

Working with Military Veterans

While having veteran status does not present a problem for most veterans, those who may be struggling with issues related to military service (including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and varying levels of depression and anxiety related to military service) may be reluctant to ask for help or raise these issues to supervisors for fear of unfair treatment. An important first step for supervisors to begin leading the process of breaking down these barriers to accommodating treatment for veterans is to learn about these conditions and how they can be managed with effective medical treatment and support from employers. There are several resources, including some educational videos at <http://www.va.gov/health/default.asp>.

Below are five simple steps supervisors can take to eradicate the marginalization of our veterans in the workforce:

1. Do not presume veterans have any issues (disabilities) because of their military service. If you do discover that a veteran has a disability simply accommodate the disability as you would anyone else with a disability, based on ADA and HR laws and policies.
2. Celebrate veterans, but do not go overboard. Our veterans appreciate the annual general recognition that comes with Veteran's Day celebrations. They also respond well to a simple "thank you for your service" message and a handshake. Much more than this kind of recognition may embarrass veterans and is not necessary. I would encourage any organization to attend Veterans Day events as a group with veterans of their offices. This can be a powerful activity for bridging the awkward divide present in many work environments that do not know how to engage around the topic of military service or veteran status
3. Be supportive of veterans with disabilities and injuries. As a supervisor with a veteran employee with disabilities, you should be informed about the capabilities and limitations of military veterans in your workforce. Most importantly, ensure that eligible veterans are afforded the opportunity to attend medical appointments for their conditions.
4. Give recent veterans space. Student veterans and employees alike who deploy then return to campus, or who are new to campus or workplace right on the heels of a military deployment are in a dynamic transition process, mostly psychological. This process of adapting to a "new normal" for combat veterans is a lifelong process, but the bulk of the adjustment takes place during the six to nine months following combat duty.

5. Treat veterans like everyone else. Veterans depart military service and expect to re-enter a normal societal role. Veterans expect to be treated like everyone else, so there's no need for special treatment or accommodation that other employees would not normally get. However, there may be times that an organization has to improvise. In these cases if you are lost as a supervisor, you may consult veterans as a resource because part of the daily conditions of military service is the need to adapt and improvise given a particular environment. This may be a particularly useful skill to assist leadership with unusual circumstances. If you choose to engage a veteran in this way, simply present the scenario and ask the veteran if they have any ideas on how to approach the issue. If they do not, then you are no worse for the wear, but they may well approach a problem in a creative way atypical of traditional ways of thinking.

The days of veterans not being a volunteer for their time in the military are just about past. Since 1975, every service member that joined the military was a volunteer. This means that veterans under the age of 54 were all volunteers, but those over 54 may well have been volunteers as well. Veterans who volunteered to serve in the military are generally proud of their service and see no reason that their service should be a detractor to any aspect of society going forward. Most veterans draw no attention to their veteran status, but some will talk about it with regularity. Veterans simply bring another component of diversity to our workplace and we should value that diversity as we do all of the other components of diversity in our workplace teams.

There are more veterans on our campuses and workplaces than many may realize, but the current position in a workplace is more prominent in the minds of most veterans than their status as veterans. Treating a veteran with simple fairness should result in no problems for veterans and the organization will simply reap the benefits of these former members of our military services. If anyone has a question they would like to pose to a third party with an extensive background as a veteran and who is specifically researching the impact of college on veterans, I am always available to you as a resource.

David Vacchi
Lieutenant Colonel, US Army retired
Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom 2002-4
dvacchi@acad.umass.edu