

(U) NSA Culture, 1980s to the 21st Century—a SID Perspective

(U) Introduction

(U) NSA's core values and ways of doing business have changed in the last thirty years, but how? What changes were for the better, and which for the worse? A lot of the changes resulted in unintended consequences; can we look back on those to guide us as we move forward?

(U) Terms

(U) Organizational culture can be defined as

- the set of basic assumptions about the organization and its goals and ways of doing business; a system of shared values about what is important and beliefs about how things get accomplished; it provides a framework that organizes and directs employee behavior at work; it describes an organization's norms in internal and external, as well as formal and informal, transactions;¹
- the environment in which process improvement is initiated and executed, and in which process, people, and technology interact (in harmony and in discord);² or
- the values, beliefs, and assumptions held by people in an organization.³

(U) We will frequently refer to *The Law of Unintended Consequences*, herein defined as "intervention in a complex system invariably creates unanticipated and often undesirable outcomes." Sections with that heading will examine some of the often unintended results of changes that occurred.

(U) The 1980s

(U) Stable World Order

(U) Grossly oversimplified, the world was divided then into three parts: the Free World, the Communists, a.k.a. the Eastern Bloc, and the Third World. Four decades into the Cold War, things were relatively stable geopolitically: the Free World and Communists opposed each other, and Third World countries would be where the proxy battles of the two opponents were played out: Greece, the Germanys (Berlin), Korea, Cuba, Vietnam. By the 1980s, the proxy battles had dropped considerably in intensity, and were largely fought with foreign aid. (There was a lot more to the geopolitics of the decade than that—hello, Afghanistan?—but that will suffice for the purposes of this paper.)

(U//~~FOUO~~) *The Law of Unintended Consequences*:

- NSAers could get deep into their targets; not only could they work the same country for decades, they could frequently work the same country, the same military branch of service, and the same geographic region within that military service—knowledge in depth was pervasive.
- Thus, resistance to change was likewise pervasive; people could take for granted they could stay on their target as long as they chose, and, after enough years, could get into a rut (not unlike their targets?).
- Because people could stay on one target so long, the reputation they built early

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on tended to stay with them, and even carry them, for good or bad, for many years. Reputation made a huge difference at promotion time in 1980s NSA culture.

(U) Telecommunications Monopolies

(U) Telecommunications were controlled largely by monolithic companies or government ministries during this decade. Given their lack of incentive for, and thus interest in, innovation and the limits of computers, communications technology and infrastructures were largely stable as well. The rise of cheap fax transmission (thanks to its virtues for businesses) was one of the few major changes.

(U//~~FOUO~~) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

- NSA's communications analysis and collection management weren't innovating any more than the communications they targeted.
- Other career fields became more attractive-looking for promotion.
- There was no Commercial Off-the-Shelf software, because the computer industry hadn't hit its stride yet. (Home computers were available but very limited, and not seen as useful by the general public.)
- NSA was far ahead in computer technology.
- Nevertheless, even NSA's computational assets weren't innovating rapidly; new tools came along extremely slowly, and updates were relatively minor.

(U) Win the Cold War!

(U//~~FOUO~~) The U.S. government set out to gain a decisive edge over the Eastern Bloc. Money poured into the Defense Department, and NSA got its share.

(U//~~FOUO~~) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

- Hiring had a huge upsurge in the early 1980s, requiring those hired in the Vietnam-era surge to train new personnel, after years of not needing to.
- All the new billets opening up meant employee mobility was unparalleled.
- Of course, employees had to go find the new office—there were no office signs in the halls beyond an organizational designator then, thanks to the traitors of the past, and there was no Webworld yet for looking up other offices. (Employees from this era still remember the hard-copy phone books.)
- New resources, in people, spaces, and equipment, were coming left and right.
- There thus arose a mind-set that any problem could be attacked by throwing money at it.
- All of the money and billets meant billets weren't carefully tracked. ("Billets? We don't need no stinkin' billets!")

(U) Winning the Cold War

(U) We were winning, though we didn't know it then. As in any war, each side has to react to the other's stratagems; but the side which is losing is the one that needs to come up with something. The side that's winning, if nothing changes, can just continue.

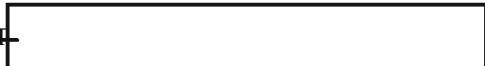
(U) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

- We could focus on getting every little thing right.
- We didn't worry about finding better processes, though.

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(U) Organizational Culture

(U) As a result of all the above, NSA valued in the 1980s

- Accuracy
- Deep knowledge
- Thorough expertise
- Productivity and reputation
- Stability

Not rocking the boat—our processes were already good enough...weren't they?

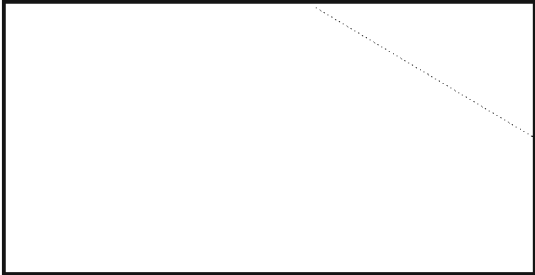
(U) The 1990s

(U) World in Flux

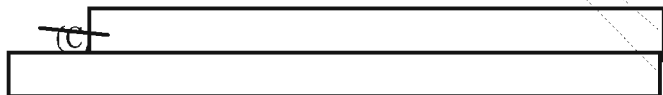
(U) The old world order was gone, and nations didn't have to fit into it anymore. Foreign aid from the superpowers dropped as well. Any pre-existing stresses could come to the fore: the Gulf War, the Balkans, Somalia, Rwanda...

(U//~~FOUO~~) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

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- The need for linguists and analysts on targets they'd never worked before became acute—for a relatively small number of targets, though.
- Managers had to jump in on those crises, too, and provide leadership despite not having years of experience on the target, and without already knowing all their subordinates, at least by reputation.

(U) Telecommunications Innovations



the rise of the internet were significant developments. Communications analysts and collection managers were at a premium, after years of neglect and declining numbers.

(U//~~FOUO~~) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

- The push to Rebuild Analysis began—too many traffic analysts had retired or moved on for promotion purposes, for example.
- Rise of the Tech Track—partly as a way to document what informal reputations had formerly connoted?
- Tools had to be developed to deal with the new technologies.
- NSA really began having to compete with private industry for the best computer personnel.

(U) "Peace Dividend"

(U//~~FOUO~~) Resources? What resources? Gulf War I had shown the U.S. was militarily predominant and could rest on its laurels, and the 1999 NATO intervention with Serbia did nothing to change that. Budgets didn't grow, however: NSA's workforce had to shrink!

(U//~~FOUO~~) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

- Yes, you need a stinkin' billet.
- "Early outs"—retirement incentives—helped ensure that many of NSA's most experienced people took their experience out the door. (Of course, those departures helped ensure we didn't RIF—reduce in force—personnel short of retirement.)

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- Those who had grown accustomed to always having money to throw at problems had some adjusting to do.
- The tools for the new technologies were being developed by fewer people with less money budgeted to do it.
- People stopped automatically turning to the highly experienced expert, since too often there wasn't one yet.

*(U) The 2000s***(U) New NSA Order**

(U) NSA had to pick up on targets and technologies it traditionally hadn't; years and decades of knowledge couldn't be a premium with them, because there hadn't been time to amass it.

(U) The Law of Unintended Consequences:

- "Managing change", "Do more with less"; mantras such as these started to spread.
- Offices couldn't rely on experts as they used to, because there might not be one on this new target, new technology, or new tool.
- People were having to tackle sweeping changes, without there being money to reward them with as there had been.
- Everywhere you turned, there were former Russian linguists.

(U) Organizational Culture

(U) As a result of all the above, NSA valued in the 1990s

- Budgeting, Competitive Selection, and other "necessary bureaucracy."
- Offices responding to crises or strongly affected by new technologies had an emphasis on the ability to learn rapidly.
- Those working crises had less value for anything bureaucratic, but had to deal with it anyway.

(U) Asymmetrical World

(U) Asymmetrical conflicts and international terrorism seemingly sprang up on every continent. Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, the Yemeni civil war, Army vs. cartels in Mexico, Colombia-Venezuela, not to mention North Korea rattling anything that even resembled a saber. Other challenges arose as well, such as adjusting to India as a nuclear power. The Cold War had the Free World and Communists fighting proxy wars in a variety of places; the 21st century started out with terrorism seeming to do the same.

(U//~~FOUO~~) The Law of Unintended Consequences:

- NSA and its predecessors never had to cover as many simultaneous conflicts before.
- A lot of conflicts over so much geography meant a lot of languages to be worked.
- A lot of decisions had to be made about rapidly evolving targets.

(U) The Information Age Explodes

(U) VoIP,⁶ instant messaging, texting, on-line games with internal communications, social networking sites, web forums, steganography, and quite sophisticated encryption were available everywhere.

(U) The Law of Unintended Consequences:

- Could anyone keep up on all the new forms of and challenges in communica-

- tion? Analyzing them? Disseminating the results?
- Every new technology required new expertise in exploiting it, as soon as possible.
 - Every new technology meant new tools were needed to exploit it, as soon as possible.
 - As target groups changed technology, offices' needs changed with them; today's valued expert could become tomorrow's dinosaur.
 - When there was a new technology, someone needed to become an instant expert on it. (Of course, how could anyone decide if the brand-new expert really was one?)
 - With all the new technologies, new tools, and new experts, could that be where notions such as, for example, "anyone could be a reporter" arose? And that report reviews no longer needed experienced editors?

(U) Conflict-Filled World

(U) Wars, crises, and conflicts meant Defense Department funding; thus, much like the 1980s, resources were everywhere: new hires, new tools, more billets, more workstations and servers.

(U//~~FOUO~~) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

- Support and enabling missions were radically reduced: thus, the Fall of the Tech Track, no more "full" Human Resources staffing, instructor-led courses stopped being the norm, promotion boards, Professional Qualification Examination (PQE) committees, all cut down to devote maximum resources to current operations.

- Too bad the "peace dividend" in the 1990s took away so many potential trainers for all the new hires.
- The new hires were coming in where they were needed most—where the experience was already stretched thin, and training was a major challenge.
- Crises and surges often meant people jumping in from other offices, to help out an office likely full of new hires.
- NSA might have had money for more servers, but that didn't mean the local power grids had enough power available.

(U) Support to Military Operations

(U) Troops were on the ground, terrorists were attacking civilians—get that threat warning out!

(U) *The Law of Unintended Consequences:*

- Real-time intelligence on life-threatening situations required an emphasis on speed rather than (not opposed to) accuracy.
- Focusing on threat information was unavoidable and necessary; but such intelligence can be very straightforward. (Maintaining a focus on "simple" information is no way to become expert on anything subtle.)
- If the language hadn't been worked a great deal before, NSA would often have to cross-train or hire new linguists—another case of instant experts being needed, especially where crises were being worked.
- When the targets were evolving, the technology shifting, and the personnel coming in from elsewhere, a lot of seat-of-the-pants decision-making had to go on.

(U) Organizational Culture

(U) As a result of all the above, NSA valued in the 2000s

- Qualifications on paper—there might not be anyone to evaluate someone’s expertise yet, and it’s not like we could rely on reputation or a Tech Track title.
- Speed—getting it 80 percent right right now could make all the difference in saving lives. (Of course, if it were targeting information that would mean killing innocents 20 percent of the time.)
- Productivity—if we couldn’t focus on expertise (quality), we’d have to value quantity.
- Decisiveness—decision-makers could not wait till they had all the information they might need as had been done in the past. (Of course, this could lead to making decisions without gathering whatever information was available.)

(U) Looking Ahead

(U//FOUO) It should have been possible in the 1980s to look at the focus on expertise and stability, and predict an emphasis on perfectionism. When being “really good” was valued, and you could be in place for years to get that way, it made sense that we would end up with people fanatically dotting I’s and crossing T’s. Certainly, such an emphasis along with no perceived need to rock any boats meant the crises of the 1990s found a workforce that often was not prepared to react with agility.

(U//FOUO) It’s difficult to predict what NSA thirty years from now will be like. Will the pendulum have swung back? Will there be a return to “stodgy perfectionism,” or will NSA have headed off in some completely different cultural direction? It’s hard not to expect that it will be very different from what it is now, and that today’s new hires will

find themselves as taken aback by their work environment as the 1980s hires do today.

(U//FOUO) Another challenge for the next generation of NSA analysts, linguists, and so on more likely will be to try to avoid the feelings of fatigue and even futility that can come from continually having to abandon hard-won but now-obsolete knowledge, and instead stay on top of an ever-changing technological landscape. Expertise will be as valuable as ever, even if experts can’t rest on their laurels once they get there.

(U) NSA will undoubtedly have to keep staying agile, valuing qualifications (even if on paper), speed, productivity and decisiveness, while acknowledging the need for accuracy, expertise, and informed decisions. The workforce will need to do the same, while remembering that its first impression of NSA may not last.

(U) *The author would like to thank those who were kind enough to provide input to this article. All errors are of course, those of the author.*

Notes

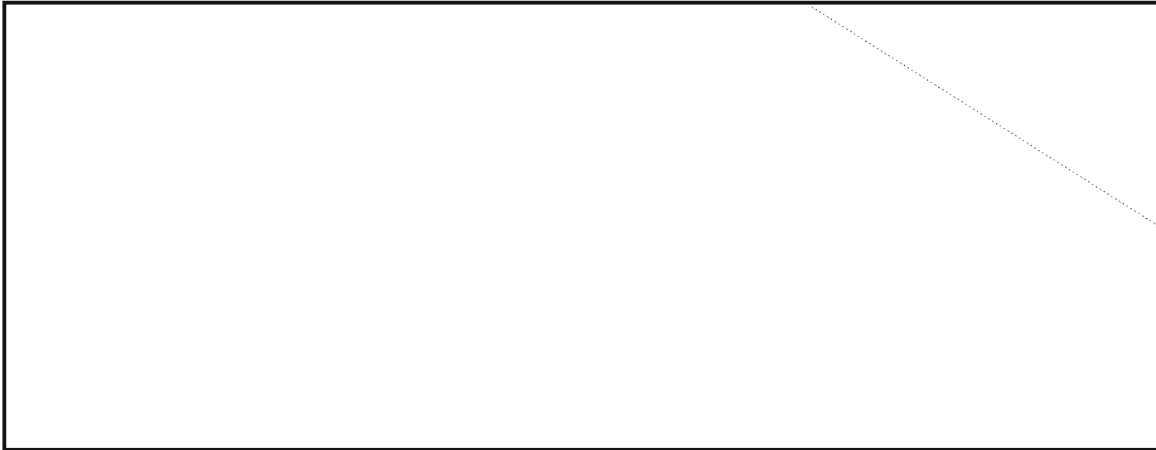
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1. (U//FOUO) [redacted] www.finance-lib.com/financial-term-organizational-culture.html (accessed 9 August 2010)
2. (U//FOUO) [redacted] www.sei.cmu.edu/library/assets/Valdez08.pdf (accessed 9 August 2010)
3. (U//FOUO) LEAD1022, Lesson One, slide 7 (accessed 9 August 2010)
4. (U//FOUO) [redacted] [redacted] (accessed 9 August 2010)
5. (U//FOUO) [redacted] and [redacted] (both accessed 9 August 2010)
6. (U//FOUO) [redacted] (accessed 9 August 2010)

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