th Capitol Riot, strengthen trust bonds among his peer group. Another LT suggested that because of the trust he had built with his junior sailors, “one of my sailors pulled me to the side. And the first thing that sailor asked me was, Sir. How do you feel about that,” referring to the BLM protests in the summer of 2020. Similarly, other interview subjects suggested that



trust between themselves and their sailors enabled them to have conversations about BLM protests and the January 6th Capitol Riot.

Although most interview subjects alluded to the importance of trust as part of a healthy command environment, some suggested trust was lost because leaders constantly presented contradictory information during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to one LT, “the confusion came in when the information changed from day-to-day. ... You start to not trust the word of the captain and I think that that’s pretty dangerous, especially in a situation like that when the people don’t trust the leader of the boat like that. Who? Who do you trust?” Other interviewees suggested that their command’s COVID-19 mitigation plans appeared haphazard and according to one ensign, akin to “building the plane as we as we fly it.” Trust seemed to erode across various commands because of the rapid changes brought forth by the unprecedented pandemic.

## **2. Respect**

Many of the interviewees suggested that respect must be preserved during conversations about race and politics; This was true for discussions about BLM protests and the January 6th Capitol Riot. One lieutenant commander (LCDR) recalled that his commanding officer (CO) at the time, “was very tactful” when it came to talking about social unrest and that he reminded his sailors that “we are a team. It doesn’t matter where you’re from or what you look like.” In keeping with a command environment marked by respect, one LT recalled that his leadership reminded all sailors to “keep with naval core values” amid the social unrest during the summer of 2020. Another LCDR recognized the value of having conversations about BLM protests at the workplace. He recalled that “you can either sit there and disagree and yell at each other and divide the workplace or you can actually just learn to respect each other, to listen to each other, and work together and hopefully become more than just coworkers.”

On the other hand, the absence of respect in communications about controversial sociopolitical issues can adversely impact a command environment. One LCDR recalled an incident that involved an email sent by her then-CO after the death of George Floyd and subsequent nationwide protests. She stated, “The email, in my opinion, was not enough



and it to me was borderline racist. ... There were several IG complaints after the email was sent. Basically, the email was saying to all hands [that] it's OK to not be OK, but we still have a job to do and, you know, we're all part of the Navy, so, like, race doesn't matter." Another LCDR recalled an experience in which he believed that some of his sailors felt disrespected when a navy doctor explained the vaccine mandate. He recalled, "I will say that they [command leadership] did a poor job of choosing that guy because he had no tact. I had sailors that had actual, you know, concerns about the vaccines, like valid concerns having to do with, you know, pregnancy and stuff like that. And he just brushed them off. He basically just said you're stupid for asking that question." Seemingly insensitive communications may appear tone deaf and undermine respect toward leadership.

### **3. Empathy**

Several interviewees hinted at their attempts to empathize with other sailors when they facilitated discussions about the summer 2020 BLM protests. One LT recalled that he "tried to relate as much as I could. Obviously, I can't completely relate, but I understand the struggles of what he [a junior sailor] was feeling and why he was feeling it, and I tried to make it personal." Another LCDR recalled that his CO at the time "encouraged sailors that wanted to participate [in the BLM protests], to participate by outlining what they could or could not do. He laid out what they could do legally. ... 'Be aware that you will be prosecuted if you do something illegal.'" his CO proclaimed.

However, not all attempts from leaders to empathize are taken seriously or perceived to be authentic. One LT recalled an instance in which her CO at the time attempted to discuss the BLM protests with her. She recalled that her CO "who was from the same state as me but obviously not the same color and trying to relate to me, I guess almost validating himself, that was just a little awkward." According to one lieutenant junior grade (LTJG), some leaders decide to ignore issues of race that may permeate the workplace. She stated that "a lot of officers, I would say, usually officers that are not people of color. ... Those who don't have experiences of, like in depth experiences of what it means to be a person of color, what it means to be a Black person, they often conflate things like gender, sexuality, race with politics, and everyone knows, you're not supposed



to discuss politics at work.” Leaders who ignore or downplay the impact of sociopolitical issues at the workplace, especially those about race, risk being perceived as lacking empathy. Several interviewees suggested that leaders’ ability to empathize is an important characteristic to facilitate conversations on controversial sociopolitical topics.

#### **4. Dignity**

According to some interviewees, it is important for leaders to treat their subordinates with dignity, especially when they address controversial socio-political topics. Several interviewees highlighted the importance of having safe spaces to talk about controversial issues at the workplace. The researcher also noted that several interviewees related the command characteristic of dignity with respect, often referring to the characteristics as a pair, “dignity and respect.” One LCDR expressed that he found value in a conversation facilitated by a senior enlisted sailor during the summer 2020 BLM protests. According to the same LCDR, participants were invited to “take rank off and have a candid discussion about everything going on and that was the best approach I believe towards handling that.” The intent of the mediated conversation was to have “a candid conversation about what’s going on and how everybody’s feeling about it and what their thoughts are.” Another LCDR recalled a time in which he had to amend a situation to ensure that one of his sailors was treated with the appropriate level of dignity and respect. The situation involved one of his sailors and a medical professional who exhibited a lack of tact when he addressed a group of sailors to discuss the COVID-19 vaccine. According to the LCDR, he relayed the issue to his chain of command. He said, “I don’t like the way he [the doctor] answered that question. And one of our female docs was able to sit down with my sailor and can talk it through with her, which was good because we would have lost the sailor due to rejecting the vaccine for that reason, for his lack of tact.”

Other interviewees suggested that leaders who do not treat their subordinates with a sense of dignity, may undermine a unit’s morale. While deployed aboard an aircraft carrier during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, one LT recalled a visit from “some Under Secretary of Defense” who told sailors, “‘You guys are lucky out here because you can’t imagine the things that your family’s going through back home.’ As if



that was supposed to make us feel better. Like we, most military people you know, we join because we wanna protect and serve, right. And it's a crazy feeling when you think your loved ones are back home, threatened and there's absolutely nothing you can do. ... and all the while there's not a lot of communication from the top." A perceived lack of dignity and respect can come from leaders up and down the chain of command. As expressed by the interviewees, it is important for leaders to treat their subordinates with a sense of dignity and respect, especially in light of nationwide sociopolitical controversies.

## **5. Collective Sensemaking**

Most interviewees alluded to the importance of collective sensemaking during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. One LCDR recalled that "the first time that we talked about COVID-19 was in a Khaki group setting, mostly just officers and some senior enlisted. It was more of an open discussion on collecting ideas of how we were going to keep everybody safe but still get work done." Similarly, another LCDR recalled that he "worked in a really tight knit group and made sure to talk to people and explain to them, hey, this is why I'm being the mask cop, you know, giving examples." One LT recalled that issues that surrounded the implementation of COVID-19 mitigation plans were addressed "in smaller group discussions and that was kind of handled with CDC guidance. ... we kind of just pushed the CDC guidance and as it changed, we just kind of continued to change and adapt with that." Almost all interviewees acknowledged that the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent mandates were very fluid and characterized by constant information change. As a result of rapid change, interviewees hinted at the importance of collective sensemaking in such environments.

Conversely, according to the responses of several interviewees, absence of collective sensemaking could lead to paralysis and undermine unit cohesion. According to one LCDR, his command's COVID-19 mitigation plan "wasn't a very well-crafted direction for the workforce." The same LCDR noted that "the expectations on what we were doing and for how long we were doing it. Maybe could have been a little more clear," when he referred to the execution of a COVID-19 mitigation plan. Another LT remarked that her CO dismissed the unit's concerns she presented him, after she conducted her



version of collective sensemaking with her subordinates. According to such LT, her CO said, “‘thanks for doing that, like no changes will be made at this time.’ So, you know, I was overruled and my assessment of what was going on and how much it was impacting us.” Along similar lines, another LT recalled that in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic “I didn’t really take it serious,” this was largely because, according to such LT, no one in his command took COVID-19 seriously at the time.

## **6. Support**

Multiple interviewees suggested that it was imperative for leaders to support their subordinates in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. One LT stated that she “initiated an interaction with my subordinates to address concerns they had when COVID-19 was first being discussed in the media and the main reason for discussing it was that children’s schools are being closed and people were afraid that they couldn’t make it to work or what would the repercussions be.” Other interviewees alluded to the creation of support networks during the onset of the pandemic, according to some interviewees most of the support networks developed organically, without command sponsorship. One LCDR acknowledged that her command leadership “were pretty good about communicating and also ensuring that whatever we needed to do as far as our department because we were applied in answering what needs to happen to make sure the command in whole is safe.”

Several interviewees also suggested that it was critical for leaders to demonstrate support for sailors who felt personally affected by the summer 2020 BLM protests. According to an account from one LTJG, she supported sailors who felt connected to the BLM protests and inadvertently became an advocate for such sailors. The LTJG recalled, “I found myself in his [the CO’s] office multiple times talking about, you know, discrimination on the ship, things that are happening to either Black sailors, female sailors, LGBTQ sailors, and he just didn’t get it. He didn’t get it, and therefore, that mindset was passed down to his department heads and then to the JO’s [junior officers].” Several other interviewees recognized that despite a lack of support from higher leadership, they attempted to provide support at their level. One LT recalled that he focused on putting “a community around him” when he referred to a sailor that felt particularly affected by the





BLM protests because he related to the treatment George Floyd experienced at the hands of police officers.

## **7. The Ability to Listen**

Multiple interview subjects suggested that leaders' ability to listen was particularly important when they facilitated conversations or discussions about the summer 2020 BLM protests and other racial issues. One LT recalled a one-on-one conversation he had with a junior sailor about the BLM protests. According to this LT, "it was just me listening and trying to be sympathetic to what was happening," as the sailor voiced his opinion about the protests. Another LT recounted an interaction between him and a junior sailor in which they addressed the topic of BLM protests. The LT said, "more than anything, I just listened to him. I didn't really have a lot of input and he kind of described how this was not out of the norm." One LCDR recalled that the conversations that surrounded the Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks, "focused more on the racial aspects of that than it did on the extremist portion of the January 6th Capitol Riot." According to such LCDR, he found value in the training, stating that, "I learned a lot about the people that I worked with, and I considered it a definite good use of our time. I think we all came out a little bit stronger as a team after that than we did going in." Several interviewees also highlighted the importance of open-door policies, to listen and learn more about their sailors.

It is worth noting that instances in which leaders displayed an inability to listen were not shared by the interviewees. However, the researcher assumes that instances in which leaders were dismissive of sailors' thoughts and feelings about a particular sociopolitical event, is evidence of leadership who lacks the ability to listen.

## **B. OVERARCHING THEMES**

The following section discusses the themes that emerged from the data analysis. As stated earlier, the researcher reviewed the coded transcripts to identify themes in the third phase of analysis. The researcher identified three overarching themes, these include the importance of open and honest communication, the need for transparency, and the value of a diverse workforce.



## **1. Open and Honest Communication**

According to several interviewee responses, productive conversations can be supported through open and honest communication. One LCDR asserted that “taking time with your people to have those open and honest discussions on a regular basis” is important “so you know your people and you know, what their concerns are.” Another LCDR recalled that in his command “everybody was very open and like, hey, we are here to help. We’re here to support the command overall,” during the early days of the pandemic and in discussions about BLM protests. Other interviewees noted the importance for leadership to remain receptive to questions and comments during conversations about controversial sociopolitical events. Another LCDR recalled that as news broke about the BLM protests, his “leadership was pretty open about, hey, if there’s things you want to address, let’s address them and talk about it.” Several interview subjects who did not consider themselves persons of color expressed appreciation for open and honest conversations about race relations and deemed such conversations effective means to build trust and respect in command environments.

## **2. The Need for Transparency**

According to one petty officer first class (PO1), “Transparency with the people that work for you is very important.” Several other interviewees echoed this PO1’s statement. Multiple interviewees suggested that it is important for leaders to explain the underlying reasons or why behind the implementation of strict policies, such as those instituted during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The same PO1 asserted that “I think that it is very important to be transparent and they [command leadership] did not do that. It was, these are the rules, follow them or these are the consequences. That created a pretty toxic environment of people trying to hide things from each other and not trusting the command.” Other interviewees warned against what they perceived to be excessive transparency. According to some interviewees, excessive transparency could also jeopardize trust and confidence in leadership. Interviewees suggested that leaders should not overwhelm their subordinates with what some considered excessive information during the pandemic. One LCDR noted that during the pandemic sharing information was “necessary, but not too



much information as to overwhelm ... it was trying to balance how much information to give out and when.” With the benefit of hindsight, several interviewees expressed a sense of value in limited information sharing, especially if the situation changes rapidly, as experienced during the early days of the pandemic.

### **3. The Value of a Diverse Workforce**

When asked to recall workplace discussions or communications related to the summer 2020 BLM protests, several interview subjects highlighted the value of a diverse workforce. According to the accounts of several interviewees, being part of a diverse workforce allowed them to gain a new perspective on such a high-profile social issue. One LCDR recalled that although “George Floyd’s death never really presented itself” in workplace discussions, “there was a sense of unification within our group.” The LCDR attributed the sense of unity to the diverse makeup of his command which included “Black and Hispanic officers” and “civilians that were Colombian and Muslim.” Another LCDR also acknowledged the benefits of a diverse workforce when it came to discussions about BLM protests. This LCDR asserted that “I just learned a ton about the people that I worked with. ... It was a very diverse workforce, diverse in age, diverse in race, diverse in background, identity. And so, I just learned a lot about the people that I worked with having those very honest discussions about race relations.” Other interviewees conveyed similar attitudes toward the value and benefit of a diverse workforce. Some interviewees contended that conversations about race relations are necessary because they belong to a diverse workforce.

### **C. VIGNETTES**

The series of vignettes under the Appendix illustrates examples of perceptions and reactions to communications surrounding controversial sociopolitical issues. The vignettes were derived from interview participants’ responses to the researcher’s open-ended interview questions, providing first-hand accounts and interactions that took place between 2020–2021. The controversial sociopolitical topics addressed in the vignettes are the 2020 BLM protests following the death of George Floyd, the Capitol Riot on January 6, 2021, and the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect



the identities of the interviewees described in the vignettes. The vignettes are characterized by the presence or absence of one or more of the command environment characteristics (i.e., codes) which the researcher assumes could equip Navy supervisors to lead and engage others in discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents. The command environment characteristics include trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen. Furthermore, the researcher assigned the general descriptors of positive, negative, and mixed practices to delineate the vignettes. The subjects found in the vignettes include both male and female; the physical locations described in the vignettes include domestic ashore, aboard ship, and overseas. The settings of the interactions outlined in the vignettes include small- and large- group interactions and one-on-one discussions. The power dynamics of the vignettes typically involved leaders and subordinates.

Fifteen of the interviewees indicated misunderstandings that can arise from written communications. Vignette 1 recounts an experience that illustrates how an insensitive tone can be detrimental when leaders attempt to address a controversial topic. Conversely, vignettes 2–7 present positive practices regarding such communications. Vignettes 8–12 demonstrate a series of mixed practices involving communications on controversial sociopolitical events.

#### **D. CHAPTER CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, the researcher presented the thematic analysis of the 26 interviews. The researcher discussed interviewee responses related to the seven command environment characteristics likely to support productive discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents. The command environment characteristics included both the presence or absence of trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen. This chapter also presented a discussion of three overarching themes that emerged from the researcher’s analysis. The themes included the importance of open and honest communication, the need for transparency, and the value of a diverse workforce. It is important to note that the command characteristics are not mutually



exclusive. Some interviewees alluded to one or more characteristics as present or absent during the communication instances they recalled.



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## **VI. SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this capstone project was to explore perceptions and reactions to communications sent and received within the DON from 2020–2021 which pertained to controversial sociopolitical incidents and to develop a database of vignettes that leaders within the Navy can use to communicate and promote I&D across various levels of command. The researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of data gathered from open-ended interview questions which accounted for first-hand experiences of naval officer and enlisted personnel. The researcher also captured demographic data about the participants' age, gender, rank, service, community, and ethnicity. This project addressed the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges identified by Navy supervisors and team members (subordinates) when responding to critical events — Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the attack on the Capitol (January 6th)?
- What strategies could equip Navy supervisors to lead and engage others in discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents?

### **A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Overall, the researcher found that the perceptions, experiences, and challenges identified by Navy supervisors and team members when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the summer 2020 BLM protests, and the January 6th Capitol Riot were varied. Such finding highlights the fact that the Navy is not monolithic. However, several interviewees noted the importance of a work environment in which there is open and honest communication. Several interview subjects suggested that open and honest communication is necessary to hold difficult conversations about controversial sociopolitical issues. Various interviewees also alluded to the need for leaders to balance transparent communication with accuracy, especially in an environment defined by rapid change.



Additionally, the researcher also found that several interviewees value a diverse workforce, a trait highlighted by discussions about the BLM protests and other racial issues.

The interview responses are consistent with the researcher's initial conjecture, that to promote productive conversations regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents, Navy leaders should foster an environment marked by trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen. The interview responses also suggest that the inverse or absence of such command environment characteristics generate an environment in which discussion of controversial sociopolitical incidents is difficult and uncomfortable.

Furthermore, responses to the interview questions suggest that interviewees had more to say about the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests; few interviewees recalled workplace discussions about the January 6th Capitol Riot. As one LCDR put it, "Even though the riot at the Capitol had happened, there were bigger things that were happening in the fleet at the time." It is also worth noting that several interviewees misremembered the timeframe in which the Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks took place. Several interviewees situated the Stand-Down immediately after the summer 2020 BLM protests, when in fact the training took place in February 2021, following the January 6th Capitol Riot (United States Marine Corps, 2021).

## **B. THEMES AND VIGNETTES**

The series of vignettes under Appendix A illustrates examples of perceptions and reactions to communications surrounding controversial sociopolitical issues. The vignettes were derived from interview participants' responses to the researcher's open-ended interview questions, providing first-hand accounts and interactions that took place between 2020–2021. The controversial sociopolitical topics addressed in the vignettes are the 2020 BLM protests following the death of George Floyd, the Capitol Riot on January 6th, 2021, and the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the interviewees described in the vignettes. The vignettes are characterized by the presence or absence of one or more of the command environment characteristics (i.e., codes) which the researcher assumed would mitigate adverse effects of unguided





discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical events. The command environment characteristics include trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen. Furthermore, the researcher assigned the general descriptors of positive, negative, and mixed practices to delineate the vignettes. The subjects found in the vignettes include both male and female; the physical locations described in the vignettes include domestic ashore, aboard ship, and overseas. The settings of the interactions outlined in the vignettes include small- and large- group interactions and one-on-one discussions. The power dynamics of the vignettes typically involved leaders and subordinates.

Fifteen of the interviewees indicated misunderstandings that can arise from written communications. Vignette 1 recounts an experience that illustrates how an insensitive tone can be detrimental when leaders attempt to address a controversial topic. Conversely, vignettes 2–7 present positive practices regarding such communications. Vignettes 8–12 demonstrate a series of mixed practices involving communications on controversial sociopolitical events.

## **C. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are derived from both the literature reviewed for this project and the interviews conducted in support of this project. Quotes from several interview participants are used to exemplify and reinforce the value of the researcher's recommendations. The recommendations include fostering a command environment with open and honest communication, the prioritization of addressing national sociopolitical controversies, and not taking trust for granted but instead embracing uncertainty and acknowledging limitations.

### **1. Foster Open and Honest Communication**

Leaders should focus on creating a command culture that fosters open and honest communication to improve the overall dynamics of a unit in the face of controversial sociopolitical issues. Although the notion of creating a culture that fosters open and honest communication is not new, it is worth reiterating given that several of the interview



participants for this project confirmed the importance of such communication. Furthermore, explicit and implicit claims highlighting the benefits of “open and honest communication” are also in line with Cooper et al.’s (2021) findings suggesting that positive command climates exhibit open and honest communication, along with other elements like trust and team cohesion.

It is also worth noting that conversations surrounding controversial topics can seem tense and awkward. Familiarity among participants prior to addressing such topics should be established prior to holding such conversations to mitigate tension. According to one LCDR interviewee, “It’s an everyday thing, right. You can’t sit down in a group and all of a sudden want to talk about race issues. ... As a leader, you have to be out there knowing your people.” Another LCDR proudly claimed that “I’m always about open and honest communication,” when reflecting on how to improve communication following the January 6th Capitol Riot within his unit. Another participant stressed the importance of open communications with leadership about COVID-19 and the impacts of BLM protests on some of the sailors. One Navy commander in the medical field stated that throughout the COVID-19 mitigation efforts her “immediate leadership was very open with communicating ... the challenges that we were facing.” In short, open and honest communication before, during, and after a crisis remains a critical component of a positive command culture.

## **2. Address National Sociopolitical Controversies**

The researcher recommends that leaders should not let a mission-first mentality interfere with addressing sociopolitical events; leaders within the Navy must address national sociopolitical controversies despite their reservations in doing so. While leaders within the Navy and military at large may be inclined to avoid discussing sociopolitical topics at the workplace, leaders should not shy away from discussing highly controversial sociopolitical topics because individuals in uniform are not immune to the adverse effects of such topics. As stated by one of our interviewees, a LTJG, “Those who don’t have experiences of, like, in-depth experiences of what it means to be a person of color, what it means to be a Black person, they often conflate things like gender, sexuality, race with



politics, and everyone knows, like you're not supposed to discuss politics at work." Although the researcher agrees with the notion that maintaining the apolitical nature of military institutions is important to a functioning society, completely ignoring the impact of national controversies is a disservice to the men and women in uniform who may themselves be impacted by large-scale sociopolitical issues.

Although the researcher acknowledges that putting the mission first is paramount across the DOD, and by extension the DON, putting the mission first should not compromise leaders' willingness and ability to address controversial sociopolitical issues that permeate their workforce. Unless it is absolutely imperative, prolonging guided discussions on controversial topics comes at the risk of having misconstrued attitudes and beliefs fester among sailors. One LCDR details how two of his subordinates settled their difference of opinion regarding the summer 2020 BLM protests. According to this LCDR, "We talked all the time pretty openly. I think if you have that relationship already, that's not really going to be an issue. ... It has to start at a division officer level and working with your sailors and having that kind of rapport. I mean, that's perfectly highlighted by the senior chief and this first class. We worked together and they can even have a simple conversation about their difference of opinions." Thus, the LCDR highlights the importance proactive engagement with difficult topics before the aforementioned topics become national controversies.

### **3. Do Not Take Trust for Granted; Embrace the Uncertainty and Acknowledge Limitations**

Although the researcher confirms Cooper et al's (2021) findings "that trust, communication, and transparency foster a healthy command climate" (p.19), leaders should balance transparency with accuracy in order to prevent the erosion of trust and confidence from their subordinates. The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event with information changing rapidly and at times deteriorating in a matter of days and hours. The pandemic highlighted the importance of timely and accurate information during a crisis. In some cases, however, leaders were challenged by the rate of information change, appearing to lack situational awareness in the eyes of their troops. One LT interviewed for this project recalled one incident aboard a carrier. He said, "The confusion came in when



the information changed from day-to-day. ... We're going back home this day and then that stuff doesn't come to fruition, so you start to not trust the word of the captain. ... I can see that he was just trying to be transparent. He was trying to give us the information he had at that time, and I think it had the opposite effect. Instead of making it seem transparent, it made him seem kind of foolish. Like, he didn't know what was going on." Expecting leaders to have all the answers is a common misconception. The reality is that, in some cases, leaders find themselves just as overwhelmed or baffled by the constantly changing information environment as their subordinates. Several of the interview participants for this project expressed their belief that leaders could have waited to pass along concrete information regarding COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Several interviewees claimed that inconsistent and contrary information was a source of stress during the initial stages of the pandemic. Therefore, rather than attempting to have all the answers and pass along all new information during a crisis, leaders will benefit from being transparent about their own information gaps, limited access to information, and control over the changing environment.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

This capstone project provides a glimpse of sailors' perceptions, experiences, and challenges to communications sent and received over the course of two chaotic years (2020-2021). It should come as no surprise to Navy leaders that discussions about controversial sociopolitical issues are not absent from the workplace. Therefore, it is important to equip Navy supervisors with strategies to lead and engage sailors in discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents. The vignettes found in the Appendix, which capture some of the interviewee experiences, provide Navy supervisors a useful tool to communicate and promote I&D across various levels of command. The responses from various interview participants reinforced the researcher's original conjecture which was informed by the literature: To promote productive discussions regarding controversial sociopolitical incidents, Navy leaders should focus on fostering an environment marked by trust, respect, empathy, dignity, collective sensemaking, support, and the ability to listen. Interviewees responses also indicated that the inverse or absence



of such command environment characteristics generate an environment in which discussion of controversial sociopolitical incidents is difficult and uncomfortable.

While this project focused on the exploration of perceptions and reactions to communications about the summer 2020 BLM protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the January 6th Capitol Attack, future research should explore perceptions and reactions to other controversial sociopolitical events, perhaps events that are more salient. Future research should also incorporate a representative sample of Navy sailors to produce generalizable findings. Future researchers should consider the employment of a quantitative research method to assess the importance of individual command environment characteristics.



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## APPENDIX. VIGNETTES

### A. NEGATIVE PRACTICES

#### 1. Vignette #1

- a. *General Descriptor: negative practices*
- b. *Genders involved: males and females*
- c. *Location: Ashore*
- d. *Setting: virtual, via email*
- e. *Power Dynamics: leader and subordinates*
- f. *Present Themes: respect, empathy, dignity, and support*
- g. *Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: BLM Protests*

Tone matters in any form of communication; this is especially true for communications regarding sociopolitical issues in the national spotlight. A seemingly insensitive tone in communications will adversely affect command climate and will call into question the beliefs and motivations of the leader responsible for such communications.

LT Coach recalled her experience during the nationwide BLM protests in the summer of 2020, following the death of George Floyd. She specifically recalled the all-hands email that was sent from her CO (CO) addressing the BLM protests. However, according to LT Coach, “The email, in my opinion, was not enough and it to me was borderline racist. ... There were several IG complaints after the email was sent. Basically, the email was saying to all hands [that] it’s OK to not be OK, but we still have a job to do and, you know, we’re all part of the Navy, so, like, race doesn’t matter.” Perhaps inadvertently, the CO’s actions caused strain for LT Coach and other sailors. She recalled, “My sailors were very stressed from this dynamic after the CO sent this all-hands email. I was stressed as a member of the command. ... One of the main leaders at our command, ... who is Black, really took issue with the email.” Leaders should therefore be mindful of their tone and intent when it comes to addressing controversial sociopolitical topics,



especially across digital communication. Leaders should always ensure that written memos and emails communicate the respect that these leaders have for the dignity of their sailors. Leaders should also convey a sense of empathy and support to those who they believe to be most affected by ongoing sociopolitical controversies.

## **B. POSITIVE PRACTICES**

### **1. Vignette # 2**

- a. General Descriptor: positive practices*
- b. Genders involved: males and females*
- c. Location: ashore*
- d. Setting: small group and one-on-one*
- e. Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates*
- f. Present Themes: trust, respect, collective sensemaking, listen, support*
- g. Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: COVID-19*

Collective sensemaking during a crisis like a pandemic is paramount. Leaders must strike a balance between transparency, accurate information flow, and feedback. LCDR Mitch's case exemplifies the aforementioned communication traits. According to LCDR Mitch, "The first time that we talked about COVID-19 was in a Khaki group setting, mostly just officers and some senior enlisted. It was more of an open discussion on collecting ideas of how we were going to keep everybody safe but still get work done." Throughout the development of the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation plan, LCDR Mitch recalled that "the ship XO was very receptive to suggestions. ... We ended up going with that first plan as we continued throughout the next couple weeks because we were trying to get the ship underway." In response to changes from the CDC's guidance on mask usage, LCDR noted that "we just pushed the CDC guidance and as it changed, we just kind of continued to change and adapt with that." Tension and issues stemming from constantly changing guidance were addressed in small group discussions according to LCDR Mitch.





2. **Vignette #3**
  - a. ***General Descriptor: positive practices***
  - b. ***Genders involved: both male***
  - c. ***Location: Ashore (Overseas)***
  - d. ***Setting: one-on-one interaction***
  - e. ***Power Dynamics: leader and subordinate***
  - f. ***Present Themes: empathy, listening, support, trust, respect***

Although American service members stationed overseas are geographically distant from the continental United States, advancements in social media and telecommunications allow them to remain connected to developments at the home front, as in the case presented by LT Gomez involving one of his junior sailors, Seaman Johnson, a young African American sailor stationed in a small naval base in South Korea during the summer of 2020. LT Gomez recalled seeing Seaman Johnson become angry as news broke out regarding nationwide Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests following the release of an eye-witness video showing George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020.

LT Gomez went on to ask Seaman Johnson what was wrong and invited him to freely express his feelings at the situation. Seaman Johnson voiced a sense of frustration because he felt that events like that of George Floyd’s murder kept happening. Seaman Johnson had firsthand experience in dealing with police brutality and knew of friends and family members who shared similar experiences. LT Gomez recalled Seaman Johnson wondering aloud, “Why does this keep happening? How am I supposed to explain this to my children? How am I supposed to protect my children?” Seaman Johnson suggested that his overseas assignment shielded him and his children from some of the perceived dangers faced by African American men in the U.S. but was also cognizant of the fact that he and his family would eventually return to the U.S.

LT Gomez felt that the best thing he could do during the situation was to allow Seaman Johnson to vent and voice his emotions in a judgement-free environment. LT



Gomez listened attentively to Seaman Johnson. As a Hispanic American, LT Gomez noted that he tried to empathize with Seaman Johnson while acknowledging the differences between both men. At the end of their conversation, he reminded Seaman Johnson of his open-door policy and told him that if he wished to continue the conversation, LT Gomez was willing and able to do so.

**3. Vignette #4**

**a. General Descriptor: positive practices**

**b. Genders involved: male and female**

**c. Location: CONUS (ashore)**

**d. Setting: small group interactions**

**e. Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates**

**f. Present Themes: respect, dignity, empathy, sensemaking, listening**

**g. Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: BLM Protests**

Despite the lack of explicit guidance from senior leadership, conversations surrounding controversial sociopolitical topics can stem from junior officer initiatives, as was the case in LT Hunt's department. According to LT Hunt, other than reminding sailors to "keep with naval core values," his leadership did little to address the fallout from BLM protests following the death of George Floyd. Fortunately, "I did have in my department a very good chief who pulled everybody in the department together." According to LT Hunt his chief mediated a conversation in which participants were invited to "take rank off and have a candid discussion about everything going on and that was the best approach I believe towards handling that." The intent of the mediated conversation was to have "... a candid conversation about what's going on and how everybody's feeling about it and what their thoughts are. We're not here to put down any thoughts or make anybody feel unsafe with thoughts, but we want to just air this out and get a good conversation about what is going on." The result was "actually a pretty good discussion across the board. Like, junior enlisted were getting involved. I wouldn't say there was like one group within the



department that was more outspoken than the other was, good balance of conversation,” according to LT Hunt.

When considering what LT Hunt would have done differently, he said that he would have replicated mediated conversations, similar to that which he took part in, across the entire command. Furthermore, LT Hunt stated that “to make the experience more positive, I would have been a bit more of a squeaky wheel amongst my peers at the command to have their departments senior leadership engage with the junior sailors. In clarifying what he meant by “squeaky wheel,” he added that “being squeaky, well, it’s just recognizing the importance of holding these meetings and talking through this topic and not just being satisfied with our department being taken care of, it’s promoting it across the entire command. Even if that’s not my appointed position to go and say you will do this, you will do this. It’s communicating to my peers and leadership the importance of doing so.” LT Hunt’s experience and desire to have done more highlights the importance of not underestimating the impact of addressing major sociopolitical controversies at lower echelons of command.

**4. Vignette #5**

**a. General Descriptor: positive practices**

**b. Genders involved: males**

**c. Location: ashore**

**d. Setting: small group (Virtual)**

**e. Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates**

**f. Present Themes: trust, respect, empathy, dignity, sensemaking, listening**

**g. Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: BLM Protests**

Open and honest conversations about controversial sociopolitical topics are possible even in a virtual environment, as illustrated by ENS Sold’s story. ENS Sold recounted his online experience in which he and his company addressed the BLM protests sparked by the death of George Floyd in the summer of 2020.



According to ENS Sold, the company officer and senior enlisted leader “basically led the discussion where we talked about these protests and Black Lives Matter and everything that’s going on during the time. ... It turned into an open discussion where people were encouraged to talk about their point of view and about what was going on. ... I feel like it helped open up people’s minds who are a little ignorant about what was going on or not entirely sure of all the facts. I mean, me personally, not being a minority, I think I didn’t really understand the full range of what was going on and I was also able to talk to a few of my friends that have experienced stuff like that, being African American and that helped me a lot too, kind of opened my eyes to what was going on. ... I think it was good to hear, especially from our peers and not just leadership.” While certain sociopolitical events may first appear foreign to military service members, ENS Sold’s experience highlighted the importance of empathy among leaders and peers regarding conversations about national sociopolitical controversies.

Considering what ENS Sold would have done differently to make such experience more positive, ENS Sold’s response was “I wouldn’t have changed much. Maybe I would have had a few follow-on discussions. I think like a one-on-one discussion type of thing and I think it would have been beneficial if they gave us time to soak in all the information and wait for the protest to kind of progress and then have a follow-on conversation.” ENS Sold also alluded to the value of reflection and follow up conversations surrounding the developments of sociopolitical controversies.



5. **Vignette #6**
  - a. *General Descriptor: positive practices*
  - b. *Genders involved: male and female*
  - c. *Location: ashore*
  - d. *Setting: small group*
  - e. *Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates*
  - f. *Present Themes: respect, empathy, sensemaking, listening, support*
  - g. *Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: BLM Protests*

The value of learning from a variety of perspectives in an attempt to make sense of a controversial sociopolitical issue is exemplified by LCDR Maker's case. LCDR Maker recalled her experience following the 2020 Summer BLM protests. According to LCDR Maker, "After the protests, I was actually nominated to be on a focus group." The focus group participated in an open discussion in front of various sailors and civilians intended to explore the BLM movement holistically. The focus group featured a diverse panel in which a moderator presented various questions pertaining to the BLM movement and asked the panel members to share their own experiences. In addition to her participation in the panel, LCDR Maker highlighted the value of "... listening to other people talking through the experience," when referring to her fellow panel members.



6. **Vignette #7**
  - a. **General Descriptor: positive practices**
  - b. **Genders involved: males**
  - c. **Location: on-ship**
  - d. **Setting: one-on-one**
  - e. **Power Dynamics: leader and subordinate**
  - f. **Present Themes: trust, respect, empathy, dignity, ability to listen, support**
  - g. **Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: BLM Protests**

Sometimes, people ask a question because they wish to be heard, as in a case involving LT Powers and a Jr sailor. LT Powers recalled, “One of my sailors pulled me to the side. And the first thing that sailor asked me was, Sir. How do you feel about that?” Referring to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the summer of 2020. LT Powers continued, “I could tell he was really; he was really upset about it and he had a lot of passion behind it because the sailor was from that area where that happened.” According to LT Powers, “more than anything, I just listened to him. I didn’t really have a lot of input and he kind of described how this was not out of the norm. This was something that went on in his neighborhood all the time. Ever since he was little to the time he left for the military, he had been that person that had been a victim of that type of discrimination and profiling before. ... He thought that the only reason people were able to get away with that in his neighborhood was because there was no proof. It’s your word against the police officers and we as a society give the police officer the benefit of the doubt, 9 times out of 10.”

Considering if LT Powers would have done anything differently to make the situation more positive, LT Powers stated that “there’s not much I would have done differently because in that moment that’s what was needed. Someone to listen, absolutely needed someone to listen to. After we talked, I made sure that he was aware of all the services that were available on the ship and that he knew where I was at all times, and I also introduced him to other senior leaders that he could talk to whenever he was going through anything tough underway.”



7. **Vignette #8**
  - a. ***General Descriptor: positive practices***
  - b. ***Genders involved: male and female***
  - c. ***Location: Ashore, academic learning institution***
  - d. ***Setting: Virtual, academic learning environment***
  - e. ***Power Dynamics: Peers, leader and subordinates***
  - f. ***Present Themes: trust, respect, sensemaking, ability to listen***
  - g. ***Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol Riot***

Following the January 6th Capitol Riot and in accordance with the Stand-Down to Address Extremism within the Ranks as mandated by the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) in February 2021, LT Hunt participated in a guided discussion pertaining to the topic of extremism. The guided discussion involved LT Hunt and his cohort, a small group of peers and fellow naval officers in an educational environment. LT Hunt recalled that the conversation occurred over the Microsoft Teams application via a video conference call. He described the situation as a “frank discussion where we are all just talking about the situation and everything going on with it amongst peers.” LT Hunt’s experience showcased the importance of fostering an environment in which members trust and respect each other’s opinions and collectively make sense of the unfolding events.

Despite not having the January 6th Capitol Riot openly discussed, LT Hunt felt that the conversation was productive. LT Hunt explained that “regarding the actual capital riot, there wasn’t, or at least nobody spoke up in our cohort discussion that were very pro riot. ... The conversation kind of geared towards, OK, so where do we define extremism and trying to get a clear-cut line or discussing how it’s more so of a grey zone? And then if you identify, what are some actions that should be taken? To kind of counter that.” Overall LT Hunt felt that “we were doing what we were directed to. ... I’m quite happy with the way that we handle that as a cohort.”



## C. MIXED PRACTICES

### 1. Vignette #9

- a. *General Descriptor: mixed practices*
- b. *Genders involved: males and females*
- c. *Location: on-ship*
- d. *Setting: small group and one-on-one*
- e. *Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates*
- f. *Present Themes: trust, respect, empathy, dignity, sensemaking, ability to listen, support*
- g. *Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: BLM Protests*

LTJG Stallone’s story exemplifies the impact of a driven junior officer in the face of national sociopolitical controversy, as was the case of BLM protests in the summer of 2020. Despite being overlooked by her superiors, LTJG Stallone said that she stood firmly behind the calls of her enlisted sailors and was outspoken in an effort to raise awareness of the seemingly “taboo” participant of race relations.

LTJG Stallone recalls, “For my community there’s like a taboo when it comes to talking about things like race, gender, sexuality. A lot of officers, I would say, usually officers that are not people of color. ... Those who don’t have experiences of, like in depth experiences of what it means to be a person of color, what it means to be a Black person, they often conflate things like gender, sexuality, race with politics, and everyone knows, you’re not supposed to discuss politics at work.” However, LTJG Stallone recalled that she found herself “having that conversation over and over again and trying to make it very clear to sailors, it is OK to have those conversations. However, you need to put yourself in a place where you’re willing to have the conversation, but you’re also willing to see other people’s perspective. So, there were a lot of like round table discussions during duty days with multiple minorities with, white officers, white chiefs, senior chiefs, and my wardroom. And I remember, like, one duty day we sat there for like 2 to 3 hours and just talked about





everything. And this wasn't a discussion that was, like, approved by my CO or XO at the time."

LTJG Stallone noted that there was palpable tension between her CO and XO. Such tension resulted in having her leadership attempting to ignore the topic of BLM protests and race relations at large. According to LTJG Stallone, "My CO just didn't like talking about those topics; he skimmed over them. There was no, 'What happened was wrong. And you know, I feel for anybody who's affected by any of that.' He just wanted to be removed from it. He wanted everyone to focus on getting underway and basically keep those conversations to themselves. ... The only time he addressed it to the command was telling people that they could not participate in the protest because of COVID. Even though, junior sailors going to his office crying in his office about how unfair it was and how they were going to take measures and stuff like that. And he was just like, 'Absolutely no, you cannot participate.'"

Although she did not plan to do so, LTJG Stallone became an advocate for junior sailors who expressed a desire to become more involved in the BLM movement during their own time. She recalled, "I found myself in his office multiple times talking about, you know, discrimination on the ship, things that are happening to either Black sailors, female sailors, LGBTQ sailors, and he just didn't get it. He didn't get it, and therefore, that mindset was passed down to his department heads and then to the JO's." LTJG Stallone claimed that it felt like a losing battle despite her best efforts. She stated "being one of the only officers on your ship who understands all those issues because I fall into all those categories and trying to talk to people who don't fall into those categories on those issues, it's a losing battle because you just always feel like you have to, you know, educate people all the time. It was, it was stressful for the sailors, who were Black on the ship, but it was also stressful I would say to the white sailors because when you have things going on and there's racial tensions, it's very easy for them to feel like they're being attacked, you know, like you're saying, all white people are racist. ... It was one of those things where if you're not careful about how you have those conversations and your tone of voice and just being understanding of both sides, it can become like low key like a little race war. ... So, I really did try my best to kind of like, mend those relationships between sailors who are having



those conversations and just, like, let them know, like, hey, like, I understand both of your perspectives, but both of you also have to understand each other's perspectives, and they may not be right.”

Considering ways to mitigate future issues resulting from controversial sociopolitical issues, LTJG Stallone believes that “The Navy in general is just not very good at making it very clear that social issues are not political issues and that it’s OK to have roundtable discussions about things in the media. We can’t ignore the news, especially if that’s what’s playing on the TV during breakfast, lunch and dinner. ... They do not make it clear enough that social issue should be spoken about because otherwise you’re walking around like on pins and needles. ... If you don’t make it very clear that, hey, these discussions are OK, as long as they’re appropriate.”

When considering what LTJG Stallone would have done differently to make the experience more positive she asserted that “it’s not my job as a 23, 24-year-old to convince a 29 something 40, sometimes 50 year old grown man to change their ideals at that point. If you don’t want to, you’re gonna stick with those and I’m not gonna argue with you about it. I’m gonna tell you my perspective and hopefully and that way I understand your perspective. You’re gonna understand that and that’s really the best I could do. ... I really did the best I could but in order to keep my sanity and also keep the peace in the ship, I did what I could. I did raise hell when need be.”



2. **Vignette #10**
  - a. *General Descriptor: mixed practices*
  - b. *Genders involved: male and female*
  - c. *Location: On-ship (Overseas)*
  - d. *Setting: one-on-one and small group interactions*
  - e. *Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinate*
  - f. *Present Themes: trust, respect, dignity, sensemaking, support*
  - g. *Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: COVID-19*

The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of constant and coherent communication, this was especially true aboard U.S. Navy warships. While communicating to the masses aboard a ship is facilitated through the use of the 1 Main Circuit commonly referred to as the 1MC, underlining and explaining the important aspects of such communications must be done at lower organizational levels and/or individual settings. LCDR Smith's recount of managing COVID information pertaining to mitigation efforts and vaccine mandates highlights the importance of reinforcing and clarifying information during a crisis.

According to LCDR Smith, "Sometimes my leadership did a good job of using the 1MC, the announcing system on the ship to talk to everybody at least once a week about what was going on, what the plan was, what the schedule as much as they could to explain what was going on, you know, hey, testing's going to happen this time." He also acknowledged that although his Commanding Officer (CO) encouraged small group discussion, "It's kind of hit or miss, you know which division you're in. I know I made sure I worked in a really tight knit group and made sure to talk to people and explain to them, hey, this is why I'm being the mask cop, you know, giving examples." LCDR Smith felt that open communication, explaining the why behind mask wearing and COVID testing was essential to preserve a climate of trust and respect, at least within his division.

However, not all communications surrounding COVID-19 were positive. LCDR Smith recalled a situation in which the ship's surgeon explained COVID-19 while



dismissing concerns regarding the vaccines. According to LCDR Smith’s account “I will say that they did a poor job of choosing that guy because he had no tact. I had sailors that had actual, you know, concerns about the vaccines, like valid concerns having to do with, you know, pregnancy and stuff like that. And he just brushed them off. He basically just said you’re stupid for asking that question. So, I will say that was the one negative. But that was addressed later on because I passed it up my chain of command and said, hey, I don’t like the way he answered that question. And one of our female docs was able to sit down with my sailor and can talk it through with her, which was good because we would have lost the sailor due to rejecting the vaccine for that reason, for his lack of tact.” LCDR Smith’s preexisting positive relationship with his sailors allowed him to determine that an answer provided by a fellow officer was unsatisfactory, hence, his inclination to seek a better source of information to address his sailor’s concerns.

**3. Vignette #11**

- a. General Descriptor: mixed practices**
- b. Genders involved: males**
- c. Location: ashore, academic institution**
- d. Setting: virtual meetings**
- e. Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates**
- f. Present Themes: trust, collective sense making**
- g. Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: COVID-19**

For many, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a stressful period of time. Those in the Navy’s training and education pipeline were not immune from the adverse effects of the early stages of the pandemic. ENS Yang recalled his experience surrounding COVID-19 mitigation efforts was marked by “poor and lack of communication” and one in which, as he put it, “we were never really told why or we’re never really told us sufficient answer. Why or we constantly felt like being lied to by leadership, even though we kind of knew the real reason why that kind of placed a distrust in a leadership.” Despite the seemingly “toxic leadership environment,” ENS Yang



acknowledged that “while we were in the moment, obviously it was not an enjoyable experience, but in hindsight I think it is a valuable experience to reflect upon simply because you can kind of see, what kind of leader do you want to be. How important communication is and how important transparency is most of all. I would say it was a good experience to look back on and to reflect upon.”

ENS Yang recalled a question-and-answer session involving his leadership and peers, in which it was “very clearly apparent that they weren’t high enough ranking to actually make any difference. They were kind of repeating what was told to them and us at the same time. It was very, very apparent that the decisions were coming down from up top.” Along with the lessons learned from reflecting on the events, ENS Yang recognized the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and context surrounding the series of decisions made by his leadership. According to ENS Yang, “It was the first pandemic in a long time, [no one] had never really been through a real pandemic. It’s there was really no. There’s no I guess guidebook to go off of. ... We’re building the plane as we as we fly it. ... I will say, though, I think most of the decisions that they made were very risk adverse. But I think in such a dynamic environment where you were seeing how bad COVID could hurt people. I think it was the right decision to make, to be more risk adverse than not to be.” ENS Yang’s experience points to the positive impact of collective sensemaking during an unprecedented crisis in which information changes constantly and concerns from subordinates may be sidelined.



4. **Vignette #12**
  - a. *General Descriptor: mixed practices*
  - b. *Genders involved: males and females*
  - c. *Location: On-ship (Overseas)*
  - d. *Setting: large group*
  - e. *Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates*
  - f. *Present Themes: trust, respect, sensemaking, empathy, support*
  - g. *Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: COVID-19*

Rapid changes in information flow are expected during a crisis, however insensitivity in communicating such changes adversely affects troop morale and unit cohesion. LT Powers' story sheds light on the difficulty leaders have when it comes to balancing constant communication with accuracy.

LT Powers recalled his time aboard a carrier during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to LT Powers, "Early March [2020] when European countries and then I think America finally shut down and closed everything. Now that's when the IMC announcement start coming out like hey man, you know, things have changed it's fluid we don't have a plan from higher, we don't have a plan from you know back home we're basically waiting on orders. But as far as we know, it hasn't changed, we still are going to be back home on our scheduled time, which was sometime in March or something like that and that didn't come to fruition. ... Meanwhile, our skipper is telling us, no, we're going home in two weeks. We're two weeks past and we are still not home. Then the CO started getting messages on the suggestion box like Sir, 'just tell us the truth. If we're not going home, we're not going home.' And one announcement I remember he's like, 'Hey, we got orders to transit through the Suez Canal, and we're going be home on April 1st and nobody can stop me from it was his words were something to the effect of I will be home on April 1st. Me and this ship will be home on April 1st. If you don't believe that or if you don't believe me, I can leave you out here on the red boat or a little dingy but the rest of us are going home.' We didn't go home."



Failing to return home on the date promised, LT Powers recalled that, “communication just all of a sudden stopped. And then there was one point I can’t remember exactly what title, but it was like some Under Secretary of Defense came out and did all hands call with us. The thing that they told us was we were out there and we weren’t gonna go into port calls because we were a self-contained bubble. We had no known cases of COVID, so we weren’t gonna break that bubble. Well, then this Under Secretary of Defense comes out with all of his staff and basically breaks our bubble. And then tells us, the most bizarre thing, he says, ‘You guys are lucky out here because you can’t imagine the things that your family’s going through back home.’ As if like that was supposed to make us feel better. Like we, most military people you know, we join because we wanna protect and serve, right. And it’s a crazy feeling when you think your loved ones are back home, threatened and there’s absolutely nothing you can do. ... and all the while there’s not a lot of communication from the top.”

Considering what LT Powers would have done differently to make his experience more positive he states that “I think I would have waited until I had solid information. The confusion came in when the information changed from day-to-day. ... You start to not trust the word of the captain and I think that that’s pretty dangerous, especially in a situation like that when the people don’t trust the leader of the boat like that. Who? Who do you trust?” According to LT Powers, information flow throughout the course of events “seemed very speculative and then again on the other side of that coin, I can see that he was just trying to be transparent. He was trying to give us the information he had at that time and I think it had the opposite effect. Instead of making it seem transparent, it made him seem kind of foolish. Like, he didn’t know what was going on.”



5. **Vignette #13**
  - a. *General Descriptor: mixed practices*
  - b. *Genders involved: males and females*
  - c. *Location: On-shore*
  - d. *Setting: small group and one-on-one*
  - e. *Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates*
  - f. *Present Themes: respect, empathy, sensemaking, ability to listen, support*
  - g. *Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: COVID 19*

“Mission first” is a common mantra in the U.S. military but often putting the mission first comes at cost. In some cases, sailors must choose between their personal comfort and safety in the name of mission accomplishment. LT Coach’s experience showcased the reluctance some leaders may have when it comes to addressing an unprecedented situation like a pandemic. During a developing crisis what is and is not said is equally important; after all, subordinates look to their leadership during rapidly changing situations to make better sense of the unfolding events and expect clear guidance to move forward.

LT Coach took it upon herself to try to make sense of the impact a pandemic had on her mission. She recalls her experience, “I initiated an interaction with my subordinates to address concerns they had when COVID-19 was first being discussed in the media and the main reason for discussing it was that children’s schools are being closed and people were afraid that they couldn’t make it to work or what would the repercussions be. And also, just general safety concern about being around each other. I was leading recruiters, so interacting with the public and this was before mask mandates or this was at the very, very beginning, at the end of February of 2020. So, I just basically pulled my team together without being endorsed necessarily by my commanding officer or my XO because I was a department head so I just pulled my group together and wanted to hear their concerns. And we just kind of compiled the information to present my superiors. So really it was like a





listening tool to have them like, vent their concerns so I could bring it up the chain with like, hey, we need to do something because people are stressed.”

LT Coach recalled the stress she endured during the situation, stating “I was stressed about my not necessarily my well-being, but my own kids being like, pulled out of school and then also my subordinates being afraid they couldn’t come to work. ...They were appreciative that I had, like, given them a forum to voice their concerns so early on. ... I brought the information to my CO of how it was affecting the field. He said, ‘thanks for doing that, like no changes will be made at this time.’ So, you know, I was overruled and my assessment of what was going on and how much it was impacting us.” For LT Coach and her sailors mission came first and at the time accomplishing the mission placed them in a precarious situation. LT Coach affirmed that “The main thing I was at a recruiting command so meeting mission, meaning if we weren’t able to go out into the field and chat with applicants then we wouldn’t be doing our jobs because we couldn’t. Actually, at the time, it seemed like we couldn’t effectively recruit without meeting people face to face.”

Considering what LT Coach would have done differently to make the experience more positive, she acknowledged that “the CO and I were both operating with limited information. Looking back, I still would have met with my department right away when it was clear that this was creating a huge problem with being at home and not supporting, you know, the other spouses with kids and then also being afraid to talk to applicants without a mask. ... I probably should have first gotten the OK from my CO to even hold this meeting not knowing, how big the ramifications would ultimately be. And maybe let him take a stab at that first command wide level meeting, instead taking it upon myself.”



6. **Vignette # 14**
  - a. *General Descriptor: mixed practices*
  - b. *Genders involved: males and females*
  - c. *Location: ashore*
  - d. *Setting: small group and one-on-one*
  - e. *Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinates*
  - f. *Present Themes: trust, respect, empathy, dignity, sensemaking*
  - g. *Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: COVID-19, BLM Protests, January 6<sup>th</sup> Capital Riot*

Petty Officer First Class (PO1) Franks emphasized the importance of transparent and open communication during controversial sociopolitical and crisis events. PO1 Franks reflected on what his command could have done to improve the communications surrounding the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests during the summer of 2020, and the Capital Riot on January 6, 2021. Referring to the subsequent government and command-imposed mandates during the pandemic, PO1 Franks asserted that “Transparency with the people that work for you is very important. The question why is asked a lot and I know a lot of leadership in the military does not appreciate that. They feel that if an order is given, it should be followed, and you don’t necessarily always need to understand why you’re doing that. But, on something that affects every day of your life and every aspect of your daily life, I think that it is very important to be transparent and they [command leadership] did not do that. It was, these are the rules, follow them or these are the consequences. That created a pretty toxic environment of people trying to hide things from each other and not trusting the command.”

PO1 Franks reiterated the importance of openly discussing controversial topics when considering possible communication improvements pertaining to the BLM protests. PO1 Franks stated, “There should have been focus groups. There should have been talks from the leadership with the staff and student body together addressing how as a command we are going to deal with that and what our stance was. I think in those moments it’s important for leadership to take a stance.” Despite his command leadership’s reluctance to



openly discuss such politically charged topic in a military work environment, PO1 Franks suggested that following the January 6th Capital Riot “was another opportunity where leadership could have stepped in.” Furthermore, PO1 Franks claimed that “In matters of religion, political views, and polarizing participants, perhaps a smaller group would be more appropriate to discuss such topics.” The goal, he added, should be to reach a state “of unity, not of polarization.”

7. **Vignette #15**
  - a. ***General Descriptor: mixed practices***
  - b. ***Genders involved: male and female***
  - c. ***Location: Ashore***
  - d. ***Setting: small group interactions***
  - e. ***Power Dynamics: leaders and subordinate***
  - f. ***Present Themes: respect, empathy, dignity, sensemaking***
  - g. ***Controversial Sociopolitical Issue: January 6th Capital Riot***

Regardless of how well intentioned, mandatory training is often regarded as a mind-numbing exercise in which participants would rather be doing anything else but the training itself. In line with the 2021 Stand-Down to Address Extremism in the Ranks, LCDR Chase sponsored a divisional training event in which she witnessed sailors’ unwillingness to participate in a mandatory training environment. According to LCDR Chase, “When I hosted the talk with my division, it was hard to get participation because people don’t want to talk about these things. It’s uncomfortable and some people probably don’t agree with it. They have their own opinions of what these protests [January 6th Capital Riot] are really about and they just didn’t feel like it was a worthwhile discussion.” Before concluding the training, LCDR Chase asked her subordinates to provide a key takeaway. Some “felt like they didn’t have anything to take away that was positive” according to LCDR Chase. Her response to those who expressed doubt on the value of such training was; “I hope that they took away that this just might be a turning point for the military and how they handle similar issues like racism and discrimination in the military.”



LCDR Chase also suggested that addressing such controversial issues would allow others to “call people out and their peers, when they witness something that’s not appropriate.” According to LCDR Chase, large scale training is not conducive to addressing controversial sociopolitical topics. She noted that, “I’ve done those trainings before and it was not pleasant, [you are with] 50 people that don’t want to talk to you or don’t want to participate. They want to get out of the room.” LCDR Chase recommended that recurring training on the participant matter would prove more beneficial as opposed to a one-time requirement.



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