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Wagner: Find Accountability Balance when Managing the Workplace

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Wagner: Find Accountability Balance when Managing the Workplace

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Fostering imaginative thinking in the government work place is best accomplished by hiring talented people, providing incentives and recognition to top performers while firing workers who aren't making the grade.

That was part of the message from Caryn Wagner, Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, during her keynote address at the 2011 CHDS Alumni Professional Exchange Conference (APEX) on Feb. 2. Wagner spoke to more than 150 alumni, faculty and staff in the McNitt Ballroom at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif.



Hiring the right people may sound simple enough, but Wagner said doing so can be more complex than it sounds. Organizations should seek diversity in age, background and education. Hiring young people is especially important in an increasingly tech-oriented environment.

"You have to have the juice of young people who have grown up living and breathing technology," Wagner said.

Perhaps as challenging is establishing accountability in the workplace without instilling a climate that fears outside-the-box thinking. Firing under-performers helps send an organization-wide message that there are consequences to poor performance on the job. However, Wagner cautioned against playing what she called the "blame game."

"If you insist on playing the blame game, that sucks the initiative out of the organization," she said.

Wagner further suggested active management of one's employees, pointing out that her department benefitted from an "executive shuffle." Shuffling staff can help revive creativity by putting workers into a new role. "You get people who are learning something new and thinking again," Wagner said.

Moreover, managers need to establish creative ways to provide incentives and rewards. An example: In her department employees make suggestions that are reviewed by a panel. The staffers with the best proposals are recognized and the two or three ideas are put into practice.

In a section of her address titled "Lessons from Fighting in the Bureaucratic Trenches," Wagner noted that when an organization fails to reward and recognize top performers, it risks losing them.

Wagner said that people who are exceptional at their particular job don't always make good managers. When a person with management potential is on staff, retaining them is highly important.

"In terms of leadership, there aren't that many of those people," she said. "When you find that you have to seize it and you have to nurture those people."

Wagner said imagination and creativity are needed in DHS as the department has a broad mandate and overlapping jurisdictions. The Office of Intelligence and Analysis, furthermore, must work with disparate state and local partners while working in an endeavor with less than clear parameters – analysts must decide when a crime is simply a

crime and when it rises to the level of terrorism.

"It's just a murky area we work in," Wagner said.

Wagner honed her leadership and homeland security acumen through decades of working in the military and government. She is a former military intelligence officer who has held numerous positions at the federal level, as well as working as a consultant.

As Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis and DHS' Chief Intelligence Officer, Wagner leads the DHS intelligence enterprise, which brings together the department's components in a number of critical initiatives involving information sharing, engagement with state and local fusion centers, and management of classified information systems security.

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