



BUILDING GOVERNMENT 2.0: CREATING MORE EFFECTIVE INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

TIPS TO RUN AN INTERAGENCY WORK GROUP MORE EFFECTIVELY: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD OF CYBER WORKFORCE PLANNING

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We hear buzz words like “teamwork” and “vision” frequently overused, causing our ears to glaze and our eyes to tune out. Sometimes though, these words actually capture the effort perfectly, when done by the right people for the right reasons. Perhaps you have been part of a workgroup that felt like a waste of time and wondered, “what could I do to make this better?”

One recent success story we can all take some pointers from is the interagency Federal Cyber Workforce Management and Coordinating Working Group (Working Group) founded by Megan Caposell of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), Christopher Paris of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and Matthew Isnor of the Department of Defense (DoD). From an effort that took just over a year, the Tri-Chairs were able to give federal employees and the general public interested in cyber an effective ointment to the burning question: “How do I start a cyber career?”

The answer to this question is not as simple on the surface as one might think. Cyber is more than just cybersecurity; it’s an ecosystem involving multiple communities of skill that rely on one another to build, secure, operate, protect, and defend our technological resources and data. Cyber is diverse; the types of roles one can perform within the cyber workforce even more so. Demystifying cyber and opening the aperture to identify the numerous points of entry is the first step to helping individuals embark on their cyber journey. Recognizing the multi-faceted nature of cyber work can not only recalibrate expectations around acceptable educational pursuits (some cyber work roles benefit from traditional classroom instruction while others require hands-on training that vocational schools or bootcamps may deliver), but it will also inform the way employers assess applicants are assessed, qualified and place them into cyber positions, and professionally develop them throughout their career.

How then did the Working Group operate effectively without a budget and no dedicated authority to meet the needs of prospective cyber professionals? Simple, they used vision and teamwork correctly. “But wait!” You are likely saying, “that’s what everyone says – they are just overused buzz words that don’t mean anything.”

Yes, those often overused and under-implemented words can feel like a mosquito buzzing near your ear, but suspend your disbelief and read on just a little longer.

Looking at the product of phase one of the Working Group’s efforts speaks for itself in the [Cyber Career Pathways Tool](#) that went live on 5 August 2020. The tool, which was developed in partnership with CISA’s Cyber Defense Education and Training sub-division, has already proven to be incredible helpful for those exploring potential careers within the cyber ecosystem, being carefully mapped to the [NICE Cybersecurity Workforce Framework](#) (NICE

Framework). Equally important, it was created to meet the needs of a specific audience – the [500,000 person gap](#) of skilled cybersecurity professionals in the United States. It is by all means a huge success, and a tremendous help to the ever-growing cyber workforce.

“Success” is another overused word, so let’s break that down and add some context.

Ray Dalio, the founder of Bridgewater Associates explained his [principle for success](#) in life: “*pain plus reflection equals progress.*” In multiple interviews Dalio shares that the best way he found to exercise this principle was to gather good people with diverse perspectives that were willing to challenge each other until they could [get as close to the truth as possible.](#)

In a nutshell, the Working Group’s Tri-Chairs used this same principle to figure out ways to get past the bureaucratic pain using reflection and debate to create progress.

So far this story likely sounds familiar, but here is the point where lessons can be learned.

FIVE TIPS TO RUN AN INTERAGENCY WORK GROUP MORE EFFECTIVELY

1. Have A Clear Vision That Is Referenced In Decisions Making.

The Tri-Chairs anchored their goals for solving this collective problem by framing all solutions specifically FOR THE END USER instead of what would make their Senior Leaders happy. This was the “[why](#)” of their vision – staying focused on creating something valuable for the federal government, and all the prospective cyber professionals wondering how to start their careers. At the beginning of each meeting the Tri-Chairs reshared the vision of what they wanted to build and reminded participants of how their effort would benefit the end users. While the word “vision” is oft pushed into the back of the brain due to its buzziness, here is why it’s important. Sharing a clear vision for where things need to go is contagious and compels participants to self-select OUT of the event if they know they are not the right fit. The Tri-Chairs never needed to have the nubby conversation with agency representatives to tell wrong fits to send someone else because the vision for what they were building was always present. That is why CEOs, great leaders, and game changers always focus on their vision – when its real and present people want to be part of it. Vision for why they were putting in the hours and effort also helped them avoid creating “*shelf-ware,*” which is too often an acceptable byproduct of federal interagency work groups.

2. Implement The Kaizen Principle Regularly.

Translated from [Japanese](#) as *the process of continuously improving*, Kaizen is the baseline fundamental behind many of the modern-day [project management](#) methodologies. In its essence, using Kaizen is breaking down all the pieces into very small steps, then refining each step by pushing decision making downward and relying on transparency of mistakes. The Tri-Chairs embrace this principle by not making unilateral decisions, but instead seeking input and consensus through debate, and then wading into doing the actual work. They were not afraid to fail, but instead saw hitting obstacles as part of the process – knowing they would need to refine and keep refining at every step. Finding the right methodology to test and define the Cyber Career Pathway Tool is a great example of this.

3. Actually Test The Methodologies Instead Of Relying Only On Best Practices.

In October of 2018 the Tri-Chairs met to begin figuring out how to codify the different KSAs of the federal cyber workforce in an easy to digest way for the end users. They started with best practices to collect and test data, but found it wasn't the right fit for the end user's needs. After testing different research and screening methodologies amongst themselves and a small group of volunteers, they realized the industry standards were not working. Because of their adherence to Kaizen style processes, Chris and a few Industrial and Organizational psychologists took on the task of overhauling their established Competency Model approach to create a more customized, task-oriented methodology that course corrected and propelled the project forward. This raises a good point: how to get people into your workgroups that will be a 'Chris' – meaning they take ownership of ensuring a successful, non-shelf ware product is made?

Stemming from the need to address the cyber skills gaps across the federal government and pushing a plan to produce a robust, qualified, well-trained cyber workforce, the Tri-Chairs identified other government agencies with the same need to uniformly and accurately identify and organize how to talk about cyber work and career pathways. The Tri-Chairs then used grassroots methods to invite participation, not just relying on email blasts, but also using networking events and conferences to seek out and recruit representatives with similar needs. They then helped coordinate and consolidate liaisons based on the individual having a strong understanding of the NICE Framework, cyber work roles, and the KSAs needed in the different areas of the cyber ecosystem. When the right person was found, taking ownership became a natural part of the process.

4. Choose The Right People And Give Them Meaningful Responsibilities.

Growing workgroups organically to solve a problem while identifying the right people to participate is essential. The Tri-Chairs were not given instructions on how to do this, and as mentioned previously, they had to embark on a grassroots effort to collect active participants. They made the time to attend conferences and other networking events to create the necessary connections at the right levels – i.e., people who have the ear of decision makers in their own agencies, and wield influence within their workforces. Since the challenge of any workgroup is getting the right people in the room, here is what worked for them:

- Actively recruited liaisons with the interpersonal skills to make friends, add value with strategic insights, and actually network. In short, use the General McChrystal tactic of [Trash Can Diplomacy](#).
- Keep reminding current and future participants how they can help, with constant reminders of the objectives to keep the overall vision in focus.
- Plan ahead for participants to find their own replacements who can contribute to the effort by making the selection process formalized.
- Consistently hold ideas and people to the standard of keeping the end user in mind.
- Pay attention to demonstrated or verbalized strengths, and ask people to fill roles that allow them to use their strengths and showcase their abilities.

5. Use Shared Resources And Prioritize Collecting Leadership Buy-In.

Through centralizing these efforts, the Working Group saved taxpayers and the federal government an estimated 15.5 million dollars and over 278,000 hours of effort compared to what would have occurred through a decentralized, individual agency approach.

Knowing that strategic planners historically don't execute their plans, the Tri-Chairs leveraged resources within their own agencies to develop the Career Pathway Tool and collect testers, data, and Subject Matter Experts that shared common interests and mission elements. The Tri-Chair's vision of helping everyone map their cyber career to the NICE Framework to better understand their future career options was an easy sell to leadership because they were able to demonstrate the benefit to the end user, show the resources the effort would save, and articulate a clear vision that leadership could internalize and reshare with their peers and subordinates.

CONCLUSION – 2021 AND BEYOND

The Working Group successfully collaborated with representatives from 21 Federal Agencies and CISA's CDET to develop a valuable, interactive tool for employers, cyber professionals, students and recent grads to use nationwide. Megan, Chris, Matt and the Working Group will continue to provide ideas for updating the Cyber Career Pathways Tool, but they're not stopping there. Newly rebranded as the Federal Cyber Workforce Management and Coordinating Working Group, the Working Group is leveraging momentum it gained in 2020 to embark on a myriad of new cyber workforce endeavors with the learning and development community. Their focus will be on pioneering new solutions to address relevant cyber workforce development problems by using refined methodologies and pushing the boundaries of traditional interagency efforts; showcasing what the federal interagency can do when it operates with the shared vision of "do once, help many." We would all benefit from more of this across the interagency, and can be proud of the results of their efforts and the great achievements to come.

ABOUT THE WORKING GROUP

The interagency Federal Cyber Workforce Management and Coordinating Working Group is dedicated to developing cyber career resources, including career pathways for NICE Framework work roles for use throughout the Federal Government, as well as private industry and academia. This interagency collaboration directly supports Executive Order 13870, *America's Cybersecurity Workforce* and the President Management Agenda's Cross-Agency Priority Goal, *Developing a Workforce for the 21st Century*. This WG is tri-chaired by the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and CISA.

