

Jack of All Trades, Master of None: Managing the Intelligence Community of the Future

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of a major crisis, everyone immediately asks: what went wrong? And how do we make sure this never happens again? The answer to the first question is often more apparent than the answer to the second. Deficiencies and shortcomings can seem obvious, especially in retrospect, but figuring out what to do about them is another matter.

I have been a part of the Intelligence Community (IC) through major crises, including the response to the 9/11 attacks, and I’ve seen one approach—reorganization—tried over and over again. It is, in some ways, the solution of first resort. Are IC agencies not sharing information with each other? Reorganize the IC. Is an agency not performing as well as hoped? Reorganize the agency.

Reorganization is not always—or even often—wrong; it can be exactly the right thing to do. But it should not always—or even sometimes—be the *first* thing to do. Reorganization has major downsides, including its impact on the workforce. Before taking such a step, one must do the hard work of understanding the root causes of the crisis, wrestle with tough problems head-on, and embrace out-of-the-box thinking to figure out how to make the system better.

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This is true for most organizations, but especially so for the IC, which is a unique construct in the U.S. government. The leader of the IC, the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), has significant limitations that must be fully understood and appreciated when considering how to manage the IC effectively. Before getting into specific issues related to the role of the DNI, however, it is important to understand a bit more detail about reorganizations and the IC.

I. BOXES AND LINES

Reorganizations have been used repeatedly to address structural and other issues plaguing underperforming organizations or those that failed at a critical moment. There is an entire industry devoted to organizational design and aligning organizations for best effect, centered around the notion that structure is core to the performance of an organization. Reorganizations can be valuable in many ways: they shake everyone out of complacency, help eliminate stovepipes and disconnects, and force new ways of doing business that can lead to important breakthroughs.

At the same time, the negative impact of reorganizations is also well-understood.¹ Significant structural changes cause substantial workforce strife: they are stressful, can break important connections, and drastically slow operations for up to several years. Many reorganizations seek to align like functions, which often requires pulling folks from across several organizations into a new office or center. Unfortunately, this can leave holes in those original organizations that are often filled with new experts, resulting in rivalries and unwillingness to collaborate. While it is logical to believe that proximity encourages collaboration, I have seen people collaborating beautifully from all around the world, juxtaposed with people in one small room not talking to each other at all. Thus proximity is no guarantee.

Creating new structures is a crutch we tend to fall back on when more effective, and less visible, solutions are elusive and hard to tackle. However, there is no perfect structure; every organizational construct has seams and gaps that must be mitigated. The questions are: which seams and gaps are most easily mitigated? And where can an organization withstand potential disconnects? If the seams and gaps are too great, a reorganization may be the best option, despite the downsides. However, if issues can be sufficiently mitigated in other ways, that is likely the better course. Structure is only one aspect of how organizations perform; networks, connections, and relationships across an organization are equally important and also must be supported by good policy, governance, and culture. Leaders must set clear performance expectations, focus on outcomes, and inspire the workforce to achieve them.

1. Ron Ashkenas, *Reorganizing? Think Again*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Oct. 25, 2011), <https://perma.cc/2F3E-XL8U>.

II. A RECENT HISTORY OF REORGANIZATION WITHIN THE IC

The world of national security has undergone significant changes since 9/11. We witnessed the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), along with the inclusion in the IC of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The IC's mission pivoted significantly toward counterterrorism, while the "wall" between domestic and foreign intelligence softened.² Innumerable other changes have occurred over the course of the last two decades in an effort to ensure that the United States never again has another 9/11 on its shores.

Much of this is understandable, as the 9/11 attacks revealed significant changes in the challenges facing the nation. We went from a Cold War posture focused primarily on sophisticated nation-state adversaries to confronting extremely diverse nation-state and non-nation-state threats that are more aggressive and more likely to result in miscalculation. Globalization continues to expand the scope of issues within the IC's purview, and the digitally interconnected nature of our world is making borders less relevant. Near-ubiquitous access to technology means that the IC must work harder to have a technical advantage over our adversaries, and an abundance of data is increasing the difficulty of determining what information really matters, particularly given the rise of mis- and disinformation.

Nevertheless, in the two decades since 9/11, the IC has successfully warned of and helped thwart many would-be terrorist attacks, and anticipated and informed policymakers of a broad spectrum of national security threats. Some might attribute this to the regular reorganization of the IC, which is true to an extent. The creation of the DNI brought the smaller IC elements more prominently into the fold and elevated cross-community needs. The inclusion of the FBI and DHS in the IC also helped better bridge the gap between foreign and domestic intelligence. On the other hand, several IC agencies and offices (called "elements") have recently undergone significant internal restructurings, with both positive and negative effects, to include new seams, new confusion, and major workforce disruption.

The challenges facing the IC will continue to grow in complexity and scope, and the instinct will be to reorganize in response to new problems. It is more productive, however, to delve into the core issues and develop mitigations that do not involve structural changes.

III. THE IC'S UNIQUE, UNDERLYING ISSUES

The IC is made up of 18 different elements that are expert in their craft and produce eye-watering insights. However, unlike other Cabinet-level officials in the U.S. government, the DNI does not have independent authority, direction, or control over most of those elements. Instead, each IC element directly reports to another Cabinet-level official—the Secretaries of Defense, State, Energy,

2. Mike McConnell, *Overhauling Intelligence*, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Jul. – Aug. 2007, at 49, 52.

Treasury, Homeland Security, or the Attorney General (AG)—with the exception of the CIA which, in addition to the DNI, has some direct reporting lines to the President. Moreover, the DNI’s authority was publicly weakened from the start; the DNI’s authorizing legislation, the Intelligence Reform & Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA), states clearly that the DNI must exercise his or her authorities in a way that “respects and does not abrogate the statutory responsibilities of the heads of the departments of the United States Government.”³

This means the DNI cannot take any action across the IC without the permission of another department head if that department head has similar authority over an IC element. Take, for example, personnel authorities. Half of the IC’s officers are also in the Department of Defense, and the Secretary of Defense has extensive personnel rules and regulations that cover those IC officers. In order for the DNI to take any action relating to IC personnel, the DNI must get the consent of the Secretary of Defense (and the other Secretaries who oversee IC officers). Indeed, it is hard to think of any action the DNI might take that does not require the consent of at least one Secretary, unless it is related to the ODNI alone.

IV. SETTING THE CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ODNI

In the early days of the ODNI, IC officers rarely worked together across organizational lines and there was more than healthy competition amongst the elements. Each agency was seeing primarily their own part of the picture through primarily their own lens. It was a community in name only.

The ODNI was created to address this issue, to ensure that IC elements operated as partners, collaborating and sharing information, so that the whole was more than the sum of its parts. Our first job was to figure out how to inspire collaboration, trust, and partnership. We could not reorganize the community or add new members—the ODNI was that new member and the product of a reorganization—so we had to consider less obvious methods. Moreover, we had to acknowledge the limitations on the DNI’s authorities.

The ODNI has attempted many approaches to managing the Community. In the early days, the ODNI tried using a hammer, telling IC elements to do something “because the DNI said so.” But as every parent knows, this only works if you have the authority to back it up, and the DNI did not. The ODNI also tried saying “pretty please,” hoping to catch more flies with honey, but asking the elements to take action for community benefit, based only on good will, was not a successful approach.

In the end, several DNIs used a combination of tactics with relative success: leveraging relationships, moral authority, budgetary authority (the DNI’s strongest lever), and crisis-related urgency to move the Community toward common solutions for common problems. This trial and error led to several important lessons and best practices.

3. 50 U.S.C. § 3023 note (Presidential Guidelines on Implementation and Preservation of Authorities) (2018).

A. Relationships and Trust

The DNI's position, by virtue of not having direct line authority over the IC elements, is one that requires appealing to people's sense of mission and morals, convincing folks that they are better off when the entire Community is better off and that working together produces greater success than working alone. This cannot be accomplished without personal engagement, consensus-building, and compromise, all of which require strong relationships and a high degree of trust. As a result, the specific individuals chosen to lead the IC, from the DNI to the agency directors, Secretaries, and the AG, greatly impact the success of the DNI and the IC.

The DNI must build a strong relationship with the Director of the CIA, who leads an independent agency and has a direct line to the President. The DNI must also have strong relationships with the Secretaries of Defense, State, Energy, Treasury, Homeland Security, and the AG, because if an IC element disagrees with DNI direction, it may ultimately be resolved at that level. The DNI's relationship with the President also is critical; if the DNI does not have the President's personal support, the DNI's authority over the IC is significantly weakened, resulting in a potentially catastrophic impact to the DNI.⁴ This was a tough lesson to learn, but one that is now crystal clear.

Relationships and trust also are important at lower levels. The ODNI team will make very little progress if they do not have good relationships with and build trust among IC working-level officers. ODNI officers must work collaboratively across the Community, provide transparency and insights about the ODNI's goals and activities, and make good faith efforts to incorporate feedback from the IC. ODNI officers must accept that their strength comes not from statutory authorities, but from moral authority, fairness, objectivity, and the ability to add value. ODNI officers must always act consistently with that understanding; one officer's misstep undermines every other officer's work.

This kind of engagement has proven vital to the successful promulgation of Intelligence Community Directives (ICDs). ICDs, upon signature of the DNI, are binding policy on the IC elements, which means all of the elements—and their parent departments—must agree to it in advance. Whereas this can be relatively easy for non-controversial subjects, like the need to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace, it can be quite arduous when it comes to more contentious issues, such as ICD 501.

ICD 501 focuses on information sharing across the Community and was a signature policy of the ODNI after 9/11, when everyone was intensely focused on the IC's ability (or lack thereof) to “connect the dots.”⁵ ICD 501 had to emphasize both the need to ensure secrets would be shared only with those who had a “need

4. Marc Ambinder, *The Admiral's Listless Ship: The Demise of Dennis Blair*, ATLANTIC (May 21, 2010), <https://perma.cc/2R5Z-LFAF>.

5. NAT'L COMM'N ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES, THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT, 416–19 (2004), <https://perma.cc/2WJB-TWS6>.

to know” and also the responsibility to provide information to those who in fact did need to know.⁶ This was a difficult line to walk—emphasizing both protecting and sharing—and every IC element had a different view of how the policy should look. Working this issue transparently across the Community, recognizing and appreciating different equities, and allowing differences when necessary and appropriate, were key to building the trust needed to successfully complete this policy.

B. Mission and Role Clarity

The 18 IC elements have similar and overlapping, but not identical, missions and roles. This is enormously beneficial when each IC element leverages its unique authorities and talents to produce the best results on behalf of the whole community. It also can cause confusion in terms of how each operates without inadvertently tripping over another and, without understanding the lanes in the road, there is a tendency to compete rather than to partner. No amount of reorganization will solve that; instead, roles and responsibilities must be clear, and each IC element must understand how their work fits together to encourage healthy partnerships. This is not as simple as it sounds.

For example, many IC organizations do counterterrorism work. NCTC was created to help bring that work together, by coordinating and integrating cross-IC analysis to give policymakers a more holistic picture of the terrorism threat. NCTC does that, but continued ambiguity in roles and responsibilities across the CT community at times results in confusion, tension, and unhealthy competition where there should be teamwork. The creation of NCTC neither fully created nor fully resolved that problem.

Ambiguity in the role of the ODNI has also caused tension and difficulty. Four different DNIs in the first five years of the ODNI’s existence led to numerous changes in vision and priorities, as well as confusion about the ODNI’s roles and responsibilities. The IIRTPA was not clear enough to settle the question, and there were significant growing pains until DNI James Clapper landed on “intelligence integration” as the ODNI’s primary responsibility, conveying clearly that the ODNI is a supporting organization that enables IC elements by helping to integrate their work. DNI Clapper’s clarity and consistency on that point helped stabilize the ODNI’s leadership of the IC, allowing the ODNI to make progress on more substantive issues.

There will always be gray areas that must be navigated carefully, given that national security functions and missions do not fit neatly into boxes, but navigating the seams and ambiguity is what strong leaders must do, based on relationships and trust.

6. OFF. OF THE DIR. OF NAT’L INTEL., INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY DIRECTIVE NO. 501: DISCOVERY AND DISSEMINATION OR RETRIEVAL OF INFORMATION WITHIN THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY (2009). Exec. Order No. 13,526, 32 C.F.R. § 2001 (Dec. 29, 2009) (setting out classification standards for national security information and creating the “need to know” principle).

C. Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast⁷

No matter how strong and convincing your strategy is, the human component will determine the success of your organization. There are a variety of ways to influence workforce culture, including creating a common vision and shared experiences, aligning incentives, and celebrating small wins. However, it is a slow process that takes focused attention.

In the case of the IC, each IC element has a professional but individually distinct culture that creates a sense of pride in the organization's identity, its work, and its mission, all crucial to high-performing organizations. These distinct agency cultures are valuable and must be maintained. At the same time, no single agency has the capacity or expertise to produce Community outcomes on its own. To operate as a community, the IC also needs an overarching common culture. Because the IC is not a department with its own natural identity, this goal has proven elusive. Nevertheless, the ODNI has taken important steps to get there.

In its first few years, the ODNI created the "Joint Duty" program, which requires IC officers to do a year-long tour at another IC element before they can be promoted to senior executive ranks, as well as IC-wide training to help ensure a better understanding of the entire community. The ODNI also created IC-wide awards to publicly celebrate community teamwork and collaboration. These programs have helped IC officers personally connect with the mission and people of other IC elements, experience the value they contribute, and bring that experience back to their home organization to share with others.

There is more work to be done, but these programs have led to a more collaborative, open, and engaged IC mindset in those officers who participate. Nevertheless, these programs get less attention than substantive intelligence work and have become lower priority in recent years. These programs must be reinvigorated in order to continue to build a community culture.

CONCLUSION: ACHIEVING A HIGH-PERFORMING COMMUNITY

The IC will not be perfectly prescient 100% of the time. The work of intelligence—predicting the future based on information people are actively trying to conceal—is inherently imperfect and ripe for mistakes. But not every "intelligence failure" is of the same magnitude and not all of them require major reorganizations. New leaders should be cautious of restructuring and creating new organizations in the first instance; there are many factors that impact the successful management of the IC, and structure is often the least important of them.

7. "Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast" - *What Does it Mean?*, ALTERNATIVE BD. (Feb. 26, 2020), <https://perma.cc/Q9GF-5DUL> (crediting quote to Peter Drucker).

This holds especially true when it comes to the DNI's leadership of the IC, as boxes and lines have little relevance to a DNI who has no direct authority over them in any event. Moreover, internal reorganizations cause significant churn and loss of productivity from which it may take years to recover. IC leadership should learn the lessons of the last 20 years and first tackle the less visible aspects of management. The DNI must lead from a place of moral authority, helping the IC elements understand their roles and responsibilities, cultivating relationships, building trust, and nurturing a culture that embraces the Community in reality, not just in name.