



Where no man has gone before ...

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It must be something of my youth and I have no clue how it influences my choices in life, but I was, and still am, a big fan of the Star Trek series. Sometimes I think that a good work day at our transformational headquarters should start with a voice-over proclaiming:

“Transformation: The final NATO challenge

These are the works of the Headquarters Allied Command Transformation

Its ever-lasting mission

To explore strange, new concepts

To seek out new ideas and new capabilities

To boldly go where no man has gone before.”

For some odd reason, this text did not sound right the moment I wrote it. Sure, I’ve changed some wordings, but the original quote, although very familiar, sounded a bit off. This article took a surprising spin when I, to understand the why, dug deeper into the history of these famous words of the captains of the Enterprises.

I do not believe in coincidence; I prefer the mathematical truth of probabilities, but sometimes this faith is heavily tested. The beginning of March was one of those weeks when all things seemed to merge together into some mysterious plot. Three solicitations to participate in a poll, an article, a challenge and a surprise hidden in the Star Trek quote was probabilistically impossible.

The polls. Three polls, although launched separately from completely different sources somehow got my attention in a span of a few hours. All three were probing my views and feelings on diversity. As I believe in expressing one’s ideas and opinions, I had to participate. The ‘this will only take 10 minutes’ turned into more than an hour.

The article. It was about the Assistant Secretary General (ASG) for Public Diplomacy, Ambassador Kolinda Grabar. Her appointment as the first female ASG in NATO history was placed in the light of the 10 Year Anniversary Report on Gender Balance and Diversity and the corresponding Action Plan. One of the objectives of that plan was raising awareness of gender and diversity issues NATO-wide.

The challenge. In fact two. The Strategic Writing course teacher acts from time-to-time as my editor. On my previous article she did spend some time changing the generic, exclusive references of "he" and "his" to be all inclusive (i.e., not gender specific). These corrections came with two challenges. The first was easy: to avoid the use of "he" and "his" in reference to common nouns in my NATO documents. Easy? The second proved much more difficult: to write an article about avoiding sexism in NATO writing. So, I was not only challenged to ban sexist writing, but also to spread the word. Since HQ SACT is tasked with

transforming NATO, it seems appropriate that the impulse to avoid exclusionary language in NATO documents should come from us. To sharpen the challenge, she asked, “Would this second [challenge] require moral courage?”

All that in one week. Coincidence?

Of course I could delete or ignore the mail. But, it felt like there was no golden bridge to escape to safety. I had to take up the challenge. But considered a member of the offending party, how could I take up the glove and survive the duel?

Why even bother writing gender neutral? Well, I’m all in favour of diversity. I strongly believe that diversity is a precondition for a rich, constructive clash of ideas leading to creativity. Diversity as in different, not alike. Yes, we all have equal rights, but that does not mean that we are equal. I hope not. Diversity must result in a sparkling melting pot of different ideas, cultures, forces, approaches, thinking... It is not a grey, homogeneous bunch of people. No, it is about differences, about heterogeneity, about confrontation in a good sense. And all must feel free to express and confront. All. One group must not be subdued by another.

This means that in our expressions, in our writing we should give everyone equal rights and equal opportunity. If gender and cultural background are not significant, than why stress on it? Easy? Not really. Why? This is more than a language issue; it is a culture issue. Doing and thinking about it questions your cultural foundations. Think about a military leader and you picture a ‘he’ – I wonder if that is also the case with our female colleagues. No problem with that, but it shows our biased views, our internal assumptions. And when we start writing, these slip into our phrasings.

How to overcome this obstacle? Start doing something about it. First: you can read your text while paying attention to gender coloured wording. Second: ask colleagues to read your text. You will make them aware of the issue and their feedback will help you. Third: propose that colleagues read their texts while paying attention to cultural aspects. Only by focusing and acting accordingly may we spark the cultural transformation towards the diversity this HQ longs for.

Being aware is the big thing, but without practical tools we may not be able write in a non-sexist (I prefer “diversity-inspired”) manner and to correct our current writing. This may require practice. Do not get frustrated when the tricks below do not work and that the only solution is to express your ideas in a completely different way. This may even be a good thing, because after rewriting them, your ideas may be better developed.

However, most of the time sexist language can be erased without completely changing the sentence. This can be achieved with the following tools (more are to be found on the internet):

- Tool 1: Try making the subject of your sentence plural. The plural includes both genders, and the sentence may retain its meaning without sounding awkward. Example: ‘As a leader, he has to make decisions’ becomes ‘As leaders, they have to make decisions’.

- Tool 2: Erase sexist language by substituting a pronoun with a noun. Example: ‘He is responsible for managing the HQ’ becomes ‘The general is responsible for managing the HQ’ – you cannot help that you (as most of us) will think ‘the general’ is male, but at least you did not express that sexist thought.
- Tool 3: Use the first or second person when possible. Example: ‘When the leader commands a unit, he must lead by example’ becomes ‘When you as a leader command a unit, you must lead by example’.
- Tool 4: Search for a gender-neutral singular pronoun. Example: ‘After the commander has left, somebody must lead his unit’ becomes ‘After the commander has left, somebody must lead the unit’.
- Tool 5: Some terms are inherently sexist and ignore the female gender in categories that should include both men and women. Often, these terms are the hardest to avoid without making the writing sound strange. However, there are alternatives you can easily find. Example: ‘The firemen rushed towards the burning plane’ becomes ‘The firefighters rushed towards the burning plane’.

Avoiding sexist language is tricky, but far from impossible. The most important thing is the motivation to pay attention to it and to remember that each problem has its own solution. There is no one quick and easy solution; no one right answer. Consider the individual sentence or idea. Consider its context in the work as a whole. Think about your audience. Talk to your colleagues about it. Be assured, the more you practice in eliminating sexist language, the easier it will become to avoid it. This does not mean that you must turn blind to diversity; on the contrary, you will become more aware of it, but you should only make a difference if there is a reason for it.

If you write about a stewardess that brought you a drink during a flight, then you may write this because she really did! But there is no reason to write in an airline SOP that a ‘stewardess’ should serve drinks to passengers, that is done by a ‘flight attendant’.

If we adapt our writing in HQ SACT, maybe one day our military culture will fully and unconsciously embrace diversity. In the long run this change will influence our military leaders, who decide on who gets key positions and ultimately who gets promoted, to look for divergent opinions and not likeminded people. That will be the day when we will find it not normal using the masculine pronoun when referencing NATO leaders. More women will have taken leadership positions in NATO, and Ambassador Kolinda Grabar will no longer be the only female Assistant Secretary General. Will you follow or lead this change?

The surprise. Back to my funny feeling at the beginning of this article. Well, by 1966 – yes, almost 50 years ago – the producers of Star Trek received criticism for the ‘no man’ part of the speech. By the time ‘Star Trek: The Next Generation’ was aired in 1987 – more than 20 years later - the producers had opted for a more gender inclusive last line. The crews of the Enterprise were not only men, but women too. And as a matter of fact, some were even not human.

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