

STRAIGHTEN UP AND FLY RIGHT: ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY AND THE FEDERAL AIR MARSHAL SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolution of the U.S. Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) since its origins in the 1960s through its dramatic restructuring in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. FAMS experienced rapid expansion, recruiting personnel from diverse backgrounds and organizations to secure the skyways. The accelerated growth resulted in an organizational structure lacking shared culture uniformity that hindered long-term effectiveness. This article examines bureaucratic and flat paradigms and their relevance to FAMS through the lenses of organizational theory.

Keywords: *bureaucratic organizational structure, flat organizational structure, Federal Air Marshal Service, organizational theory*

INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, Americans in the Northeast woke to a promising day framed by beautiful blue skies. The day began auspiciously for 19 Islamic terrorists, who boarded four U.S.-flagged commercial airliners on suicide missions that stunned the world. By day's end, thousands of lives would be lost, and two of America's most prominent landmarks would lie in ruins. In the aftermath of the attacks, Congress passed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (2001). The Act created the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and bestowed sweeping powers upon the agency to secure the nation's transportation infrastructure. The Act also transferred the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) from the Department of Transportation to TSA and codified how the organization would secure the skyways.

FAMS prioritized staffing, and by the spring of 2002, thousands of newly hired air marshals were flying missions around the world (Homeland Security Act, 2002). In the haste to field new agents, the FAMS did not develop a healthy organizational structure or a long-term strategic plan. It did not have the time to develop deeply embedded values and communal traditions necessary to build a functional corporate culture. The FAMS prepared its workforce to meet its tactical challenges in the skies, but it wavered in strategic alignment. To correctly posture FAMS for the future and ensure viability and operational effectiveness, FAMS should apply organizational theory to develop its structure and a common organizational culture.

UNCOMMON GROUND

After the 9/11 attacks, FAMS was tasked to field a large workforce. The agency recruited experienced law enforcement and military professionals nationwide. FAMS leveraged the experience of its newly hired workforce and designed and conducted abbreviated training courses (Federal Air Marshal Service [FAMS], 2012). These actions were consistent with the political and strategic priorities in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. An unintended consequence of this expedited training soon became apparent. Training and employee onboarding were haphazard, and newly hired marshals with prior law enforcement experience were exempt from various training on an ad hoc basis.

At the same time, the FAMS grew geographically from one office to over 20 field offices. Senior executives were recruited from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. They brought the bureaucratic cultures of their previous organizations. The executives were not required to go through FAMS' basic training programs. These policies came with a cost. The executives had little understanding of the operational environment in which their air marshals were working. One must grasp the landscape at the tactical level to produce a strategic vision. The rapid post-9/11 expansion of FAMS resulted in a dysfunctional leadership team and workforce, competent at the tactical level but unsure who they were or where they fit into the nascent national security landscape. Because no unifying culture was instilled within the organization, a lack of identity and common focus threatened to undermine the FAMS. Examining and applying organizational theory combined with shared corporate culture and leadership may help temper the turbulence.

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY – WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

A body of literature exists to explore and advocate various organizational structures. Structure is how an organization aligns and positions assets to achieve its objectives (Bhatt & Garge, 2023). DeSanctis and Poole (1997) found that structure guides collaboration and internal decision-making. Organizational structures are influenced by internal factors, such as expectations and goals, and external factors, including the operational environment (Bhatt & Garge, 2023). This article focuses on two commonly recognized organizational structures: bureaucratic and flat (horizontal).

Bureaucratic Structure

Bureaucratic theory, or the classical perspective, is built on Taylor's (1911/1998) *Principles of Management*, which holds that there is one correct way of doing a task. It is a hierarchical, autocratic system with top-down leadership, formal rules, regulations, policies, and job specialization. While less flexible and agile, this system is easy to implement rapidly and is designed for optimal efficiency. Organizational goals structured under bureaucratic theory include efficiency, productivity, formalization, and routine (Wright & Pandey, 2010). Similarly,

Kettl (2003) found that the bureaucratic model is founded on the division of work and can only be organized by purpose, process, persons, or places.

Flat Structure

A flat organizational structure stands in near opposition to the bureaucratic theory and is also known as a horizontal structure (Bhatt & Garge, 2023). The absence of formal structure and loose boundaries define this system. Bjørnstad and Ulleberg (2021) found that flat organizations are decentralized and characterized by high levels of flexibility. Horizontal organizations feature increased delegation and broader spans of control and are effective in dynamic environments (Bhatt & Garge, 2023).

Adaptive Management Model

A closely related concept to the systems approach is presented by Wise (2006), who suggests that an adaptive management model is the most effective for homeland security agencies. The adaptive model uses a flexible structure and functions in a learning capacity, allowing an organization to remain agile and mature appropriately. Similarly, Kapucu (2005) found that the dynamic network theory and complex adaptive systems are appropriate in dynamic situations and offer robustness, resourcefulness, redundancy, and rapidity that help organizations achieve their goals.

Organizational Resilience

Dalgaard-Nielsen (2017) put forth the concept of *organizational resilience*, also known as resilient leadership, which examines an organization's ability to rapidly adjust to evolving and dynamic environmental conditions and smoothly return to equilibrium. Everly et al. (2010) defined *resilient leadership* as qualities that motivate and inspire others during a crisis. Resilience is necessary for national security agencies as they operate in unpredictable and challenging environments and because they must prepare for all contingencies (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2017). National security agencies operate in challenging environments where they must prepare for all contingencies and are often reactive to unanticipated events. In this context, resilience and horizontal structure can best prepare a homeland security organization for its mission. Building a solid organizational structure is the first step toward success but will only contribute so much. Although often overlooked as nonessential, culture is vital to an organization's success and is informed by organizational structure.

CULTURE COUNTS

Culture is a set of shared attitudes, values, and practices that characterize an organization, group of people, or profession (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is in the traditions and norms of an organization where individual employees find common ground and a sense of purpose and belonging. Culture, more so than written mission or vision statements, can bring a workforce together as a team focused on a singular outcome. From organizational culture, all employees find inner guidance and reassurance. Permeating throughout an entire organization, a deeply rooted culture can help its members know which direction to go in during periods of adversity.

FAMS has faced instances where individual employees or managers have strayed from the parameters of acceptable behavior (*Federal Air Marshall Service*, 2016). According to the DHS Office of Inspector General (2017), 3,000 reportable incidents occurred in fiscal years 2014–2016, including failure to follow policy, refusal to honor debt, and using offensive language toward internal or external personnel. In 2015, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform examined allegations that FAMS personnel engaged in the manipulation of mission schedules for personal benefit, that personnel hired prostitutes, that a former director used his position to acquire weapons for the personal use of several FAMS officials, and that alcohol abuse was a significant problem within the ranks of the organization (*Federal Air Marshall Service*, 2016). Additionally, the Government Accountability Office (2020) found that FAMS had not fully implemented plans to address discrimination within the organization. A common remedy to address behavior issues is applying appropriate training and discipline. This approach, however, treats the symptoms of a larger problem rather than its more deeply rooted causes. Many of these issues are not due to rogue employees but to the lack of an organizational moral compass that would be created by the existence of a healthy culture informed by organizational theory. FAMS will never be entirely successful at implementing its business strategy until its organizational structure and culture align with its strategic goals.

ALL IS NOT LOST

Though today's FAMS looks very different from its pre-9/11 ancestor, there is much to be proud of in its history. In 1961, Congress amended the Federal Aviation Act of 1958. Following a rash of hijackings, the first class of sky marshals was deputized and took to the skies to protect the airspace (Krauss, 2022). Like today's FAMS, those agents answered their nation's call for service and completed a rigorous training regimen. Since that first class, federal air marshals have been held to the highest marksmanship standards in federal law enforcement, have developed a reputation as competent tacticians, and have been on watch patrolling the world's skies (Government Accountability Office, 2016). FAMS can be successful by building upon this history as the first step toward institutionalizing core values, pride, and culture. This requires proactive leadership.

IT STARTS AT THE TOP

Leadership is the core element of organizational theory and culture. It begins at the top. Brazer et al. (2014) found that organizational theory informs leadership style. Similarly, James (2011) concluded that senior leaders are responsible for articulating organizational vision and direction. Historically, FAMS directors have launched their version of organization and culture. Each of these efforts focused on changing the behavior of the frontline workforce, has not been strategically aligned to organizational structure and culture, and has failed to target the agency's executive leadership. Leaders throughout the organization must realize that if they do not grab hold of the culture of the FAMS, an unhealthy informal culture will deepen and take hold of the organization. Leaders must manage the culture or be managed by it. To effect positive structural and cultural transformation, change must be driven and sustained from the director, through headquarters leadership, to field office leadership, and finally to empower employees. Leaders must embrace the new structures and cultural norms and live them daily. In doing so, they will set an example to their subordinates that this new design is the way forward. Leading by example includes leaders holding themselves accountable to the same standards of behavior and performance that the culture requires of its employees.

CONCLUSION

FAMS' post-9/11 expansion includes challenges, opportunities, failures, and successes. The hurried growth of the organization, necessary to face the evolving terrorist threat of the time, resulted in an organization that lacked cohesive structure and a unified culture. An objective review of the existing theories dictates that the organization must shift from a bureaucratic organization to an organization built upon a more flexible contingency or open system theory framework. FAMS leadership should leverage the tenets of organizational theory to develop an optimal operational structure that promotes a positive workforce capable of securing the nation's aviation sector.

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