

[Intro]

In this episode we are going to talk about the benefits and challenges of measuring mission impact within national security agencies. Specifically, why it is important, what challenges arise while attempting to measure impact, and best practices and tips for successfully measuring and communicating impact. As you will hear we hosted a live discussion at the American University on this topic where leaders from TSA, CIA, GAO and State Department engaged with the audience on these topics. Following the discussion, I had the opportunity to sit down with the panelists and the content from those discussions is captured here.

To kick off the conversation we hear from Patty Cogswell, Acting Deputy Administrator for TSA...

Patty Cogswell [00:00:09.15] PATTY COGSWELL: I am Patty Cogswell, I am the deputy administrator of the Transportation Security Administration.

[00:00:13.63] INTERVIEWER: Awesome, thank you so much for being with us. It was tremendous to have you on the panel today. Just to start off with, I was hoping you could talk just a little bit more about why you really think it's so important to measure mission impact. Specifically, on the panel we've talked about outcomes versus activities, can you talk a little bit from your perspective about why that's so critical.

[00:00:33.30] PATTY COGSWELL: So all of us are charged with very important missions to accomplish. You do a lot of activities thinking that's going to add up to achieving the overall goal. If you aren't measuring whether or not you're achieving the goal, you can work very, very hard but still not reach it.

*INSERT Sasha:* Absolutely – that is so true. Let's turn to Geoff Fowler, Chief Accountability Officer at the CIA. Geoff, do you have any thoughts on measuring mission impact?

(Geoff from panel) [00:51:21.23] So what you actually have to do when you measure, is measure not just activities. Activity measures are important. But you can't get caught in the trick box of only measuring activities. You really have to find measures associated with the outcomes. And if you're really good at it, you're measuring both activities and outcomes, OK. And so you can actually then say, this activity is in fact leading to this outcome, or if this activity isn't leading to this outcome, then you stop doing the activity, or you draw it back or whatnot.

*INSERT Sasha:* Yes, absolutely. We also have Mike Smith, Director of the Office of Global Programs and Initiatives in the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs in the Department of State with us. Mike, I'm interested in hearing your perspective on why this is so important?

Mike Smith [00:00:48.99] MICHAEL SMITH: Well, I think it's essential for us, because we really do need evidence-based decision making in order to convey our efficiency and effectiveness to people who appropriate us money, whether it's OMB that's involved in the process, the Office of Management and Budget, the different appropriations committees on the Hill. They need to be able to understand the impact of the American taxpayers' dollars on what we're trying to achieve.

*INSERT Sasha:* Geoff, let me turn back to you for a moment. When we are talking about measuring outcomes, can you talk to us a bit about what that means? What are the types of things you can measure?

(Geoff from panel) [00:37:44.64] ~~And the types of things that you can measure are what?~~ You can measure your current state. You can identify a future state that you want to achieve. You can identify-- sort of the qualities or elements of that state. You can do a delta sort of analysis between your current state and your future state. You can identify the types of things that you want to accomplish and measure your success. You can certainly do relative to cost, time.

*INSERT Sasha:* Mike, you talked a bit during the panel about assessing all the activities you had going on to determine whether you were measuring things that mattered. Do have anything to add here?

(Mike from panel) [00:42:16.25] We also took a look at aligning-- determine how our programs align with national security goals and objectives. That was probably the most fruitful part of what we did, because the officers within our bureau were then able to see the things that they've been doing, in some cases for decades. They actually saw the correlation between those activities and our national security and foreign policy goals and objectives.

*INSERT Sasha:* Great, thanks. And was there a time in which you had to change your trajectory based on measures and how they aligned to your strategic priorities?

(Mike from panel) [01:17:23.71] ~~But foreign policy and national security are more dynamic than that.~~ So the things that we started out to measure, aren't the things that were necessary measures right now. We had to be sort of adaptable and agile to, you know, the current environment. There were certain countries that we're trying to counter certain types of their activities. And so we have to kind of audible, based on what they're doing, and figure out what to measure to sort of track that.

*INSERT Sasha:* Makes sense. It must be challenging at times to know whether you are on the right track. Patty, any thoughts on that?

[00:01:01.56] PATTY COGSWELL: You are absolutely correct, it is very challenging. Number one challenge from my perspective is you need to be willing every so often to relook at everything you thought was 100% correct and say, do I have the right underlying data? Am I reaching the outcome I wanted? Is there another assumption I had made that is no longer holds or is no longer correct? Does the funding stream I was relying on still present, still viable? And then say, I may need to completely reapproach this problem.

*INSERT Sasha:* Patty, any final thoughts on this idea of why measuring outcomes is so important?

(Patty from panel) [00:47:16.90] The last piece I really want to highlight out of this is understanding what problem you're trying to solve, and then, do the metrics actually help you make decisions as to whether or not you're actually solving it? You can have fantastic measures, and be having really good numbers, and then you have to look and say, am I having the impact I wanted to make?

(Patty from panel) [00:48:07.87] You need to understand, what does it mean in this context? What do I think is this likely strategy to solve the problem, and then how do I align the metrics, which incentivize behavior to solve an overall problem?

*INSERT Sasha:* Well said. I'd like to switch gears a bit. Mike, you mentioned earlier the need to convey your efficiency and effectiveness, to have people understand the impact of what you are trying to achieve. Are there challenges you face in doing that? How do you overcome those challenges?

[00:01:21.99] MICHAEL SMITH: The biggest thing, I think, that we have to do in terms of challenges is managing expectations, because we have a combination, essentially, of quantitative data and qualitative data. And neither one of them by itself or even together can lead to actual causation or cause and effect.

[00:01:39.40] So what we have to do is manage expectations and be able to present to different audiences a plausible correlation to explain the impact that we're having on a given activity.

*INSERT Sasha:* Understood. Geoff, anything to add on this idea of conveying effectiveness?

(Geoff from panel) [01:11:40.65] JEFF FOWLER: ~~I'm just trying to think of a good example. Actually a fairly tactical example.~~ In metrics, and sort of what you measure, often if you are the one who can come to the table with a well informed argument with effective measures that will allow you to buttress that argument, you will win the day.

Sasha O'Connell [00:02:21.72] INTERVIEWER 1: Absolutely. Hearing you speak, it reminds me of storytelling-- that it's a narrative that you're trying to explain and use qualitative and quantitative measures to kind of get there. Does that make sense?

[00:02:30.35] GEOFF FOWLER: Yeah. No. It absolutely makes sense. And I love the reference to storytelling too, because another analogy, of course. But stories, they have beginnings, middle, ends. They are a journey that you're taking a reader through.

[00:02:41.90] The business of strategy, and then ultimately, the business of measurement [INAUDIBLE], it really is effectively telling your story-- how you stay on the narrative, if you will.

*INSERT Sasha:* Patty, do you have any thoughts for us on the topic of storytelling?

[00:02:40.20] PATTY COGSWELL: So I think the number one piece is the importance of retaining that overall interest in learning and looking at where you are going and why it's important to do what you're doing. If you can't tell a story, if you can't look at your metrics and say how does this tell me about the health of my organization, what I'm investing in, what I need to do next if I just have one more dollar, it's time to think again.

*INSERT Sasha:* Thank you. I want to turn now to Nancy Kingsbury, Managing Director for Applied Research and Methods at GAO and a faculty member at the Key Executive Program at American University. Nancy, do you have any suggestions related to the topic of telling your story?

Nancy Kingsbury [00:02:21.24] NANCY KINGSBURY: Being flexible. One of the things, and I talked during the panel about the shift to the social media world, and how you get your message out, and how you deal with stuff, which personally, is quite foreign to me. But I have become convinced, partly because I see the impact of it in the public sphere, that it is a very useful way of communicating our message, not only to the Congress, but to the public. And if we don't get it to the public and the press, it won't get to Congress either, because they won't pay attention.

*INSERT Sasha:* Exactly. So we've talked a lot about challenges – challenges in determining what to measure, how to tell whether you are on the right track, how to tell your story. I'd like to ask you, Patty, whether you have any tips on how to navigate these challenges?

[00:01:38.85] PATTY COGSWELL: So number one is having leaders and decision makers who care about this and understand the importance. One of the topics that we had on the panel was how do I recruit people with this type of skill set. My perspective is everybody should have at least some of this skill set. Know how to use it, know why it's important, know why this is part and parcel of advocating for your program, for your activity, for your agency. So if you don't have those people who know it, understand it, use it, you don't build the true methodology and culture that goes along with it.

*INSERT Sasha:* Absolutely. Finding people with those critical skills is so important. Nancy, anything to add to this?

[00:03:07.56] NANCY KINGSBURY: Inside GAO, one of the things that I think we haven't talked very much about today is the importance of being open to talking with the staff who are actually doing the work to get their ideas. I'm in the process right now of a round of meetings with the staff in my team who work with another particular team.

[00:03:27.63] And I'm doing it for each of the other particular teams, because I want to get a feel for what the culture is in that team, how we can be more effective with that team, and so forth. And it's proving to be-- it's time consuming, but it's proving to be very helpful, because they're on the ground actually having the arguments with whether you're going to publish the confidence intervals or not.

*INSERT Sasha:* Thank you. This has been a really enlightening discussion. Before we wrap up, I'd like to as you, Geoff, whether you have any best practices or tips that you'd like to share with our audience?

Geoff Fowler [00:00:48.67] JEFF BALLARD: Yeah. So a couple of things come to mind. So first, most people want to measure whether you hit the target, if you will, right? And that's important. And if you can get that measure, that's great. But sometimes, that sort of measure is elusive. But that doesn't mean you

can't measure, right? And so other things that you can measure, or what I'd refer to as the trueness of your trajectory-- so what objectives do you have in terms of the actual execution of your mission?

[00:01:20.01] Because in truth, the target, if you will, is often receding, just like the horizon on a journey. Often, it recedes. So you have to measure the trueness of your trajectory in order to ensure that you are making the journey effectively, if you will.

[00:01:38.08] The other is-- and I suppose I should just refer to what I just said-- is the importance of analogy. Right? A lot of times, I have found over the years that folks find it difficult to determine what are the specific questions that the answers to which would inform their thinking with respect to a particular outcome and whether they want to make a decision one way or the other?

*INSERT Sasha:* Perfect, thank you so much. Mike, over to you. Any final words for our audience?

[00:02:01.62] MICHAEL SMITH: I would say definitely, really two things-- to take the long view. Look at your metrics over time, and make sure they're doing what you want, making sure they're relevant to sort of the situation that you face.

[00:02:16.11] And the second thing would be to-- its' better-- the more that you can inculcate a culture of metrics and evaluation, of data gathering throughout your organization, where everybody is involved and has a stake in it, I think the more effective you'll be.

*INSERT Sasha:* Excellent closing thoughts, thanks Mike. And on that note, I'd like to thank all our panelists for taking the time to talk with us today, and to share their thoughts and insights into this critical topic of measuring mission impact.

[Outro]