CG Column
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What a difference just a few years can make. Today, we can use handheld devices that link many services and information. With a small cell phone, a person can access a bank account, send a message, get the weather forecast, and make dinner reservations around the corner or airline reservations around the globe. Similar hand-held devices can also help navigate to remote locations, identify friendly or enemy forces, "sniff" out explosive material, or countless other tasks. The increased technological reach creates incredible opportunities and with it individual power. But, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt mentioned in his State of the Union address, January 6, 1945, "in a democratic world, as in a democratic Nation, power must be linked with responsibility."

What does this mean in a broader sense?

It means increased access to information requires increased individual responsibility. It also means addressing a change in culture about controlling or sharing information. We are very good at controlling information, but there is a dichotomy between "need to know" and "need to control." "Need to know" is the bedrock of Operational Security and assists in protecting assets by limiting the number of people who have access to sensitive information. "Need to control" is often about well-meaning protectors, but sometimes it's about protecting turf. One is about security, the other is about agenda.

Giving up control in a hierarchal organization is problematic. When Marine Corps General James Cartwright became the commander of U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) in 2004, he saw a Cold War organization operating in a 21st century environment. He flattened part of the hierarchy by creating the Joint Functional Component Commands. He then enabled the flattened hierarchy by creating a secure electronic community called SkiWeb. The JFCCs provided USSTRATCOM the ability to address issues such as weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missile defense, cyber warfare and others. SkiWeb provided a secure environment where information could be shared and those with an answer to a problem could respond by blogging. In both cases, General Cartwright was giving up some of his control (not his responsibility) in order to share information and shorten the "flash-to-bang" time between analysis and execution. He was empowering the entire organization.

Leaving the comfort of a hierarchical structure is a challenge. Communication is easier in a stovepipe organization – it's delivered in one direction, and usually to one level. Normally, the only empowerment in a hierarchical organization is the ability to say "no." In a typical monolithic organization, the checkout clerk at the grocery store can say no, but if you challenge the answer the next voice you hear is the metallic: "customer assistance needed at checkout."

While USSTRATCOM was able to flatten the hierarchy with the JFCCs and enable information sharing with SkiWeb, those are structural changes. The real change begins when all members of a team feel empowered to contribute to the mission. Empowering starts with trust and is fueled by competent and confident members of a team who understand the overall goals of an organization. More importantly, change takes hold when people can see that honest mistakes can be underwritten.

To loosen control and share information requires a level of trust to do the right things, and to do things right. In his book, "The World is Flat," Thomas Friedman states that the "flat-world platform" empowers individuals "to go global easily." With this capability to reach out globally, there is a need for organizations to trust individuals and for individuals to understand the consequences of their actions on the global information grid. These are not easy changes. There is a certain comfort in being anonymous inside an organization. But, as many are finding out, there is very little anonymity in a flattened technological world. Prospective employers and colleges scan the web for information about individuals while potential adversaries scan the web for information about organizations.

Culture-change is a long term effort and requires organizations, to include our own, to think outside the box and probably outside their comfort zone. It also requires individuals to take an active role in helping create new, efficient, 21st century organizations able to manage information at "the speed of thought," as Bill Gates would say.

No one said it would be easy. I am confident we will rise to the challenge as we learn to operate in this new reality.

SECURE THE HIGH GROUND!