Remarks as delivered by PDDNI O'Sullivan - Taking the Diversity Challenge

Remarks as delivered by
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Taking the Diversity Challenge
Going Beyond the Business Case for Diversity in the Intelligence Community

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Most of us know, because we've worked in this business for a while, that the business of intelligence is a little iffy, and at the moment, it's a little chancier than usual.

We're dealing with the "Where's Waldo?" exercise of Ed Snowden, and we've got the Syrian issue going on. We've got Egypt on the verge of violent demonstrations at the end of this week. And therefore, it is with great pleasure that I see some of our senior leaders in this audience.

It's a recognition of the fact that diversity for us is foundational. If we don't have it, we're going to be suffering, as we go forward, in our abilities to meet all the challenges that I just spoke of. Diversity is the basis of the human capitol that we draw on to meet those challenges.

So Chris, Kshemendra, Larry, and many others that I see out there, thank you for taking the time out of your schedules, especially with everything going on, to be here today.

Thank you, Karen [Cheney, Intelligence Community (IC) Equal Employment Opportunity and Diversity (EEOD) Office] for the short introduction, and Bruce [Stewart, U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)], for giving us some challenging ways of thinking.

Just challenging our preconceptions is a foundational tenet for the business of intelligence. In everything that we drum into analytic training, that's the basis for not falling into traps. And all of those hints that Bruce gave you, whether they apply to diversity or the way that we go about thinking and drawing our assessments or laying out our operational plans, are equally key. It doesn't make any difference what part of our business we're applying this to. And that's why this topic is so key to us.

In August, [OPM] Director John Berry spoke here for an ODNI townhall. His enthusiasm for the

federal workforce was clearly evident in his remarks. When he says the government is a great place to work, he isn't just feeding us a line.

He told a story of going to Google's campus and telling an auditorium of their employees that, for a small pay cut and fewer stock options, they could do truly meaningful work as part of the federal workforce. I'm sure he got a few converts that day with the degree of enthusiasm and genuine belief that he projects.

He has a passion for what we do, and he's committed to making the workforce stronger. John talked about how OPM has reformed and streamlined hiring practices and boosted hiring of veterans, and how OPM is taking the lead on enhancing performance management, making recruitment of students and recent graduates easier, speeding retirement processing, and improving the diversity of the federal government workforce.

Of course, we're here today to talk about that last point: improving diversity.

What John didn't mention in his speech was his own personal story. But with our very first question, someone from the audience, the workforce here at ODNI, thanked him for being "out" as the most-senior openly-gay official in the ***history*** of the federal government, and asked him what obstacles John had had to overcome to achieve his position.

John laughed and talked about going through his very first security clearance interview, just 90 days after the President signed the executive order allowing people to hold a clearance while serving openly. John said his security interviewers were more nervous than he was. They had no idea what questions they could or couldn't ask him.

We asked him what advice he would give to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual employees in the IC as they progress through their careers. He advised everyone – and this advice stands for everyone in this room, no matter what persuasion, background, or experiences you've had – "Be open with who you are, because life is simply too short not to be yourself."

And this auditorium erupted with applause that went on for almost a minute. I was proud of us for that.

Today, we're here to take the Diversity Challenge. It's an appropriate name. Originally, we called this "Diversity Day," but [IC EEOD Director] Pat Taylor and her team pushed that today isn't just a day to ***recognize*** diversity in the workplace. It's a day to ***challenge*** ourselves and our preconceptions about what

diversity is, how diverse we are as a community, and how we can do better.

When Pat's team discussed this opening speech, they wanted to make a "business case" for diversity in the Intelligence Community, to talk about why diversity is critical to our business. We have very a strong business case for diversity. So we're going to at least start there.

When I came into the Intelligence Community as an engineer – oh, three decades or more ago – there were very few women in the intelligence or engineering career fields.

I remember being the only woman in an auditorium full of about 300 men at the very first conference I ever went to. I realized I couldn't get up and leave what was turning out to be an incredibly boring and dull lecture, because everyone in the room would notice that "the woman" was leaving.

But I also learned that standing out could be useful. There's a flip side: I was going to be noticed. You can stand out, and you can make it into a chance to get people to hear what you have to say. I realized in those early meetings that I had an opportunity to shape the discussion around the technology we were going to be designing, and I truly appreciated having that opportunity, because I knew that eventually, they were going to come back and ask me to build the stuff.

As I moved from building technology to building teams and then organizations, I've tried to seek out people who think differently than I do, to look for the quiet person in the room and ask them what they're thinking, to try to find opinions different than my own. I did this because it's the right thing to do, to have people participate –they're there; we're paying them – but also because it improved my chances of delivering a better product.

After all, I know what I think. I know the problems that I can identify, and I can lay out solutions, and people will challenge ourselves to go and solve them. The ones that are going to sneak up and get me, and you, are the ones you didn't think about.

And that is the value of having diverse viewpoints and backgrounds on your team. That is the value of having what is often referred to as "new eyes" that belong to the new member on your team, the person who hasn't been there and wasn't invested in the way we got to where we are today.

Ask them – what do they see? – because they might see something and ask, "Why in the world are we doing this?" And very often, you can't even remember why.

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So, challenging your preconceptions, as Bruce so ably laid out, is a core capability for you as intelligence officers. You can see why I believe diversity is critical to the IC, much more-so than perhaps to other parts of government.

We face incredibly difficult problems, and we need a diversity of experience and thought to challenge ourselves, so that we don't fall into the trap of all following the same thought patterns and then missing something we hadn't considered.

Today, we have a much higher percentage of women in leadership than we did three decades ago, and it's easy to overlook the magnitude of that change. So much so that in the summer of 2011, I found myself on a panel; sitting on one side was [NGA Director] Tish Long, on the other side was [NRO Director] Betty Sapp, and holding the gavel of the committee we were testifying to was Senator [Dianne] Feinstein. We on the panel didn't realize what had happened, but she stopped the hearing at the beginning and said, "I have never seen a panel sitting in front of me that was all women, all senior women in the IC."

But more remarkable, we hadn't even realized it. We stopped and looked around, and we thought about it. Somehow, over the course of those three decades, I'd gone from being the only woman in the room to being in an organization and a community in which, if you look across the IC, in the top three positions in most agencies, almost every agency has a woman.

Now that's just one part of our diverse workforce, one I would happen to recognize. Clearly, we haven't hit nirvana, but we've come a long way as a society and within our Community with regard to integrating different viewpoints and different backgrounds.

But if we're really making a business case for diversity, and if we value diversity because diverse people have experiences that we don't and thoughts that we wouldn't think, we can't limit our definition of diversity to just gender and race.

We have to value all types of diversity, to include also physical ability, culture, heritage, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Particularly if you speak a different language or have a unique cultural background, you bring something to the game. That's a diversity need that's very specific to the Intelligence Community and our business.

We need ops officers who blend into their environment. You cannot look like me and operate on many of the streets of this world. We need analysts whose understanding of unique global communities runs deeper than what they've read or studied in school. And in my experience with IC Technical Officers, ethnic and cultural diversity was as important as their technology expertise.

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I think people tend to picture all the Intelligence Community's scientists as wearing white lab coats, with goggles, handling super-cooled lasers. That would be kind of cool, would make a great comic book, but that's not our reality.

Our reality was a CIA scientist who, in the early stages before the second Iraq war, got sent out to the front lines and met with the Special Forces guys. This was when we truly believed – for lots of reasons that maybe diversity would have helped us with – that Iraq was going to use bio weapons or chemical weapons.

So our scientist shows up at this forward-deployed Special Ops station, pre-staged and waiting on the border of Iraq, and he's told: get on a bicycle and ride two miles that way, because you're going to be on the front line in a bunker, sampling to see if they've actually used these weapons.

You cannot predict in the Intelligence Community where your expertise might be used. This guy was a PhD, a biologist. I'm sure he never imagined that his career in the Intelligence Community would take him to that spot.

But that's what we do. That's what we need to be prepared for. That's why looking and understanding and drawing from the experiences of the diverse community around you is your best chance to be prepared for the challenges that, as an intelligence officer, you are going to face.

We need people who can fix their own cars and have hand skills, not just theoretical understanding of technology. I sent officers in to put audio devices in buildings overseas, and they had to know how to plaster and patch the walls when they were done.

We need to understand how things are built and that the electrical power grid is different overseas, to plug into that wall than it is here.

We need to be able to blend into the culture and surroundings in which we have to work, and to understand the communities and liaison officers who we work with, or who we're assessing.

We keep asking ourselves: Why are the Russians doing what they are doing? What is [Syrian President] Assad's calculus? What will [Turkish Prime Minister] Erdogan want to do next? It's an understanding, not only of the facts, but also of the cultural imperatives that drive their decisions.

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These are critical skills, skills for which we're only going to be able to train people to a certain level. We have to adapt or react when the unexpected happens. That's why, for the Intelligence Community, having a diverse workforce is more critical than it is for the federal park service or the department of motor vehicles.

Our job is to observe and investigate the world and to assess and analyze how what we see impacts our national security.

It's why the argument for diversity goes well beyond a simple business case.

Diversity can lead to truly revolutionary changes.

When we expand our definition of diversity to include people whose brains ***literally*** work differently than our own, it can transform an entire business.

I recently heard a broadcast by Temple Grandin. I think many of you, once I describe who she is, might recognize her. She stands out as a great example of what it means to have a unique perspective.

She was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3, in 1950. She couldn't talk, and the sensory experiences of the world around her overwhelmed her nervous system to the point that she was constantly in panic.

Instead of locking her up in an institution, as many parents did with autistic children 60 years ago, Temple's mom found a speech therapist and teachers who were willing to work with her and to work in different ways.

Decades later, Temple explained that language was hard for her because she thinks in pictures, and she has to translate those pictures to words before she can speak.

As she grew up, she became fascinated with understanding the world through the eyes of animals.

While studying, and eventually earning her PhD in animal science, Temple worked with ranches in the American Southwest.

Because she was so easily overwhelmed by her own sensory inputs, she innately saw how cows became overwhelmed by equipment and processes.

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She perceived how sharp corners in corrals, reflections of light, transitions of shadow, the jingle of chains, or the rustling of a plastic tarp caused the animals to panic and injure themselves.

She understood these things because ***she felt them too***.

She felt differently and thought differently, and because she thought in pictures, visualizing everything before she could talk about anything, she saw how to fix the problems as well.

As a ***woman*** with a ***severe disability*** in the 1970s, she set out to convince the male-dominated cattle industry that they should consider and respect the ***feelings*** of the animals they worked with.

That was – a *unique* perspective at the time.

Temple drew designs for facilities with soft lighting and wide sweeping turns, filled with soothing sights and sounds. And she was almost laughed out of the industry.

Until they tried her designs. And found that they worked.

Eventually, corporate leaders like McDonalds asked Temple to write federal standards for their industry.

Temple Grandin went on to serve as a federal regulator and now is a professor at the University of Colorado. She currently has 6 books in print and is highly sought-after as a speaker and consultant by both the agricultural and autism communities.

So diversity of thought can be more powerful than just preventing blind spots in the intelligence products we provide to decision makers.

Director Clapper spends a lot of time talking about intelligence integration and how that does not mean turning the Intelligence Community into “one big, bland bowl of oatmeal.” It does not mean making us the same. Integration is about melding together and getting the best out of our diverse viewpoints and experiences.

This truth about individual agencies is true for us as individual employees.

We need to extract the value of the different experiences around us. If we listen to each other, if we listen to people who truly have unique experiences and perspectives, we have the opportunity to revolutionize our business and to serve our national security structure in ways the

rest of us simply can't imagine.

But I want to leave you a thought that's completely divorced from the business case for diversity. I opened by quoting John Berry, a brave man who has lived his life and his entire professional career open with who he is, because he believes life is too short not to be yourself.

I want to close with the words of another openly-gay public servant.

Harvey Milk was the first openly-gay person to be elected to public office in California. He worked through the 1970s to organize the gay population in the Castro district of San Francisco, encouraging everyone to live openly and demanding that the government recognize the rights and the needs of his community.

He also believed that his community couldn't be properly served unless it was represented among its government leaders. After three failed election bids, he finally won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. He served 11 months on that board before he was assassinated in 1978.

But the impact of his work continued after his death, as he became an icon for the gay rights movement, and others continued to work in his name.

I want to leave you with some words he recorded, his thoughts on the Declaration of Independence. Harvey Milk said, "*All men are created equal*. No matter how hard they try, they can never erase those words. That is what America is about."

I would submit to you that the best and most important reason for us to push for a diverse workforce is because we serve our country and strive to live up to its ideals. It falls to us to make America safer, and it also falls to us to do what is right for America.

Over the past few weeks, the nation has embarked on a discussion of what it expects of its Intelligence Community and what things it will allow us to do in the name of safety for our citizens.

The conversation began with a series of regrettable and – yet to be fully calculated – costly leaks, and skewed and sometimes patently-false assertions that were made about those leaks.

Having this conversation is a good thing.

To me, the most unfortunate aspect of this national dialogue and discussion is the allegation

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that we, as a community, have disregarded the principles we took oaths to support and defend.

It may be difficult for someone outside our business to see, but the work you and your colleagues do is grounded in and governed by the Constitution. We constantly ask ourselves if our activities meet both the ***letter*** and the ***intent*** of the law and our nation's founding documents.

I cannot imagine an intelligence enterprise on this earth as introspective about the laws that govern us and as committed to their obligations under that law as we are.

Bill Crowell, who is a former deputy at NSA and who chairs Director Clapper's senior advisory group, tells a story that Janet Reno, when she was the attorney general, came up to NSA and said: You talk to me all the time about the training that you do for NSA employees on protecting the rights of U.S. persons, but I don't believe you.

Bill challenged Janet Reno: Go out of this office, get on that elevator, stop on any floor, and ask the first five people you see – What are the [U.S. Signals Intelligence Directive 18] regulations, and how do they govern our business?

She took him up on that challenge. And every person she asked was able to give her an answer. That is what it means to have at the core of our business the laws and principles that govern our country, the things that we swore to defend. And what makes our introspective conversations about them truly rich is the variety of perspectives we bring to the discussion.

At the end of the day, everyone in this room is, and people all across our community are, true patriots, committed to the ideals that the United States stands for. I'm proud of you and the direction you are taking as a community. We are a workforce unlike any other.

Please don't ever forget how critical your work is, and that the things that make you different are the things that make you valuable. It's from our diversity that we draw our strength and our identity as an Intelligence Community and as a country.

Thank you.

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