

**Business Executives
for National Security**

TALENT MANAGEMENT: A Strategy for Great Power Competition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tackling 21st Century challenges requires having a sustainable strategy to build a talented workforce for U.S. national security agencies. The national security enterprise, however, faces challenges recruiting the best talent, developing leaders, and retaining top performers. These challenges result, in part, from possessing a lack of rapidly evolving skillset needs coupled with heightened competition with foreign adversaries and private sector peers.

In this context, national security agencies have consistently engaged BENS since 2018 to explore and implement best practices from industry to address their gaps in managing talent. Through these efforts, BENS business leaders have observed common threads in workforce queries raised by national security leaders. BENS has recognized the recommendations provided to agencies have broad application across the national security enterprise. In this report, BENS distills the common themes and insights from these efforts to help national security leaders develop and implement a talent management strategy for their organization.

Leaders in the national security community will bolster their organization's effectiveness by developing a talent management strategy aligning with the mission, building in adaptability, and designed and executed with broad support from the workforce and other key stakeholders. Commitment to the strategy by agency leaders, managers, and employees is imperative for the overall success of the organization. Everyone has a role to play ensuring the organization has the most skilled talent available. BENS' work with national security agencies yielded the following eight best practices, which will help leaders develop a successful national security talent management strategy:

1

Establish a strong business case

2

Create a baseline, establish goals, and develop roadmaps & milestones

3

Tailor recruitment and retention to talent needs

4

Examine and appropriately adjust promotion processes

5

Encourage mentorship, coaching, and professional development opportunities

6

Employ innovative strategic communication approaches

7

Involve every layer of the organization and identify "champions"

8

Assess, adapt, and make adjustments as necessary

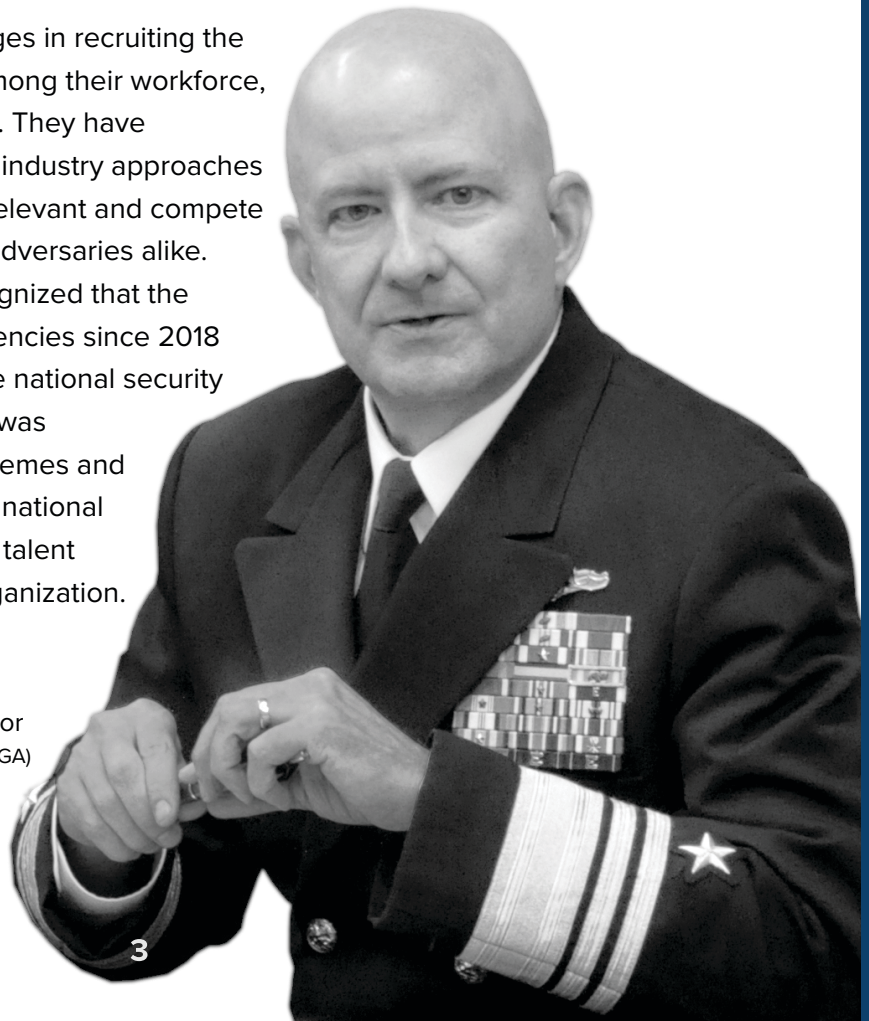
INTRODUCTION

“People, partnerships, mission today, and mission tomorrow.” These are the four priorities that National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) Director Vice Admiral Robert Sharp describes as essential in executing his agency’s mission and meeting 21st Century national security challenges. “[Our] first priority is taking care of our greatest asset – our people...We’re concentrating on creating the environment where our people want to stay on the team – where they’re properly resourced, where their families are taken care of, where we’ve set the conditions for them to contribute, to grow, and to succeed, where barriers preventing them from ‘being all they can be’ are removed.”¹

Great power competition coupled with rapid technological innovation is forcing national security organizations to rethink the way they execute their missions. Foreign adversary efforts to gain advantage over the United States cut across all sectors of society. The complexity of today’s threats require national security leaders to build a workforce with the skills suited for the dynamics of the modern threat environment, as articulated in the *National Defense Strategy*.² To this end, national security agencies must develop a national security talent management strategy to effectively recruit, develop, and retain the best and brightest workforce possible, and is imperative in ensuring United States’ security today as well as preparing to prevail against threats tomorrow.

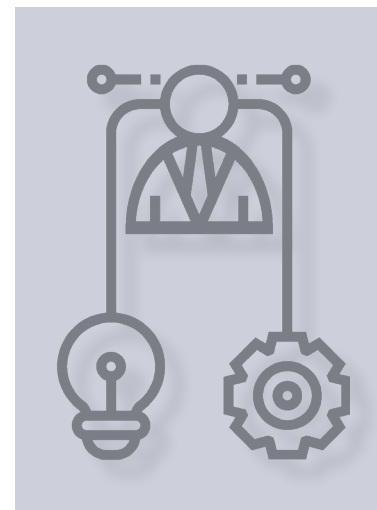
Government leaders face challenges in recruiting the best talent, developing leaders among their workforce, and retaining their top performers. They have recognized a need to incorporate industry approaches to talent management to remain relevant and compete with domestic peers and foreign adversaries alike. BENS business leaders have recognized that the recommendations provided to agencies since 2018 could be broadly useful across the national security enterprise. For this reason, BENS was motivated to distill the common themes and insights from these efforts to help national security leaders build an effective talent management strategy for their organization.

Vice Admiral Robert Sharp, Director
National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA)



What Is a Talent Management Strategy?

A talent management strategy is an organization's approach for recruiting, developing, and retaining a workforce providing maximum value to the mission. The strategy must align with an organization's culture, vision, and values, while adapting to changing internal and external environments. Investing in human capital through a talent management strategy is a force multiplier for mission success. To this end, talent strategies will directly drive effective mission execution and attract prospective talent. Additionally, a talent management strategy enhances an organization's effectiveness, relevance, and resiliency.



Establish a Strong Business Case

Business leaders argue that a talent management strategy should be driven by a business case that describes why the strategy is critical to the success of their organization. Specifically, national security leaders should understand how the effectiveness, relevance, and resiliency of their organization improves with such a strategy. To develop and deploy a business case, leaders must first answer how a talent management strategy will:

- 1 Improve the organization's mission execution;
- 2 Develop/maintain the organization's edge over public and private sector peers providing similar services; and
- 3 Create resiliency and adaptability to manage opportunities and challenges of tomorrow.

For example, leaders in the Intelligence Community (IC) recognize the competitive nature of the skills and expertise they need to provide world-class intelligence. The quality and relevancy of provided intelligence depends on recruiting and retaining people excelling in specific skillsets. They must assess future threat landscapes, demographic shifts, and talent needs to ensure they are capable of tackling tomorrow's challenges. In meeting these challenges, leaders would create tangible value for the organization's "bottom line."



Create a Baseline, Establish Goals, and Develop Roadmaps & Milestones

Leaders must be able to describe the gaps in their approach to managing talent. Leaders should first define the current “as is” state and describe the desired end state. To effectively understand the “as is” state, an organization should initiate a stakeholder input process collecting information on current workplace culture and comparing this to analogous peer organization data. Analyzing data assists leaders in uncovering root causes, developing recommendations for areas of focus and action, and prioritizing scarce resources. Elements of a stakeholder input process include:

Pulsing the workforce and gathering testimonials to identify trends. Aim to collect information on why people chose the organization as a place to work, what existing programs work well, areas for improvement, etc. Data may be collected through various platforms, including anonymous employee surveys, focus groups, town hall meetings, and feedback periods for staff to submit comments to top leaders.

Utilizing data points from workforce testimonials to form a metrics baseline. Metrics and data inform leaders about organizational culture and magnify issues of importance to the workforce. Leaders should compare these metrics to peer organizations to benchmark their current state, develop a definition of success, and identify gaps.

Creating a steering committee to shape and implement a talent management strategy. Steering committee makeup should represent the organization’s desired end state. Enlisting a diverse group of individuals allows accounting for all ages, job levels, backgrounds, etc., in the talent management strategy. The steering committee will assist top leaders and implementers in defining success and keeping track of progress if/as goals are met. The steering committee will also be beneficial as a vehicle for testing ideas, presenting proposals and best practices, and showcasing champions and successful initiatives.

Tailor Recruitment and Retention to Talent Needs

Recruiting and retaining a skilled, diverse workforce is a central element of a successful talent management strategy. Attracting top talent and keeping them long-term contributes to organizational effectiveness, reducing costs, and boosting morale. Business leaders recommend the following tools for effective recruiting and retaining for national security organizations:

Recruitment Tools

- Examine the organization’s ‘successful’ people and their experiences and qualities to identify desired attributes, characteristics, and behaviors for recruitment.
- Be mindful of diverse skillsets, experiences and backgrounds as a priority while recruiting. This will help bring employees on board with an expectation of diversity and opportunity to add to existing of experience, expertise, and perspectives.
- Strategically target college/university students with desired skill sets and backgrounds, such as science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), to attract a specified talent pool for the mission.

- Consider positioning jobs around specific company geographic hubs. Eliminating the social and financial costs of moving potentially allows for streamlined movement between private and public sector jobs.
 - For example, the establishment of Army Futures Command in Austin, TX, allows software specialists to remain in an attractive city for young tech talent to transition from the military/defense sector to the civilian sector.
- Ensure the new hire on-boarding processes create an immediate sense of belonging. On-boarding provides ripe opportunity for organizational acculturation, investment and inclusiveness.

Retention Tools

- Convey the talent management strategy to current employees, especially managers, to facilitate star performer buy-in and retention, and to motivate change by those who might sit on the fence. Such “re-recruitment” underscores the organization’s mission, each employee’s role in its execution, and strategy updates germane to employee recognition programs.
- Leverage predictive analytic tools to help leaders better understand successful retention incentives and to identify potentially successful employees. Analyzing inflection points where retention begins to deteriorate allows leaders to address issues “left” of the inflection point.
- Demonstrate appreciation and reward high performers. Organizations should define and identify specific performance objectives, create measurements for those objectives, then fairly evaluate and potentially reward those exceeding expectations. Clearly defined and published quantifiable goals increases transparency, reduces the perception of favoritism while motivating, and improves output and production.
- Adopt private sector approaches improving work-life balance and retention, such as “9/80 schedules.” Under this approach, employees work eight 9-hour days, one 8-hour day, and gain one extra day off for time with family, travel, etc.
- Explore providing scholarships or loan forgiveness programs in exchange for “x” amount of years working to secure a highly-skilled pipeline of new talent. Industry leaders must market these programs as internally motivating incentives tied to organization commitment, and not as an exit strategy.
- Identify top-performers with a high potential of leaving for targeted retention efforts. Conduct surveys and professionalize exit interviews to understand why employees stay and leave. Consider choices leading to outcomes and determine the rational, financial, and emotional reasons for decisions contributing to retention success.

Examine and Appropriately Adjust Promotion Processes

Promotion boards should be structured as transparently as possible. Business leaders recognize conscious and unconscious bias contributes to promotion decisions for candidates, and cost organizations to lose skilled people or contribute to professional stagnation. Building awareness and consideration of how best to eliminate or mitigate such bias can help an organization better ensure the talent critical to carrying out their mission.

For example, organizations' promotion/review boards should ensure their interviewees reflect broad diversity demographics, and that boards consider for promotion candidates reflecting the organization's mission, business plan, and objectives. Board sessions and outcomes should be regularly examined to ensure fairness in conduct while identifying candidates with the highest potential for success.

Organizations also should ensure there is a two-way feedback mechanism for individuals not selected for promotion. Leaders should create a plan to help those candidates who are not promoted, so they have opportunities for success on a second round.

- In some private sector companies a C-Suite executive receives a monthly briefing from their direct report for any senior-level individuals who were up for, and did not receive, a promotion during that period. These briefings include: reason(s) the person was not ready for promotion and steps to take to determine if that person might be ready for promotion in the next cycle. Leaders should externally report to the workforce related trends to create accountability and transparency around the process.

Encourage Mentorship, Coaching, and Professional Development Opportunities

A successful talent management strategy must encourage mentorships, coaching, and professional development opportunities at all levels. These tools will help an organization drive and promote high performance and develop leaders who have a stake in their employees' success.

Senior leaders should actively model the importance of coaching and mentoring with direct participation and should receive training themselves in how to do so. Leaders should consider:

- Group and one-on-one mentorship programs matching skills and aspirations
- Gap mentoring individuals several levels of seniority away within the organization.
- Targeting diverse top performers for mentorship and development.
- Setting up networking groups (e.g. based around childcare, housing, financial literacy, other practice areas) bringing people together and foster a supportive environment.
- Facilitating increased leadership understanding of workforce dynamics through experiential opportunities.
 - In one private sector example, senior male business executives were invited to sit with female colleagues where they were placed in situations they would find atypical but were common for the women leaders, followed by discussion. This provided a different vantage point to start the conversation.

Managers have a responsibility to ensure employees are receiving the support needed to advance in their careers, through:

Acting as “people developers” to better create an environment where all employees feel equal ability for career advancement.

Providing timely, constructive feedback and mentorship to staff. Managers should receive specialized training on the importance of their decision-making and how it can affect an employee’s career and perception of the organization.

Receiving training on and embodying clearly articulated inclusive leadership behaviors. These behaviors should align with the culture and mission of the organizations and be an integral piece of management evaluation.

Employees should feel there are multiple avenues available to “own” their career. Organizations should ensure employees utilize:

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), employee-led networks to support staff with similar areas of focus, skill sets, and backgrounds. ERGs promote inclusion and camaraderie, and serve as a forum for open dialogue on professional development or workplace challenges.

Peer-to-peer mentorship in workforce “community” groups/clubs to provide tools to empower professional advancement, including training on skills gaps and networking.

Professional development programs teaching approaches to effective leadership within and across organizations, high-level decision making, or negotiation. Leaders may wish to explore specialized certificate development programs offered by universities to the national security community, or training opportunities with industry partners.

Employ Innovative Strategic Communication Approaches

To effectively build support for sustainable change, leaders must field a strategic communications campaign when rolling out the framing principles of a talent management strategy, and its corresponding business case. The message surrounding the roll-out should include both the rational case for change – how it will improve an organization’s ability to achieve its business goals – and the emotional case for change – how it will improve employees’ daily work lives.

Recommendations for crafting a message include:

Make a transparent case for encouraging change: Transparency places pressure on leaders to execute, which can lead to greater success since leadership is held accountable if the workforce is invested.

Develop a unifying message: The case for change should appeal to all levels of the organization. Developing a unifying message will create buy-in rather than resistance.

Relay permanence with messaging: Sustained change requires repetitive communication and engagement through the roll-out and continues after major elements of the plan are in place. The more channels of communication employed, the more effective they are.

Tell stories to convey the business case: Organizations can move fence-sitters and win over some resistors by highlighting narratives demonstrating how and why particular workforce efforts drive their success and the success of the organization. The story should emphasize the organization's recruitment, retention, and promotion changes are happening because they directly support the business plan, strategy and goals. Employees who commit to working toward the success and goals of a program should be recognized and rewarded.

Involve Every Layer of the Organization and Identify “Champions”

The development and roll out of a talent management strategy should foster and reinforce organization-wide commitment to change. However, developing a strategy motivating all levels of an organization to participate and adopt this change can be a challenge. In the private sector, successful approaches to engaging the entire organization have involved particular roles and responsibilities at different leadership levels, such as:

Principal (Secretary, Director, etc.): The head of an organization should spearhead change and promulgate a message reflecting the “to be” vision. Leaders must be clear that the change they are implementing is a top priority.

Maintain consistency of the leader's voice, message, and actions to show employees that change is taken seriously at the top.

Tour facilities to articulate priorities and generate buy-in for their initiatives. Proxies are insufficient substitutes for leaders' voices.

Create an outside “Leadership Council” that advises on working toward the business case. The Council could include successful outside operators from the public or private sectors.

Dedicate time to participating in Employee Resource Groups to signal that leadership is invested in their respective missions and their work is valued.

Develop and use a performance indicator dashboard, or “cockpit chart,” outlining specific drivers and outcomes that help illustrate the “story” behind how certain metrics drive desired changes.

Senior Leaders: Senior leaders should reinforce the principal's vision.

Work with managers and other key stakeholders to prioritize and sequence short- and long-term goals. Regular communication (recurring phone calls, in-person meetings) between leadership and management keeps all levels of leadership accountable for carrying out workforce goals.

Commit to opening opportunities to all, regardless of gender or background, to dictate perception of how the organization values its workforce and wants to prepare those with the highest potential. This requires deliberate decision-making on who leads discussions, who is at the table, and who has access to top assignments.

Managers: Managers wield significant power and have tremendous potential impact due to the large percentage of the workforce with which they interact.

Evaluate manager performance with key metrics to directly transform managers' approaches to talent management-related responsibilities by signaling that the changes are both durable and critical to professional success. 360-degree feedback systems with employees will also provide constructive feedback and improve accountability.

Provide management short-term incentives rewarding them for implementing the vision effectively by leveraging incentives such as bonuses and time off.

Coalition of the Willing: Establish a "coalition of the willing" among the workforce ensuring bottom-up support to foster leadership buy-in.

Feed that network with data and resources to achieve results, such as documents, surveys, insights, media, and engagements. These tools facilitate bottom up feedback and idea generation.

Establish lines of communication with leadership through focus groups, town halls, etc. to ensure the workforce's voices are heard. Implementing workers' feedback can capture sustainable workforce support when leaders act on their suggestions for improvement, or address reasons why they do not. These communication efforts can also facilitate socializing the talent management strategy.

Champions: These "informal" influencers are likely early adopters and proponents of change and have professional connections, responsibilities, and/or experience across an organization. They are not motivated by direct compensation or structural benefits. Leaders should identify these employees and find opportunities to involve them in the beginning. Appropriately reward these champions with suitable incentives.

There are three distinct kinds of influencers:³

1

Pride builders: Employees who motivate their colleagues to take pride in their work. These individuals boost overall morale through their influence.

2

Trusted nodes: Often referred to as "go-to" people. They engender trust among their colleagues due to their willingness to autonomously complete tasks and for their comprehensive organizational knowledge, and not necessarily because of their title or pay band.

3

Change ambassadors: Live the change and will help influence the "fence-sitters" and force the "resistors" to either get on board or leave. They communicate and amplify messages, including why change is necessary.

Assess, Adapt, and Make Adjustments as Necessary

Progress toward implementing talent management milestones and goals should be continuously measured and reviewed. Leaders and managers who take the time to find out what is working and what is not, and adjust next steps accordingly based on lessons learned ensure a greater chance of success. Further, top talent seek out organizations with a reputation for agility and who reward performance, so adjusting an approach to talent management, where appropriate, will boost the quality of the workforce in the long run.

Leaders should consider the following key elements in assessing and adapting:

- Commit for the long term. The entire workforce must be convinced a talent management strategy is not simply a “flavor of the month.”
- Anticipate and communicate they won’t get everything right, and will endeavor to do so. Opportunities for improving the talent management strategy will be accommodated.
- Conduct a midterm review or adjustment process that leverages data to benchmark and review progress against identified goals, aligns program resources, and adapts to necessary changes.
- Showcase transparency through appropriate metrics, asking for input from the workforce and engaging them in frank discussions.
- Failure to follow through deprives an organization of the information about how to address particular issues associated with a program and therefore ultimately limits an organization’s ability to achieve its critical mission, and could contribute to workforce apathy.

Conclusion

Increasing strategic rivalry between the United States and near-peer competitors has become a central national security challenge. People – both military and civilian – are at the core of this challenge, requiring national security agencies to develop effective talent management strategies to maintain U.S. competitive advantage.

In this guide, we focus on best practices to recruit, develop, and retain top talent through development of a talent management strategy. By adopting these approaches, national security leaders can maximize opportunities to attract the most qualified individuals our country has to offer to fill national security positions of trust. The challenges our country faces deserve no less.

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End Notes

- ¹ “NGA Director Says AI, Modernization Among Key Policy Pillars” MeriTalk. June 3, 2019. <https://www.meritalk.com/articles/nga-director-says-ai-modernization-among-key-policy-pillars/>
- ² The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) prioritizes “rebuilding military readiness as we build a more lethal Joint Force” as one of three lines of effort to counter great power competitors. Cultivating this force requires the national security community develop a workforce prepared to tackle complex and emerging challenges. The other two priority lines of effort are “strengthening alliances as we attract new partners,” and “reforming the Department’s business practices for greater performance and affordability.” Available at: <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>
- ³ Deanne Aguire and Micah Alpren, “10 Principles of Leading Change Management,” *Strategy and Business*, Summer 2014, Issue 75, <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/00255?gko=6c601>, pg. 5-6.



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