



## Transitioning Veterans into Your Organizations:

# A Guide for All Employees

By Chris Wilson

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I served active duty in The United States Marine Corps from 2007 to 2012 as an Infantry Officer serving deployments to Afghanistan in 2009 and 2011. I often reflect back and find that the most beneficial years of my life will forever be when I was active duty in the Marine Corps. The growth and lessons learned from training, deployments, and responsibilities as an officer have prepared me for any line of work in leadership in the business world.

I feel very fortunate to be where I am in my life now both professionally and personally. However, I look back at the immediate years following 2012 as I transitioned in becoming a “civilian” and realized many mistakes were made on my part. Then I also look at my employers and realized that they were not fully prepared to integrate Military Veterans into their culture.

I look at “Corporate America” today as a place filled with organizations that understand the value add of employing Veterans — however, I do see gaps in this market. The gaps deal with how to correctly retain and promote Veterans in their cultures. It goes beyond “what NOT to say to Veterans” and the common inquiries of “Did you ever kill anyone?”

I have analyzed four key areas that will assist all employees in interacting with Veterans, as well as assist Veterans and your organizations with retention and promotions.

## 1 Understanding a Common Misconception: Holidays

Whether you have Veterans that have come from the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps or Coast Guard, the Veteran community is very proud of its service. There are special days in the year that mean a lot to this community. Understanding the date and what the meaning of these holidays and events are will go a long way in showing to your Veterans that you care and appreciate their previous lives.

Memorial Day and Veterans Day are the big holidays that everyone is familiar with, but understanding what each day actually means is significant. Memorial Day is a day to remember those that gave their lives serving our country. Veterans Day is about giving thanks to those that have served. These differences are big in the eyes of someone that served in the Military. For those that have served, many have lost friends to combat operations. Thanking a Veteran for his service around Memorial Day could bring back moments of grief and guilt around their fellow

service members that were lost.

Outside of these large national holidays there are also very specific holidays in the individual branches — for example, when the branches were formed, also known as their “birthdays”:

Army: June 14

Coast Guard: August 4

Air Force: September 18

Navy: October 13

Marine Corps: November 10

## 2 Mental Health

When people are mentally healthy they can reach their potential in life. Mental health carries a huge stigma in our country. This stigma can be even stronger among Veterans due to the Military culture of not submitting to weakness. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is most consistently seen and associated with combat Veterans.

With the correct treatment PTSD is 100 percent curable. The reason I know this



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**C**hris Wilson is vice president of consulting at DiversityInc. He served as an infantry officer in the Marine Corps from 2007 to 2012 and separated as a Captain. He graduated from Rutgers, where he was a member of the Division I soccer team, in 2006, and earned his Executive MBA from Rutgers in 2015, at which time he was awarded the Directors Award.

Chris remained active at Rutgers; he was the lead mentor of the university's mini-MBA program for veterans. He became an adjunct professor in 2016, teaching an organizational behavior course for the Executive MBA program.

Prior to joining DiversityInc, Chris worked at two Fortune 500 companies. He also served as head of strategy for Headstrong Project, a nonprofit that partnered with Weill Cornell Medicine to aid veterans with mental health and substance abuse issues. Chris had previously received treatment there for his own PTSD using a therapy known as EMDR.

Today, Chris lives in Ridgewood, New Jersey, with his wife Sara and their dog Brooklyn, a Rhodesian Ridgeback. He enjoys staying active with fitness and time with family and friends.

is because I was diagnosed with PTSD in February 2014 and, through a great program through Weill Cornell Medicine called Headstrong Project, I too was 100 percent cured in six months through their therapy processes of stabilization, memory processing, and reintegration.

But I had to find care and research on my own. I look back in 2014 as someone who was working for a large Fortune 500 company while going through some very scary symptoms of PTSD. My company wanted to help but did not have partnerships with key clinicians that had experience working with combat trauma. I first saw a therapist that worked primarily with children. Simply put, child therapists are not prepared to speak with Veterans about the traumas that occur on the battlefield.

Taking initiative as an organization to find partnerships to take care of your Veterans' mental health is something that will pay forward for the business in an immense way.

### Facts on Mental Health and Veterans

- Anywhere between 22 and 30 Veterans a day commit suicide
- Approximately 25 percent to 30 percent of Veterans that go to combat will come back with some type of PTSD
- Signs and symptoms of PTSD can include, among others, headaches, trouble sleeping, a disconnect with loved ones and anxiety attacks

### 3 Social Interaction

Studies have found that that people find more meaning in life and have a reduced risk of depression when they are committed to social and physical interaction. This applies to Veterans as well; ensuring your Veterans are not isolated is important.

Social interaction can be done in a variety of ways. Whether that is through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) or mentoring, having Veterans communicate and being social will drive them to meet their potential. Also, this social interaction will gain trust in the organization and have them believe in your "corporate community."

Military Veterans, particularly those who have been in combat, want to feel strong bonds in their new corporate culture because they all just left a "family" that they will miss as the years go by.

As Veterans become more social in your companies they will then begin to talk about their previous life in the service. Then you will never have to worry about people in your organization asking the typical questions around "did you ever kill anyone?" Veterans will develop strong relationships and will be faithful to the organization.

### From our popular "Things NOT to Say" series, additional things never to say to a Veteran:

- "Thank you for your service, but I don't think we should have been there in the first place."
- "Why did you join? The military is a job for men."
- "You're too rigid to deal with sudden changes."
- "How could you leave your family while you were deployed?"
- "How did your husband/boyfriend feel about you being around all those men?"
- "Do you have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?"
- "What's the worst thing that happened to you over there?"
- "Were you raped?"

### 4 Giving Back to the Community/Service

Veterans are a group of people that wanted to serve for something that was "bigger" than them. They wanted to give back to their country and feel good about what they were doing for a higher cause. This is something that can be very hard for Veterans when they start to work in the "for profit world" or for publically traded companies. The perception from the Veteran could be that the company does not care about their communities.

I know when I worked for two different Fortune 500 companies they did not do a great job of promoting areas where you could volunteer your time or charity programs they were involved with. I left both organizations seeing them as companies that were not making a world a better place and, as a Veteran, that did not sit well with me.

I understand that many organizations are participating in making the world a better place. However, if your Veterans are unaware of these efforts then they may have the same feelings I did for my corporations.