

# Bridging the Communication Gap: Helping Veterans Reintegrate into Civilian Life

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For many military veterans, transitioning back to civilian life can be a challenging and often isolating experience. The stark differences between military and civilian communication styles can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and even relationship breakdowns. Dr William Howe at Texas Tech University is dedicated to understanding and addressing these challenges to help veterans successfully reintegrate into society, work, and personal relationships. His research could revolutionise how we support veterans transitioning back to civilian life.

## The Military/Civilian Divide

The United States military, like many around the world, is a unique and highly structured organisation. It instils a specific set of values, norms, and communication styles in its members through rigorous training and socialisation processes. This intensive indoctrination helps create a cohesive fighting force but can also lead to challenges when service members return to civilian life.

Dr William Howe and his colleagues have found that the military's strict hierarchical structure, emphasis on direct communication, and use of specific jargon can create a significant disconnect when veterans interact with civilians. This disconnect can manifest in various ways, from difficulty in personal relationships to struggles in educational and work environments.

In a 2019 study, Dr Howe and colleague Dr Maria Shpeer explored the experiences of student veterans as they transitioned to university life. They found that many veterans struggled to adapt to the more informal communication styles of their civilian classmates and professors. Some veterans reported feeling frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of respect or discipline in the classroom, while others felt unable to express themselves effectively in this new environment.

## Identifying the Problem

Building on these initial findings, Dr Howe and his team set out to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the communication challenges faced by veterans. Their research led to the creation of a new concept: veteran contempt for civilian communication (VCCC; read V triple C).

VCCC refers to the negative feelings or attitudes that some veterans develop towards civilian communication styles. This contempt can range from mild frustration to outright dismissal of civilian communication norms. Dr Howe theorised that this contempt could be a significant barrier to successful reintegration, affecting veterans' personal relationships, job prospects, and overall well-being.

To measure this phenomenon, Dr Howe and his colleague Professor Ryan Bisel developed the Veteran Contempt for Civilian Communication Scale. This innovative tool, published in 2023, allows researchers and practitioners to quantify the degree of contempt a veteran feels towards civilian communication styles.

The VCCC scale consists of two key components: general contempt and targeted contempt. General contempt refers to an overall negative attitude towards civilian communication, while targeted contempt involves specific criticisms of civilian communication behaviours.

Dr Howe explains that the VCCC scale offers a way to identify veterans at risk of struggling with reintegration due to communication issues. Quantifying these feelings allows clinicians to better understand who might need additional support and what kind of interventions might be most effective.

## Impacts on Relationships and Work Life

With the VCCC scale in hand, Dr Howe and his team began exploring how contempt for civilian communication affects various aspects of veterans' lives. A recent study conducted with Dr Leanna Hartsough examined the relationship between VCCC scores and romantic relationship satisfaction among veterans.





The results were striking. Veterans who scored higher on the VCCC scale reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction and closeness with their romantic partners. This finding suggests that communication challenges not only affect veterans' professional lives but can also strain their personal relationships.

Dr Howe's team is also investigating how VCCC scores might predict workplace communication patterns and dynamics. Preliminary findings indicate that veterans with higher levels of contempt for civilian communication may struggle more in civilian work environments, potentially affecting their job performance and satisfaction. His team also seeks to understand how the VCCC might predict successful interactions between veterans and their healthcare providers.

### **The Importance of Identity**

The concept of identity is central to Dr Howe's research. The military experience often becomes a core part of a service member's identity, and the transition to civilian life can create what researchers call 'identity gaps'.

These gaps occur when there is a mismatch between how veterans see themselves (their personal identity) and how they feel they need to act in civilian settings (their enacted identity). Dr Howe's work suggests that larger identity gaps are associated with greater difficulties in communication and reintegration.

Dr Howe also highlights the issues many veterans face in civilian settings when they feel unable to be their true selves. They may feel pressure to hide aspects of their military identity or struggle to express themselves in ways that civilians understand. This can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration.

### **The Roots of Communication Contempt**

To understand why some veterans develop contempt for civilian communication, it is critical to consider the nature of military training and culture. Dr Howe's research has shown that the military's intensive socialisation process can profoundly affect how service members view communication.

Military communication is often characterised by its directness, efficiency, and adherence to a clear chain of command. In contrast, civilian communication can seem indirect, inefficient, or even disrespectful to those accustomed to military norms. This stark difference can lead to frustration and misunderstandings.

Dr Howe's earlier work, published in 2018 with Dr Amorette Hinderaker, explored how the military's rigid structure and intense training create a 'totalistic' organisation. This type of organisation tends to shape members' identities and worldviews in profound ways, making the transition to civilian life particularly challenging.

The language of the military also plays a crucial role. Dr Howe's research has highlighted how military jargon and communication patterns can become deeply ingrained. When veterans return to civilian life, they may struggle to 'code-switch' or adapt their language to civilian contexts. This difficulty can lead to feelings of alienation and reinforce the sense that civilians don't understand.

### **Mindfulness and Perspective-taking**

One promising avenue for helping veterans bridge the communication gap is through mindfulness and perspective-taking training. Dr Howe's research suggests that these skills can help veterans become more aware of their communication patterns and more adaptable in different settings.



Dr Howe's team is currently exploring how mindfulness and perspective-taking training could be incorporated into veteran support programmes. Early results suggest that these skills could significantly reduce communication-related stress and improve veterans' ability to adapt to civilian life.





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Mindfulness involves being present in the moment and aware of one's thoughts and feelings without judgment. For veterans, this can mean becoming more conscious of their reactions to civilian communication styles and learning to respond more flexibly.

Perspective-taking, on the other hand, involves trying to see situations from others' points of view. This skill can be particularly valuable for veterans as they navigate civilian environments, helping them understand and appreciate different communication norms.

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### The Role of Education and Awareness

Another critical aspect of Dr Howe's work involves educating both veterans and civilians about the challenges of cross-cultural communication. Dr Howe hopes to foster greater understanding and empathy on both sides by raising awareness of the differences between military and civilian communication styles.

For veterans, this education might involve learning about civilian communication norms and strategies for adapting their communication style without compromising their identity. For civilians, it could mean gaining insight into military communication culture and learning how to better support veterans during their transition.

Dr Howe emphasises that this education should not be about changing veterans' identities or forcing them to conform to civilian norms. Instead, it is about giving veterans the tools to navigate different communication contexts effectively while maintaining their sense of self.

### Towards Better Support for Veterans

The ultimate goal of Dr Howe's research is to develop more effective ways of supporting veterans as they transition back to civilian life. The VCCC scale provides a valuable tool for identifying veterans who may need additional communication support, but this is just the first step.

Dr Howe and his team are exploring potential interventions to help veterans bridge the communication gap. These interventions might include communication skills workshops tailored to veterans' needs, mindfulness and perspective-taking training programs, peer support groups focused on communication challenges, educational resources for employers and educators on supporting veteran communication, and family communication coaching for veterans and their loved ones.

Dr Howe explains that the team is looking at ways to help veterans recognise and appreciate the differences in communication styles without feeling like they are compromising their own identity. This involves finding a balance and developing the skills to navigate different communication contexts effectively. The team is also investigating how to educate civilians about military communication norms, fostering greater understanding and empathy on both sides of the military-civilian divide.

## Challenges and Future Directions

While Dr Howe's research has made significant strides in understanding and addressing veterans' communication challenges, there are still hurdles to overcome. One major challenge is reaching veterans who may be resistant to seeking help or who do not recognise their communication struggles as a potential issue.

Another challenge lies in developing interventions that are both effective and scalable. With thousands of veterans transitioning to civilian life each year, finding ways to provide personalised support on a large scale is crucial. There is also the potential for technology to play a role in supporting veterans' communication skills. This could include mobile apps that provide real-time communication coaching or virtual reality simulations that allow veterans to practice civilian communication scenarios in a safe, controlled environment.

The team's next steps include longitudinal studies to track how veterans' communication attitudes and skills change over time, as well as research into how family members and employers can better support veterans during the transition process. They are also keen to explore how their findings might apply to other groups who experience significant cultural transitions, such as international students or employees moving between very different organisational cultures.

By shining a light on the often-overlooked issue of communication in veteran reintegration, Dr Howe and his team are paving the way for more effective, targeted support for those who have served their country. Their work reminds us that successful reintegration is not solely about finding a job or a place to live – it is about helping veterans find their voice in the civilian world.

## MEET THE RESEARCHER

### Dr William T Howe

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Dr William Howe is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas Tech University. He received his PhD in Organizational Communication from the University of Oklahoma in 2020. Dr Howe's research focuses on military veteran reintegration, high reliability organisations, and computer-mediated communication. His work has been published in leading journals such as *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, and *Computers in Human Behavior*. Dr Howe has received multiple top paper awards from the National Communication Association and was honoured with the 2017 Master's Thesis of the Year award. As a U.S. Army veteran, he brings unique insights to his research on military communication. Dr Howe is dedicated to supporting military-affiliated students and improving veteran health outcomes through his scholarship. He is actively involved in the National Communication Association's Communication and Military Division.

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Dr Arden Roeder, Baylor University  
Dr Maria Shpeer, Texas Tech University



#### FUNDING

Texas Tech University, College of Media and Communication, Department of Communication Studies



#### FURTHER READING

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