



The First Salute: Why Ethical Onboarding Matters for Veteran Hires

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ABSTRACT

As military veterans transition into civilian employment, they often encounter cultural misalignment, operational ambiguity, and identity shifts that can hinder their integration into corporate environments. This paper examines the ethical responsibility of organizations to create onboarding programs that are not only inclusive but also tailored to the unique leadership experiences veterans bring. Integrating theories of adult learning, transformational leadership, and organizational culture, it is proposed that an onboarding framework should include ethical leadership development, cross-cultural adaptation strategies, and mentorship structures. Special attention is given to the role of instructional design and educational technology in shaping these programs to ensure equitable access and long-term success. Drawing from empirical research and case studies of veteran-supportive organizations, this paper highlights best onboarding practices that advance organizational performance and social responsibility. Ultimately, the discussion positions veteran onboarding not as a compliance task but as a strategic, ethical imperative that enhances human capital development and fosters workplace inclusivity.

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Transitioning from military service to civilian employment represents a pivotal life change for many veterans. While veterans often bring extensive leadership skills, operational expertise, and mission-oriented thinking, they face significant challenges in translating these experiences into civilian workplace success (Cooper et al., 2018; Stone & Stone, 2015). Organizations bear a responsibility to ensure that veterans are welcomed into inclusive, supportive environments that honor their service and facilitate professional integration (Gonzalez & Simpson, 2021). As a United States Air Force veteran and Honor Guard member, I learned firsthand the importance of first impressions. Whether presenting arms at a presidential ceremony, honoring a fallen comrade, or representing the Air Force abroad, I understood that it is often the first, and sometimes only, interaction others had with the military. Similarly, onboarding is a company's "first salute" to new employees. For veterans entering the civilian workforce, that first impression can significantly shape their perceptions of the organizational culture, sense of belonging, and value (Mael et al., 2022). Just as precision, respect, and integrity guided every Honor Guard ceremony, so should those values inform how organizations welcome veterans into their ranks. Ethical onboarding, therefore, becomes not only a matter of policy but of symbolic importance and a statement of how deeply an organization values its people.

While veterans bring a unique skill set, background, and leadership style, they are still chartering new territory as they reenter the workforce. Their value should not be assumed; it must be cultivated. Organizations that recognize and develop veterans' strengths stand to benefit not only from increased diversity of thought and experience but also from enhanced alignment with strategic goals and vision. Investing in ethical, intentional onboarding is a forward-looking decision that honors service while actively preparing veterans to thrive.

ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ONBOARDING

The onboarding process is a critical juncture where organizations express their ethical values. Ethical onboarding involves more than procedural orientation; it is a deliberate effort to align individual capabilities with organizational culture, expectations, and mission (Godinho et al., 2023). For veterans whose previous organizational culture emphasized hierarchy, discipline, and mission fulfillment, the shift to less structured civilian settings can be disorienting (Flores, 2025). Ethical onboarding requires that organizations establish clear moral standards, demonstrate accountability, foster transparent communication, and inspire trust through consistent actions and supportive leadership, which are essential in easing veteran transitions.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN AND ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES

Veteran onboarding programs benefit from being grounded in adult learning theory and evidence-based instructional design practices. Knowles' principles of andragogy, the most well-known adult learning theory, emphasizes self-direction, experiential learning, and relevance to real-life situations. These elements are particularly effective for veterans who often arrive with significant life and leadership experience (Biniecki & Berg, 2020). These learners thrive when training is contextual, collaborative, and focused on solving practical problems (Bhardwaj et al., 2025). Effective onboarding programs should go beyond passive orientation sessions to offer dynamic, learner-centered experiences. Scenario-based simulations, microlearning modules, and real-world problem-solving activities allow veterans to connect past military experiences to new organizational challenges. Combining in-person instruction with digital content, blended learning approaches can further enhance accessibility and engagement.

Educational technology plays a key role in delivering this adaptive instruction. Platforms that support modular, self-paced learning paths and real-time feedback promote autonomy and reflection (Pellas, 2025). Tools like virtual discussion boards or mentoring platforms also encourage peer interaction and knowledge sharing, reinforcing community and inclusion. Well-designed digital onboarding environments can replicate some of the cohesion and structure veterans are accustomed to, easing cultural adjustment while building new competencies. Several organizations have developed successful veteran-focused onboarding and training initiatives that reflect these principles. For example, Deloitte's CORE (Career Opportunity Redefinition & Exploration) Leadership Program uses hands-on workshops and case-based learning to help veterans translate their military experience into civilian leadership potential (Deloitte, 2023). Similarly, Microsoft's Software & Systems Academy (MSSA) combines technical education with soft-skills training and mentorship, using a hybrid instructional design model to prepare veterans for roles in the tech sector (Microsoft, 2022).

These examples demonstrate how adult learning theory and digital education tools can be harmonized to support meaningful career transitions. By investing in personalized and flexible learning pathways, these programs embody a commitment to inclusion and professional development that extends beyond compliance. Ultimately, the most impactful onboarding experiences integrate instructional design with organizational culture and mission alignment. By acknowledging veterans' prior knowledge while providing structured learning and contextual application, organizations can accelerate integration, reduce frustration, and strengthen long-term retention.

CULTURAL BRIDGING AND ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTATION

As more companies begin rolling back their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, due in part to recent executive orders and shifting political landscapes, those with strong, values-driven organizational cultures are distinguishing themselves in innovation and retention. This trend has been partly influenced by Executive Order 13950, signed in 2020 (EO No. 13950, 85 FR 60683-60689; [National Archives, 2020](#)). The order was revoked on January 20, 2021, by President Joe Biden through Executive Order 13985, titled “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government” (EO No. 13985, 86 FR 7009-7013; [National Archives, 2021](#)). More recently, on January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 14151, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” (EO No. 14151, 90 FR 8339-8341; [National Archives, 2025](#)), which prohibits federal DEIA programs and mandates merit-based contracting in lieu of diversity initiatives.

These policies signaled a federal devaluation of DEI as a strategic and ethical imperative, reverberating across private sector practices, particularly among defense contractors and veteran employers who often model their inclusion frameworks on federal standards. There are few veterans in higher education, technology, healthcare, and business leadership, and removing DEI commitments could overlook what they can offer ([Mercer, 2025](#)). Organizations can best help veterans find civilian work by including programs for veterans in their DEI efforts, such as mentoring, teaching how to use military skills in civilian jobs, and keeping veteran experience in mind while recruiting ([Mael et al., 2022](#)). This way, businesses help veterans overcome real difficulties and prove they care about diversity in the workplace. Despite this environment, companies with strong cultural foundations, such as those with adaptive, clan-oriented cultures, continue outperforming peers in engagement, innovation, and retention metrics ([Hartnell et al., 2011](#); [Nishii, 2021](#)). These organizations recognize that inclusion is not merely a policy but a performance asset and a cultural imperative. A resilient and inclusive culture not only withstands policy changes but also reinforces the long-term strategic value of cultivating diverse talent, which includes veterans.

MENTORSHIP STRUCTURES AND LONG-TERM SUPPORT

As a senior non-commissioned officer in the United States Air Force, I understood that leadership went beyond supervision; it encompassed mentorship. My responsibility included guiding subordinates as they transitioned from civilian life to military service, shaping their professional skills and confidence, identity, and commitment to

excellence. That mentoring experience taught me the long-term value of investing in others early and consistently, a lesson that carries directly into the civilian onboarding environment. Mentorship is a high-impact practice in veteran onboarding. Pairing new veteran hires with experienced employees, especially those with similar backgrounds, supports identity affirmation and accelerates cultural adaptation ([Tao & Campbell, 2019](#)).

While some may perceive mentorship as a passive or outdated tag-along process, its true value is far more strategic. Mentors act as trusted guides, using their experiences and hard-earned lessons to help new hires navigate unfamiliar professional terrain ([Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021](#)). This kind of personalized guidance can prevent setbacks and confusion, saving the veteran and the organization valuable time and resources ([Mael et al., 2022](#)). Moreover, mentors often carry institutional knowledge and historical insight that can illuminate unwritten norms, political dynamics, and potential pitfalls. By helping new employees avoid the proverbial “two steps back,” mentors contribute to individual success, organizational continuity, and resilience.

Mentorship fosters reciprocal learning and signals organizational investment in veteran success, reinforcing ethical leadership commitments across the workforce. For example, Amazon’s Military Mentoring program has been widely recognized for its effectiveness in accelerating veteran career development ([Berthiaume, 2024](#)). Through structured mentor-mentee pairings, the program fosters a culture of support that has improved retention and advancement rates among veteran hires. According to a 2022 internal review, veteran employees who engaged in mentoring at Amazon were more likely to receive a promotion within their first two years than non-participants and were likely to be awarded through training and non-profit support ([Martin, 2022](#)). This case underscores that mentorship is not just a cultural benefit but a measurable driver of organizational performance and individual growth.

CONCLUSION

Veteran onboarding is not merely an HR function but an ethical obligation and strategic opportunity. By designing programs that align with ethical principles, adult learning theory, and organizational culture frameworks, businesses can foster equitable transitions for veterans. Such investments uphold social responsibility and unlock the leadership potential of a uniquely skilled workforce segment. In an era where DEI programs are under political and legislative scrutiny, ethical onboarding is a practical and values-driven response to preserving inclusion. The rollback of federal DEI initiatives, most notably through Executive

Order 13950 and related administrative actions, threatens to marginalize veteran voices at a time when they should be uplifted. Veterans offer unmatched experience in leadership, problem-solving, and resilience. Ignoring their potential because of weakened inclusion infrastructure is a missed opportunity with ethical and operational consequences. Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts of onboarding on veteran career trajectories, examine the influence of organizational culture archetypes on veteran retention, and identify scalable, policy-resilient onboarding models across industries. Organizations that act now to embed ethical onboarding as a cultural norm, not a compliance requirement, will gain a strategic advantage and affirm their commitment to those who have served.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (2023). No human subjects or identifiable data were involved, and all sources have been cited appropriately.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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