

Leading with Character

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Overcoming Complacency by Luis F. Valdes, Ph.D.

Complacency Quiz

1. Do you spend more time communicating or finger pointing?
2. Does your organization often see stability as good and change as bad?
3. Are you willing to listen to bad news?
4. Are people willing to make decisions with limited information?
5. Does critical information ever get lost?
6. Do people feel comfortable speaking up?

After all the finger-pointing, blaming and political grandstanding is done, the recent controversy concerning the failures of our intelligence community in anticipating the terrorism of 9/11 will provide us with valuable lessons about how to fight back. It may also provide insight into what most organizations must do to ensure their success.

What the FBI's so-called whistle-blower, Coleen Rowley, made so clear in her memo of May 21 to FBI Director Robert Mueller are the ways in which any organization can get in its own way. Much of what is described in her memo is a complacent bureaucracy. Ultimately, the criticisms she so eloquently outlines are lessons in dealing with organizational complacency. It is, in fact, a problem that many CEOs say keeps them up at night.

Connecting the Dots

Much of what has been discussed centers on the inability of the intelligence community to "connect the dots" to anticipate what was to come on 9/11. Learning to connect the dots will require us to focus on what happened and did not happen rather than who was asleep at the switch. Playing the blame game will benefit few in the long run. An opportunity to learn will be lost if we want to assign blame rather than find a solution and fix the problem. What is important here is determining the "what" and not the "who." We also need to look at what went right in the intelligence community.

Chief Mueller acknowledges that the successful process of "connecting the dots"

to prevent terrorist activity involves many key components. The most important include:

- ◆ fostering a balanced culture willing to admit mistakes
- ◆ overcoming political barriers to teamwork and communication
- ◆ maintaining a systems approach to dealing with and sharing information across boundaries
- ◆ identifying and retaining talent and leveraging diversity
- ◆ accurately analyzing potential threats and challenges
- ◆ valuing and using intuition and creativity



Extreme Organizational Culture

It seems more than coincidental that both whistle-blowers in the FBI scenario and in the recent Enron scandal were women. Both organizations were characterized as being dominated by aggressive males, many with the reputations of being extremely ambitious and career-oriented. Enron was considered to be free-wheeling and high-flying

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*Michael Beer, Professor,
Harvard Business School*

environment, while the FBI is characterized as extremely risk-averse where it is most advantageous to one's career to keep your head down beneath the radar. In each case, both organizational cultures at Enron and the FBI were built on tolerance of extremes in behavior. The FBI created paralyzing fear and indecision, while Enron seemed to reward impulsivity and reckless abandon. What is most glaring is that organizational diversity was minimal in both instances. It is necessary to understand your organizational culture, strengths and weaknesses as well as realize the implications of your particular culture.



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Organizational Communication: The Black Hole

“90% of the knowledge needed to improve an organization already exists within that organization,” says Michael Beer, Professor, Harvard Business School. The challenge is to get the information heard in the right places. In fact, the several individuals who were able to connect the dots were unable to effectively navigate the communications labyrinth connecting the FBI, CIA, and White House. Whatever information was available fell into an organizational black hole and never came back out. More and more, it is apparent that the FBI had the information necessary to paint a picture forecasting imminent terrorist activity yet attempts to obtain permission to move forward with additional investigation were systematically dismissed, stalled, and undermined. Organizations falter and individuals become complacent when the culture dictates that the risk of doing something is greater than the risk of doing nothing.

To be successful, an organization must overcome the challenge of poor communication. Individuals charged with a common goal cannot work in the dark, unaware of the efforts and information gathered by others. The challenge of the information age is to quickly sort through vital information and pass it on to those that can use it, while concurrently communicating its potential importance. Timely decision-making can be facilitated through the centralization of information, if not the centralization of power.

Information Hoarding

Information must be ultimately seen as the property of all that share a common objective. Information hoarding as a goal must be eliminated. Policies and procedures must be designed and used to facilitate communication rather than bog it down. An organization cannot function when individuals place their careers over the mission of the organization.

Culture, Intelligence and Intuition

Effective leadership requires individuals to make quick decisions with minimal data. Organizations

tend to undervalue that ability. Hunches and intuition must be highly valued by organizations whose individuals are entrusted with its survival. Intelligence is not just being able to gather data, but really using it to survey the situational landscape, as well as using data collected by others in a timely fashion. Organizations must encourage individuals to value and use their sixth sense, individually and collectively without fear of reprisals. We must reward and reinforce people who want to be right rather than creating people who avoid being wrong. Those who take calculated risks should be rewarded even when the results are less than desirable.

The Talent Drain

Ms. Rowley suggests there is a lack of talent in FBI management, because many street agents refuse to go into management positions. Recent data has suggested that college graduates are finding the job market tough. The dot-com crash and a shaky economy have not helped. At the same time, there is no obvious strategy by the FBI or CIA to recruit the best and the brightest into an industry that may hold the key to our future as a nation. The long-term future of our civilization may hinge on our ability to create an unprecedented sense of urgency that would lead our talent pool to tasks that will give us the ability to win the war on terrorism. Should we not do all that we can to bring in the right talent to fight the war?

Models of Integrity: Combating Complacency

Finally, Coleen Rowley suggests in her memo that lack of integrity is at the core of the FBI intelligence meltdown. The initial attempts to underplay what was known and not known prior to September 11th certainly suggests a crisis of integrity. Individual actions that place career ambition over national security are certainly cause for concern. Ms. Rowley contends that an FBI double standard exists which results in those of lower rank being “investigated more aggressively, thoroughly and dealt with more harshly for misconduct while the misconduct for those at the top is often overlooked or results in minor disciplinary action.”

Lessons Learned

Arrogance can be deadly. In order for an organization to learn from mistakes, leaders must display vulnerability. They must be willing to admit mistakes and acknowledge accountability. Organizations that avoid embarrassment without coming to terms with the truth about its mistakes cannot expect to maintain the public's trust. The credibility of the FBI has certainly taken a hit. Credibility can only be regained through a thorough and sincere re-evaluation. The FBI as well as the entire intelligence community must be clear about its mission regarding terrorism. It must work to be proactive rather than reactive. Whether it focuses on catching criminals for acts already committed or focuses on the prevention of terrorist acts will be an important decision. If it carefully redefines its mission properly and executes deftly, the FBI can and should serve as a model of change for all organizations.

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“Leadership character is grounded in integrity and requires balancing humility & respect with self-confidence, courage and accountability.”

*The Turknett
Leadership Character Model*

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