



INCREASING AGILITY AT SANDIA NATIONAL LABORATORIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH LYNN JONES

BY KALI SAPOSNICK

About two years ago, Lynn Jones, then vice president of lab services at Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico, and several other leaders recognized that the lab's mission was shifting. They concluded that Sandia's entire infrastructure needed to be transformed if the lab were to successfully meet the needs of its expanding customer base.

Since the 1940s, Sandia has been one of three government-owned labs that provide national security for the United States by developing nuclear weapons and atomic energy technologies. A program of the National Nuclear Security Agency (NNSA), a semi-autonomous part of the Department of Energy (DOE), and operated by contractor Lockheed Martin, Sandia has a budget of approximately \$1.7 billion and 7,700 employees. Its goal is to help parts of the U.S. government, universities, and private industry secure a peaceful and free world through developing technology in four mission areas: nuclear weapons, nonproliferation and materials control, energy and critical infrastructures, and emerging threats.

Changing Needs

After the Cold War ended and the U.S.'s needs for national security broadened, Lynn and her colleagues responsible for infrastructure—which accounts for approximately \$600 million of Sandia's total budget and 2,500 people—recognized significant limitations in how they provided services to the mission areas. For one thing, infrastructure units (human resources, information, financial, legal, and so forth) rarely coordinated work efforts. For another, the lab struggled to sustain staff diversity and creativity in the face of strict compliance and

oversight requirements. This restrained culture often stifled innovation and added costs for items such as high security checks and constant auditing that some customers didn't need.

During the last decade, infrastructure leaders diligently sought ways to improve their organizations, including participating in an Infrastructure Council (which Lynn chairs) to set strategy and discuss change initiatives. Nevertheless, they continued to fall short of meeting the mission areas' needs. In the fall of 2000, many of the council members attended a leadership development program to figure out how Sandia's infrastructure could work as an integrated system. At the seminar and with subsequent coaching, they discovered several barriers to achieving their goal and ways to overcome them:

- ***They neglected to coordinate their change initiatives.*** They realized they had to lead change initiatives together as well as develop a shared vision that propelled the entire infrastructure system forward. Focused on ensuring a world-class workforce, fostering a robust work environment, and providing common sense governance, they now devote significant attention to building trust, openness, and accountability among group members.
- ***They were ambiguous about their goals.*** Council members now spend more time clarifying their objectives, using specific language to articulate their expectations about each other and the new organization.
- ***They were afraid of failure so they rarely took big risks.*** These leaders learned how to commit to a goal even when they're unsure how to achieve it. Although some actions have initially felt like jumping off a cliff, they have continually discovered

a greater capacity for innovation when they do things collaboratively.

As a result of these discoveries, council members sponsored a study to investigate more fully how Sandia's infrastructure might reorganize itself to operate as an integrated system. The study took nine months to complete, after which the Infrastructure Council recommended radical improvements in the infrastructure to meet the mission areas' needs for agility, improved technical productivity, less hassle, and more cost-effective services.

The infrastructure leaders then began to think deeply together about the study's recommendations. From these dialogues came the decision to merge all infrastructure support and services into one enterprise called Integrated Enabling Services (IES). Spearheading this project is the newly created IES Program Office, which consists of a small, handpicked team of highly qualified change leaders in the organization. Lynn gave up her previous position to launch the risky new initiative; she now heads the IES Program Office and serves as vice president of IES and chief security officer of Sandia.

A New Framework

The first step that Lynn and her team took was to develop a framework for how they would lead the IES change together. During another team-building workshop, they established personal and group accountability, methods for resolving internal conflicts, and an agreement to value each other's perspectives, work, and time. With this framework in place, they have begun to design the lab's new system on three different levels:

1. ***They're implementing a new structure for enabling services.*** The

Infrastructure Council's vision required the team to transform departments from silos to integrated service providers. For example, setting up a location for a new group typically required calls to 5 to 10 departments, each of which handled different pieces—getting space, setting up phones, ordering keys, and so on. Since the departments rarely talked to each other, any move was laborious and disjointed. To improve this service, the IES group is designing a system that integrates the various functions. All the processes involved in moving will be contained in one “package”; another package will include recruiting, hiring, training, and security clearance for new employees; a third will handle business travel procedures. Combining complementary functions in this way will let Sandia's service staff better meet the mission areas' needs.

2. They're developing a new governance system for the lab. Team members are collaborating with DOE/ NNSA to come up with ways that lab professionals can take more responsibility for their work with less DOE oversight. Both groups believe the increased tech-

nical productivity that will result (while still managing operational risks appropriately) will mean more national security solutions for each taxpayer dollar spent at Sandia.

3. They're transforming their management and communication styles. The group is working systemically to introduce the concept of integration to managers. Focusing on building

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pride, IES members are engaging people in the mission to help Sandia better support U.S. security. Through a series of workshops bringing managers of different service functions together, the group is addressing questions such as, How can we deliver more services and higher quality performance more cost effectively? In small groups, they've imagined the

lab's future together and elicited managers' ideas for making the new process work.

At the same time, a new sense of leadership and teamwork is evolving. Instead of waiting passively for instructions, managers are taking more initiative to solve problems and collaborate across departments.

Lynn recalls that, two years ago, Sandia's executive leadership had set a strategic goal for Sandia to be the lab that the U.S. turns to first for technology solutions to the most challenging national and global security problems. Since September 11, Sandia has been increasingly called on to do just that, with efforts that have ranged from hardware products delivered to the Afghanistan front; to bomb-squad techniques used to disable the “shoe bomber's” shoe; to foam that decontaminated several facilities of the anthrax spores; and so on. As its new integrated infrastructure evolves, the IES group believes that the lab will become increasingly agile in providing these kinds of solutions to the nation. ■

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