



## TRANSFORMATION OF ETHOS AT THE U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

BY REBECCA OWENS PILLE

This is the first in an occasional series of articles that share lessons about how the U.S. National Security Agency is bringing about fundamental change as it reorients itself to the challenges of the 21st century. Subsequent articles will provide updates and specifics as to how NSA is undertaking this transformation effort.

In January 2000, the director of the National Security Agency (NSA), Lieutenant General Michael V. Hayden, engaged the Society for Organizational Learning (SoL) to help NSA transform the way it conducts business (see "About the NSA"). General Hayden believes that, to address the new challenges of a rapidly changing world, this transformation must occur in two dimensions—*mission* (the tasks involved in providing and protecting vital information) and *ethos* (the way NSA employees feel, think, and act as they take on that mission). Revamping the agency's mission involves implementing federally mandated reforms as well as updating technology and the way employees work together. Transforming its ethos—perhaps more daunting and the focus of this article—entails (1) undertaking a multi-level educational effort within the established organizational structure and (2) building in-house capability to foster continuous learning by leveraging an informal network of change agents.

### Undertaking a Multi-Level Effort

SoL consultants and internal consultants are designing ways to weave new thinking tools and techniques into the fabric of the NSA culture. They have been helping NSA's senior leadership team redefine roles and responsibilities as a result of significant organizational restructuring, describe new

leadership standards, develop an efficient decision-making process, and begin to run NSA like a business.

In addition, early in the change process, General Hayden identified a cadre of leaders who would champion the effort throughout the agency. Consultants are working with these leaders as well to help align their thinking and actions with NSA's strategic and business imperatives—and to model new attitudes and behaviors for others at all levels within the agency. These change leaders recognize that in order to model new behaviors for others, they must first transform themselves. In moving away from a traditional hierarchy, many have found that they need different skills, such as the ability to lead change, foster collaboration, and empower employees.

To develop these skills, these leaders are working with what we call *reflective partners*, usually internal consultants or change agents who volunteer to support an executive in learning new ways of leading. Reflective partners in turn receive training from experienced coaches. This process allows both the leaders and their partners to improve their interpersonal skills.

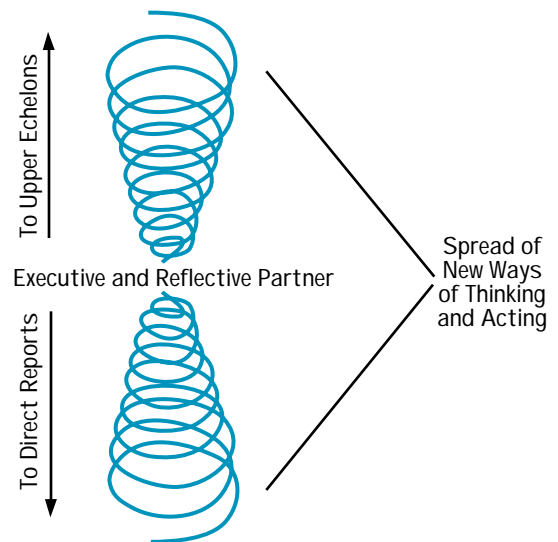
The role of reflective partner takes different forms, depending on the leader's needs. The goal of the relationship is to create

time for leaders to reflect on how they interact with their peers and subordinates. Partners act as mirrors, helping executives gain insights into their actions and encounters with others. For instance, a reflective partner might accompany a leader to a meeting to observe and take notes on the interactions. The partner later provides feedback about the dynamics he or she observed and helps the leader learn from the experience.

Over time, leaders learn behaviors that can help them lead more effectively—and unlearn those that interfere with performance. The first people to notice changes in the leader

*Continued on next page >*

### SPIRAL INTEGRATION



Spiral integration involves two types of spirals: a downward spiral (from executive to direct reports, as people further down the ranks become involved in learning different ways of working together) and an upward spiral (from executive to upper echelons, as interest in the change initiative surfaces from above). Spiral integration occurs naturally; it is not a program or a project to be managed. Instead, leaders model productive new ways of thinking and acting and then help others adopt those same behaviors.

> Continued from previous page

are his or her direct reports. Once executives come to trust their reflective partners, they often invite them to work first with their direct reports and then with their larger organization to bring innovative ideas to more and more people.

We call this process *spiral integration* (see “Spiral Integration”). So far, we have noticed two types of spirals: a downward spiral (from executive to direct reports, as people further down the ranks become involved in learning different ways of working together) and an upward spiral (from executive to upper echelons, as interest in the change initiative surfaces from above). Spiral integration occurs naturally; it is not a program or a project to be managed. Instead, leaders model productive new ways of thinking and acting and then help others adopt those same behaviors. In

this way, spiral integration is facilitating change throughout NSA.

### Building In-House Capability

By increasing our capabilities within NSA to maintain momentum around continuous learning and change, we lessen our need for outside help. Two organizations—one formal, Corporate Development Services, and the other informal, the Learning Leaders—assist individuals, teams, and organizations in their efforts to change. Linked to the work being done by SoL consultants, these two internal groups provide continuity by sponsoring training courses, hosting learning events, and offering consulting services to people who are trying to transform how they and their organizations work.

Corporate Development Services is composed of NSA employees who have advanced training and education

in applied behavioral sciences, specializing in organization development. This organization’s work is supported by the Learning Leaders, an informal network of NSA employees from a wide variety of disciplines who have a passion for innovative thinking. The Learning Leaders began more than four years ago as a grassroots effort to help bring about fundamental change at NSA. Many people in this network support spiral integration by serving as reflective partners, facilitators, and champions for change wherever they work.

### Preserving the Best

The first year of the transformation initiative was marked by unprecedented changes as we implemented federally mandated reforms, restructured the organization, and named new leaders throughout the agency. The work with SoL focused on educating the top leadership team, building internal capability to support the change process, and beginning to work with mission teams. The second year was characterized by the launch of a reflective partnering practice for senior leaders, spiral integration in many parts of the organization as managers introduced new tools and techniques, and a “settling in” to the new organizational structure. In this coming year, we will expand our capability at all levels, work more with mission teams, and communicate stories and lessons learned to the workforce.

We have found that this gradual approach to change ensures that the best of NSA’s ethos—a dedication and passion for serving America—is being preserved. At the same time, the organization is developing the collaborative skills, agility, and speed we need to tackle the emerging challenges of the 21st century. ■

**Rebecca Owens Pille** leads Corporate Development Services and is the focal point for the Learning Leaders network. She has worked in the change arena within the federal government for over a decade and formalized her experience with a master of science degree in applied behavioral science from Johns Hopkins University.

## ABOUT THE NSA

The National Security Agency is the U.S. government’s cryptologic organization—America’s codemakers and codebreakers. NSA coordinates, directs, and performs highly specialized activities to protect U.S. information systems and produce foreign intelligence information. A highly technologic organization, NSA is on the frontiers of communications and data processing. It is also one of the most important centers of foreign language analysis and research within the U.S. government.

As the world becomes more and more technology-oriented, protecting U.S. information systems becomes increasingly challenging—and important. This mission involves protecting all classified and sensitive information that is stored in or sent through U.S. government equipment. The agency’s support spans from the highest level of the U.S. government to the individual soldier, sailor, airman, and marine.

NSA’s other mission—providing foreign intelligence information to the U.S. government—results from a discipline known as Signals Intelligence (SIGINT). SIGINT’s modern era dates from World War II, when the U.S. broke the Japanese military code and learned of plans to invade Midway Island. Based on this intelligence, the U.S. defeated Japan’s superior fleet. The use of SIGINT is believed to have directly contributed to shortening the war by at least one year.

Additionally, NSA conducts one of the U.S. government’s leading research and development programs. Some of the agency’s R&D projects have significantly advanced the state of the art in the scientific and business worlds. NSA’s early interest in crypt-analytic research led to the first large-scale and solid-state computers, predecessors of the modern computer.

Most NSA employees are headquartered at Fort Meade, MD, located between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. The agency’s workforce represents an unusual combination of specialties: analysts, engineers, physicists, mathematicians, linguists, computer scientists, and researchers, as well as customer relations specialists, security officers, data flow experts, managers, and administrative and clerical assistants.

For more information on NSA, see <http://www.nsa.gov>.