



BY COLE SMITH

REDUCING THREATS BY CREATING A POSITIVE CULTURE

Now more than ever our organizations need to be safe and secure. Everyday there are incidents and reported stories detailing tragic events that are the end result of an individual's despair. Protecting our organizations is a priority. The vast number of tools, products and resources are so numerous and overwhelming, often we are left making costly decisions with little confidence the security upgrades will really solve the problem. Understanding simple methods of improving internal culture can improve safety and security for an organization while increasing productivity.

While serving as a Special Agent in the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, I faced numerous safety and security concerns for the diplomats and their families. An ongoing issue was the concern of our third-country-national employees being recruited by foreign intelligence services. Being in a foreign country, our security team was extremely limited on effective legal options. In consultation with leadership within the Consulate, we came up with a basic plan that would reduce the frequency of this threat while increasing the likelihood of reporting regarding this matter. The end state of our endeavors encompassed a targeted focus of three specific areas in the Consulate, which in turn created a better environment to work in, happier employees and increased productivity.

The first area we addressed was what employees were seeing and perceiving as they entered their place of work. Our goal was to create an environment inviting to diversity, creativity and optimism, while at the same time was clean and organized. Since a large number of employees were Muslim we provided a prayer room for them allowing for them to practice their core beliefs. In addition to this we adjusted the method in which employees entered our secure facility. Clear paths were painted and signs made to direct and expedite employees coming in for work. This replaced the need for a security guard verbally directing employees, and allowing employees to feel trusted and enabled while not compromising security. Artwork through the building was replaced with pieces that reflected not only American culture, but also the culture of those working there. In part a sense of belonging resonated through the organization. Employees saw and perceived on a daily basis a place they wanted to be a part of and take care of; which resulted with them having the desire to uniquely contribute to build the organization.

Next we addressed what employees were hearing and how they understood the dynamics of the culture in the Consulate. A unified effort amongst supervisors was vital for this step. Active "critical communication" became a standard for communication between supervisors and their subordinates. When this is truly put to action, employees begin to understand and internalize mission goals. At the same time they feel they are being heard and something is going to be done about it. This is core communication that focuses on issues and matters that change and grow an organization. It is beyond the day-to-day fluff that is shared out of repetitiveness and convenience. For this to be most effective, it must be a top down approach. People follow those of us who lead. I noticed the

impact this had significantly when conducting internal investigations. Each time the interviewee and I reached the "critical communication" level, we both benefited and I received information that would not have otherwise been shared, while the interviewee felt confident they were being listened to. Within 60 days of implementing this approach two cases came to surface with issues tying back 10 years previous. It is clear that people respond positively when they feel they are being heard and when they understand what is being asked of them. Our security team saw the benefits from this as incident reporting went up ten-fold. Again, a safer environment was created while better methods of communication improved the organization as a whole. The ripple effect was the standard of communication changed not only between the supervisor and subordinate, but also between peers.

Finally we realized most importantly actions speak the loudest. The organization as a whole had to embrace best practices in how people should be treated, rewarded, and developed professionally to complete the foundation of a great internal culture. How often do we as people automatically entitle ourselves based on pay, position and socio-economic factors. More often than not people thrive on feeling superior and in charge. This is a common practice in Saudi Arabia. Third country nationals are the labor force that keeps the infrastructure intact. Saudi Arabians have a very distinct class difference between themselves and those manual laborers.

Undoubtedly this attitude poured into our organization. The sense of superiority and entitlement was addicting and poisoning amongst the American diplomats. It affected growth opportunity for locals and diminished their role at the Consulate. To counter this, events were organized that included all personnel and facilities at the Consulate were made available to accommodate all employees. An example of this was making the use of the swimming pool after hours available to all. Local staff could not go to public locations and swim because of Sharia law. It was common for the local staff and their families to grow up and never have the opportunity to swim together as a family. The Consulate created a new access policy allowing for the pool to be benefited by all, giving individuals the ability to swim with their families, in some occasions for the first time. Additionally, emphasis was made on showing recognition for employees. Certificates were given and in most occasions became the wall art in offices throughout the building. When new positions became available, in everyway possible, interested employees were offered specific training to be competitive for promotion and advancement.

Simple changes in our actions as leaders had tremendous impact in the happiness of employees and their safety and security. Let me illustrate this with one other example. A close friend of mine was assigned as a regional security manager with a private organization to manage multiple U.S. government facilities in a country in Africa. At the time this project received some of the lowest ratings possible. Within 2 years this project was reviewed again and was rated the top in Africa. I asked my friend what did he do. Expecting a long list of things, he responded, "a weekly mile." A "weekly mile" consisted of him getting on his bike and riding around to each guard station and greeting the guards once a week. By doing this, the internal culture changed immediately and he could then implement specific improvement plans.

Resulting from a focus on improving our internal culture individuals became empowered. They are now taking ownership in their future by improving the environment, protecting it by promptly reporting concerns and handling issues in their earlier stages before it becomes a more serious incident. Similarly these same practices have been done throughout the business world. Simply put, a happy employee works harder, harder work produces better results and better results increases revenue. The bi-product of all of this is a safer and more secure environment.

In summary there are multiple avenues of approach to protecting our organizations. By making small adjustments within the culture an organization can make sound, long lasting changes that cost a fraction of other options by paying attention to the following three items:

1. What employees *see* and *perceive*.
2. What employees *hear* and *understand*.
3. What the organization's *actions* are *saying*.

A unified effort in guarding against unpredictable threats will always be more successful than a single individual or department trying to do it alone.

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