

13 Critical Paths to Real Change

The US Transportation Security Administration's *Security Evolution* Project

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Introduction

Between 2007 and early 2009, the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) designed and implemented the most significant advance in security operations that the agency had undertaken since its 2001 inception—a project called *Security Evolution*. To accomplish this, the TSA used design-thinking methodology to pioneer innovations in technology and security processes, checkpoint design and, most ambitiously, the behavior of TSA leaders and Transportation Security Officers—more than 50,000 of them nationwide.

How this very large, complex federal agency went about transforming the thinking and behavior of its diverse work force provides a compelling lesson for organizations of every size, in every sector. It is especially pertinent to industries where change is unavoidable and must be fast and strategic—e.g. technology, health care and those directly impacted by changes in the economy. It is also useful to industries where front line employees are in constant contact with the public, such as health care, retail environments, airports and government services.

This white paper outlines a number of factors that created the TSA's success.

13 Critical Paths to Deep Change

1. Start with a sense of urgency and passion

Change that is necessary to survival and core to mission is more likely to succeed than change that is just a great idea. Be certain that you can clearly articulate the reason and urgency behind the change you want to create.

The need for change at the TSA was driven by a single, very compelling factor: that the terrorist threat is not static. It is constantly changing and highly unpredictable. To effectively protect the nation's aviation security, the TSA had to find a way to prevent unknown future threats—not just to react to threats that had already emerged.

“What finally convinced many fence-sitters—especially among the leadership—was the knowledge that we had to do something very different than we were currently doing if we were going to keep ahead of the terrorist threat,” muses Kip Hawley, then the TSA's head administrator. “Top leaders knew that terrorists would ultimately defeat any SOP, and when they did, it would be our front line people who would have to be able to stop them.”

2. Line up with your customers and other key constituents

The change you are aiming for must be driven by customer needs and fully endorsed by your governing structure. A leader can create enormous, radical change in even a very large system if it is undeniably wanted and supported by these key internal and external forces.

The TSA's customers—airlines, airports, and the traveling public—were demanding big change at the agency. When then-Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff hired Kip Hawley as TSA administrator in 2005, it was with a clear mandate from the White House to make aviation security more effective. Public demand was driving political will, a basic requirement for creating change in government.

It is a truism that government institutions tend to resist change. While the same can be said of many systems, in government the people and procedures already in place can generally outlast a mandate for change by simply waiting for the next elections. Thus it is easy to shoot down a radical proposal and many senior leaders hesitate to take on daunting change that, if unsuccessful, might damage their reputations and spend valuable political capital.

The TSA had a distinct advantage. Not only was change necessary in order to ensure security, the public was fed up with what they saw at security checkpoints. The White House, Chertoff and Hawley understood and were aligned with the magnitude of change that was needed.

3. Prepare the soil and build trust in leadership

Before embarking on a major change initiative, make a clear, unbiased assessment of whether the organization currently has the capacity to execute on your vision. If not, do the work that needs to be done to build that capacity.

Although the mandate and external will for change were clear, in 2005 the TSA system was not ready for an endeavor that required deep motivation and effective systems. It had been formed only three years earlier in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, had hired more than 50,000 people within its first seven months, and had been in a constant state of reacting to crisis. It lacked basic business processes, management metrics, and quality control. Front line staff had no structure for pay increases, no career development path, and no clear direction other than to follow a standard operating procedure (SOP).

For expediency at startup, the TSA had adopted the Federal Aviation Administration's regulatory model for security. This became a core problem that handicapped the agency because, while the security-related safety of *objects* can be ensured by following an SOP, screening *people* is a very different kind of challenge. To effectively deal with a human security threat requires risk management rather than regulatory practices.

The shift to a risk management model—and the resulting workforce behavior change—eventually became the goal of *Security Evolution*. Before that could happen, however, some basic adjustments to processes had to be made. It took about two years for performance metrics to show that the workforce was clearly stable and engaged. Absenteeism, turnover, and the number of injuries—among the worst in the Federal government—dropped significantly, indicating better teamwork and a more attentive operation. At the same time, putting the needed systems in place increased the leadership team's credibility with the workforce. "They began to believe that we weren't just talking through our hats," says then TSA Assistant Administrator for Security Operations Mo McGowan.

4. Make use of momentum and move forward quickly

Change that needs to happen quickly is more likely to succeed than change that has all the time in the world. Make use of the immediacy created by tight deadlines. Don't let idea development, decision making, or execution wallow in the notion that it has to be perfect before it gets implemented. Instead, dive in and learn from your mistakes as you go. This drives ownership, creates buy in, and increases momentum and confidence.

Security Evolution began in 2007 and needed to be substantively complete before the change in administration that would come with the 2008 presidential election.

The initial phase of the project was IDEO's design of a new security checkpoint. The *Checkpoint of the Future* incorporated next-generation detection technologies and created a more deliberate, controlled environment. In parallel with this innovative design, the TSA re-engineered airport screening processes. As these changes were researched, designed, and implemented, Hawley's initial instincts were confirmed. Environment and technology were not enough to stop threats to aviation security. The workforce also needed to change—big time. Deterring ever-changing, unpredictable terrorist methods required empowered front-line security personnel. Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) needed to advance beyond compliance with standard operating procedures and learn to use their judgment, instincts, skills, and experience.

The behavior-change training began to be designed in December 2007, with a goal of having the entire workforce trained by spring '09. This allowed 16 months to develop the training, train more than 1,000 internal trainers, and roll out to 50,000 employees at 426 airports.

5. Steer into unfamiliar territory

If you really want innovative results, try a new approach. For example: hire a design firm rather than a management consultant; bring in new thinkers; look at best practices in other fields, industries, or economies. Begin your thinking at the edges of what you currently consider smart or acceptable and move out from there.

To get an outside point of view, the TSA wanted people from outside the world of government, law enforcement, and security. They chose the innovation company IDEO as a partner, explicitly requiring that IDEO push top leadership and the project team out of their comfort zone.

"It was all about getting uncomfortable," confirms McGowen. "Individuals at every level had to confront their own fears, excuses, and resistance to change. If they were really serious about stopping an attack they had to learn how to take the risk to use their own instincts and critical thinking, and encourage their teams to do the same."

6. Turn vision into tangible goals and tasks

Even when seeking a shift in behaviors or culture, create a real and tangible set of goals and outcomes that make sense; something the organization can clearly drive towards.

The TSA's initial strategy including tangible outcomes such as checkpoint redesign; new screening equipment like the full-body scanner; revamped communications infrastructure like wireless

headsets; passenger engagement through ads targeted at passengers to gain interest and buy in; efforts to humanize TSOs for the passengers, including photos and short biographies at checkpoints.

These tangibles engaged and motivated leadership and moved the program from an idea to a real set of actions. Accountability was clear. Roadblocks were removed. Goals were met.

When the need for behavior change became evident, the approach to it was similarly based on tangible outcomes. One example: the change from a hierarchical to a networked communications strategy, giving the workforce access to the information and guidance they needed on the ground to make sound security decisions. Another: a shift in focus from individual competencies to teaming skills, creating a more seamless, unified presence at each checkpoint.

Most important was the shift from compliance to responsiveness. The TSA realized that the result of its initial regulatory model was that security officers were trained to strictly follow the SOP—and any SOP can ultimately be defeated by a motivated foe. To effectively mitigate ever-evolving security threats, officers would instead need to use their own critical thinking and judgment based on experience.

This necessitated a very tangible goal—enhanced instinct and the ability to make critical decisions under pressure—that led to another very tangible change: a dramatic shift from compliance-based performance evaluation to coaching-based behavioral feedback that would help officers hone their awareness and instincts.

Security Evolution coalesced into a set of highly experiential trainings in which every field employee and leader at every level participated. TSOs were trained in specific skills and methods that would enable them to become fully engaged with and aware of *self*, *team*, and *environment*. Supervisors, managers and leaders were trained in coaching and communications skills specifically aimed at encouraging TSOs to develop the needed behavior changes.

Simply titled *ENGAGE*, aimed at line employees, and *COACH*, aimed at managers/leaders, these trainings educated, motivated, and guided security workers to rethink their role and learn to accept a new set of parameters and expectations.

7. Get the right personalities into the mix

When assembling the project team that will drive the initiative, don't just look at skill sets and job titles. Consider personalities, relationship networks, and credibility. The ability to provide inspiration and influence thought leaders at every level of the organization—top brass all the way to rank-and-file—might be the single most important success factor. Motivation and drive also play a key role. Leaders of change must be committed to facing adversity without giving up. At the same time, don't overlook hard skills. What is the breadth of functions you need to cover?

Find the innovators and early adopters, people who have a healthy tolerance for risk and understand how to read others. Emotional, social, and systems intelligence are critical. Architecting change is a matter of being astute about human relationships and being able to read whether you are getting through to people or not.

The TSA sought to include skills and experience such as operations management, security officers, bomb appraisal officers, behavior detection officers, experts in experiential learning and curriculum design, specialists in acquisition, financing and budgeting, public affairs, physical plant, industrial designer, and a host of other critical functions—all of which were represented on the project team.

Leadership specifically identified people in each area known for their tenacity and resilience. Team members were chosen who had a reputation for refusing to take no for an answer and persisting until the job was done. “This assignment really required courage,” says Hawley. “The people leading it had to be willing to sail upstream every single day.”

8. Be steeped in all aspects of your system

Be sure that on-the-ground reality is integrated into the goals and the design. Take a collaborative approach to all phases of development that brings real experience to the fore of decision making.

Hawley himself went through TSO certification training and is the only national security administrator who is also a certified security officer. McGowen went out into the field and learned every aspect of security, as did third-in-command Stephanie Rowe, *Security Evolution* executive director and co-author of this article. The IDEO design team observed security at airports, interviewed focus groups of TSOs and visited passenger’s homes as they prepared and packed for flights.

IDEO designed the *Security Evolution* trainings so that they included ideas from all constituents. They beta tested their designs at a series of pilots held with personnel from a variety of airports. Representatives from every level participated in extensive feedback sessions after every pilot, leading to further refinements in the training curriculum and facilitation techniques.

9. Capture people’s hearts and minds by giving them a direct experience of the change you want them to make

Just as the design and project teams need to have direct experience with the organization’s on-the-ground reality, employees who are expected to participate in the change need to be provided with a direct experience of the vision, strategy, and tactics that will create success.

To accomplish this requires diving into the challenging realm of human experience—relationships, motivation, satisfaction, engagement—territory that can and must evolve for organizations to survive and to meet the demands of an unpredictable and ever-changing world.

At the TSA, capturing hearts and minds required a sea change in training methodology. Up until this point, all training at TSA was technical and procedural—driven by lecture, reading, and hands-on practice. To create the kind of enterprise-wide change in behavior and world-view needed for *Security Evolution* to take hold, that mold had to be broken.

Using design-thinking methodology, IDEO and the TSA worked together to design and deliver a direct experience of the *Security Evolution* vision. “We wanted to allow the workforce to find the

needed change inside themselves,” says Hawley. “To understand it in their own minds and hearts—and to know why their full-out participation was so urgently needed.”

Trainers, trainees, and leaders found themselves deeply inspired and motivated by this process. Each realized the importance of his or her own role in protecting national security.

10. Be strategic in building momentum and support

Start where you know you can succeed—with the people most likely to benefit from change—and build enough buy-in so that resistant constituents are pressured to consider the merits of the plan.

Hawley knew the middle layer of managers were going to be the most difficult to convince, so he intentionally focused the program on creating so much momentum among front line staff that the middle layer would be influenced by them.

“Odds were it would be easier to convince the front lines. We were essentially telling them ‘We’re handing you a lot more autonomy and power,’” explains Hawley. “With the field leadership, we had to convince them it was a good idea to let go of some of their power and give it to the TSOs—a much tougher sell.”

11. Create a tipping point by building an internal group of thought leaders and change agents

Among those most likely to benefit, focus on winning over a defined core group. Equip them with the tools, knowledge, power, and status that will enable them to mentor others. These are the agents that will build the momentum of change on the ground.

To roll out *ENGAGE* and *COACH* in the planned time-frame, within budget, and with maximum impact, the TSA developed a process to equip and certify internal trainers. Only those who were certified were allowed to teach the content, and they were granted the authority to represent a mandate from senior leadership. This provided the trainers with confidence and enthusiasm, as well as a sense of personal mission. It also helped to reinforce the fact that the behavior change they were introducing was coming from the top, not “just the training department.”

A series of carefully crafted 12-day train-the-trainer events—designed by Beth Shapiro, a member of IDEO’s TSA team, and Stephanie Rowe, co-authors of this article—helped ensure broad-based support by combining intensive training with deep encouragement and inspiration. More than 1,000 TSA personnel were trained in powerful experiential facilitation techniques. As important, they came to understand and enthusiastically embrace the profound leadership role they were expected to play in bringing *Security Evolution* alive.

Top leaders from every area of the organization participated in these events—both to observe the training and to engage in discussion with the participants, who were urged to ask tough questions. “We should be able to give you good answers and if we can’t, then we need to go back and rethink what we are doing,” Hawley told them.

The process was deeply challenging and rewarding. As intended, it created an internal motivational force that spread excitement throughout peer groups, across silos, and up and down the chain of

command—even out to airline and airport personnel. Participants became a powerful team of thought leaders. They were the early adopters who advocated—from above and below—for the importance of TSOs becoming empowered to “go beyond the SOP,” trusting themselves and each other to spot and stop potential threats.

12. Make good use of resistance

Honor those who resist the change. They are giving voice to fears or concerns that everyone involved is experiencing on some level. When handled openly, resistance can be a critical element in propelling success, because it forces everyone to grapple with issues below the shiny surface of vision and ideals. As a result, supporters develop a deeper understanding of what is needed and why, and they make a deeper commitment to doing their part.

TSA trainers were taught to make use of resistance in their courses—ask about it, look for it, invite it, use it. Leaders, too, were taught that they should encourage rather than punish those who asked tough questions or expressed doubts.

“If you’re not looking for resistance or can’t find it—if it seems too easy—ultimately you’re going to fail,” says former TSA trainer Rich Pater. “You have to let people get it at their own pace. Don’t shut down questions or make confusion wrong. Don’t penalize people for not being on board. Invite discussion.”

13. Institutionalize the change

Modify existing infrastructure to demonstrate commitment to the new worldview. Change agents within any organization need structures that will support and back them as they communicate and model new behaviors, and encounter related problems.

A networked approach to communication was a key element of *Security Evolution*. This would be a big change from the traditional hierarchical communication model. The centralized train-the-trainer program delivered the strong message that it is important for the frontline workforce to know each other, trust each other and share ideas, concepts, and knowledge across all 426 airports. A key goal of the program was for the trainers to build effective internal networks.

TSA operations personnel were tasked with rewriting check point SOPs to align with the new *Security Evolution* vision. This meant re-architecting the SOP to incent the desired behaviors: engagement, critical thinking, and judgment. Modified management directives and job descriptions were also key to showing the workforce that the changes were for the long-term.

An *Evolution Support Center* was created to help with training logistics and curriculum support for trainers, and also to nurture behavior that enabled networks. It held conference calls, did push communications, encouraged trainers, provided guidance, and gave trainers and front line supervisors a place to report middle-management resistance that was interfering with the program’s success.

Conclusion

Subsequent studies performed by Price Waterhouse Coopers determined that *Security Evolution* was being successfully implemented in the field. TSOs, managers, and—perhaps most important—the traveling public reported noticing a significant difference in daily experiences at checkpoints throughout the US.

Despite a complete change in TSA leadership in 2009, the principles of *Security Evolution* continue to inform practices at all levels of the organization.

With *Security Evolution*, the TSA found a way to effectively tap the deepest motivations of a large and diverse workforce. While many things about the organization are unique compared to typical corporate environments, its story is highly instructive for a wide variety of organizations.

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