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Management shortcomings seen at NSA

Report identifies a culture of distrust, failures of oversight

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Spokespeople for the House and Senate intelligence committees said lawmakers on those panels have not been informed of the conclusions of the report and had no immediate comment.

The 28-page classified report, initially intended only for top NSA managers, was completed in March and distributed to NSA employees on April 24 as part of Alexander's push to revitalize the agency. It painted a bleak picture of the intelligence agency.

"We do not trust our peers to deliver," the task force wrote. "Fragmentation has undermined corporate trust. Lack of trust is on display in NSA organizational structures [and] behaviors across the Enterprise.'

Management specialists said distrust within an organization is often difficult to overcome.

"That's alarming," said Zegart, a former management consultant. "If people in that organization don't trust either their peers, their superiors or their subordinates, nothing is going to change."

The NSA's spokeswoman said the report's conclusion about a lack of trust was a reflection of "the extraordinary work ethic and sense of personal accountability" among employees, which can make them less eager to collaborate with others in the agency. Martino added that the NSA is looking for ways to encourage

According to the report, the agency also lacks a coherent set of goals. "It's not clear what needs to be accomplished" on a year-to-year basis, it concludes. The task force recommended that the agency set priorities to provide a vision "that does not exist today."

Inability to carry out plans and hold employees and managers accountable for executing them is also a persistent problem, according to the report.

"There is no clear measurement and no accountability for execution performance," it said.

NSA leaders have evaluated the report's conclusions, Martino said, and "agree that we need to give great attention to these issues to succeed against the challenges we face."

The report also points to a lack of management expertise among the agency's top leaders, which, it concludes, has prevented earlier reforms from taking hold. The task force recommends a reorganization of the NSA's technology programs, similar to the one Alexander has announced, but repeatedly states that reorganization alone will not solve agency problems.

Making changes that go beyond bureaucratic reorganization is the key "to not having to repeat the 'study team' process once again in the relatively near future," the report concludes. However, a senior intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the NSA is largely focused on organizational changes at this point.

Martino responded by saying that reorganization was "naturally a dominant issue" for the agency now, but that the NSA is also working to improve communications about its vision, strengthen its management of programs and establish clear priorities.

And Zegart, the UCLA professor, finds some signs of hope in the report's findings.

"They get the importance of management, which is a good start," she said. "You can't fix anything you can't manage." The national spy chief's office, which oversees the NSA and the other 15 intelligence agencies, would be wise to see whether other intelligence agencies are experiencing the same management deficit, she

Ross Feinstein, a spokesman for Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, said McConnell tracks "potential management issues" through an annual workplace survey distributed to a sampling of employees

The 2006 results show that the NSA's senior managers scored slightly below average among intelligence agencies. The survey found that 43 percent of NSA employees say they are satisfied with the "policies and practices of your senior leaders," compared with a 46 percent satisfaction rate for all U.S. intelligence

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