POWERFUL LEADERS EMPOWER OTHERS

Twelve Lessons Learned from a Fireside Chat with Colonel Bobby Saxon, Ret. U.S. Army

Authored By:
Drew Spaniel, Lead Researcher, ICIT

Contributors:
Colonel (ret.) Bobby Saxon, Deputy CIO, Office of Information Technology, Centers for Medicare Medicaid Services (CMS)
Scott Sloan, Senior Director of Pre-Sales Engineering, Veritas

ICIT Institute for Critical Infrastructure Technology
The Cybersecurity Think Tank

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At the ICIT 2020 Virtual Fall briefing: A Secure Roadmap for the Future, Scott Sloan, the Veritas Senior Director of Pre-Sales Engineering, interviewed Colonel Bobby Saxon, Ret. who is the Deputy CIO at the Office of Information Technology Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). They talked about how leaders can recover from crises, learn valuable lessons, build resilient frameworks, foster unity, and help their organization become more proactive. These are the twelve key takeaways from their conversation:

1. Identify Qualified Personnel and Ask Them What They Need

Colonel Saxon began by explaining his experience in improving the performance and stability of the HealthCare.gov marketplace. Prior to Col. Saxon's appointment as CMS' CTO in January 2017, healthcare.gov had a challenging reputation due to its tumultuous launch in October 2013. Col. Saxon identified the qualified people on his teams and opened dialogues with them to learn what challenges they were facing and how he could empower them. In short, he fostered a culture where his team could vigorously and proactively detect and solve problems, ensuring they were remediated by the 2017 open enrollment period.

2. Culture Change Is Necessary

Senior leaders need to be comfortable heading strategic efforts to improve organizational cybersecurity, risk management, incident response, and remediation. When Col. Saxon was appointed to manage a team to secure healthcare.gov, he knew he would have to persuade the team to become comfortable with cybersecurity best practices. Although his team was still shell-shocked by the initial launch of healthcare.gov, he needed them to consider modern options like cloud migration. His solution was to remain calm and display confidence and fearlessness while gradually increasing people's comfort with the solution.

3. Large Problems Are Less Daunting When Divided into Smaller Tasks

Instead of directing his team's attention solely to the necessary technological, cultural, and organizational shifts, Col. Saxon found it more efficient and beneficial to separate the transition into short-term and long-term problems for his team to focus on and tackle according to their strengths. After all, migrating to the cloud takes time, and they had more immediate challenges to overcome in their data centers. He explained, "[It] was really about empowering people to take their skill set and do great things. I like to think of myself as a great leader; however, I was fortunate to walk into a place where there were a lot of people there that were really easy to lead because they had skillsets that were extremely valuable and an asset to the organization."

4. Lead through Empowerment

While migrating to the cloud ultimately took around sixteen months, by empowering his team to play to their strengths, CMS reduced their performance, stability, and throttling issues to nearly no challenges per open enrollment period. They achieved around 1,100 hours of scheduled uptime with less than an hour and a half of unscheduled downtime. Col. Saxon opines, "That didn't happen because of a move to the cloud. It happened because really good people started doing really good things with a long-term approach to solving problems."

5. Think Forward

No one could have predicted the impact of COVID-19. Due to their forward-thinking strategy, CMS's migration to the cloud became an invaluable asset in 2020 because the pandemic significantly increased the traffic to the healthcare.gov marketplace. Without the migration to the cloud, expanding the number of servers and other systems to adjust for the 2020 demand would have been resource-intensive and difficult, especially with some staff remotely working themselves. Instead, their flexible cloud strategy enabled them to scale on demand. This can serve as a model for other government agencies.

6. Openly Collaborate with Stakeholders

Since many organizations tout the benefits of migrating to the cloud without discussing the associated growing pains during the transition period, Sloan asked Col. Saxon if there were any unforeseen challenges during the migration. Surprisingly, Col. Saxon responded that they did not encounter any significant issues. He chalked this up to a diverse vendor team who worked with them as partners rather than contractors. The decision was a boon, as the vendor partner team had significant cloud migration experience within their organizations. They were able to bring the necessary skills and talents, sharing their expertise with the CMS team. The exchange of information helped train the team and improved the customer experience at healthcare.gov.

7. Foster a Culture of Education and Growth

For their migration, the team and their collaborators were encouraged to acquire any necessary skills. Perhaps more importantly, they received support from leadership to do so. Col. Saxon recounts:

> "One experience that I remember on a very personal level occurred in the operation center during open enrollment. This was the year before we were rolling too, but everyone knew we were now on the move to the cloud. And as you know, operations

> centers can be very slow sometimes, so one of my vendor partner team members was sitting there doing some online classes for AWS because that's where we moved most all of our stuff. I got into a small conversation with this person was he was just so excited and so proud of the fact that he was being given the opportunity to grow his skill set in that area and excited about how to utilize it to help transform healthcare.gov and us as an organization. And I saw a lot of that. It was to his credit, to his company's credit, and really, to our team's credit that they took that kind of a collegial kind of approach to 'let's share, let's educate, let's be better, and let's make this organization, the kind of organization that ought to be able to serve the American public."

In short, by fostering a public-private partnership, learning from each other, and providing additional opportunities to learn and grow, both organizations were able to improve.

8. Compliance is Not Security

Col. Saxon also shifted the culture from compliance-focused to security-focused. He shared that, throughout his career, he has seen too many instances where organizations were compliant but not secure. When an incident occurs, compliance does not absolve the organization or protect the customer from harm. For him, one of his strengths was that he never feared the security of the cloud any more than he feared the security of his data centers. In fact, he felt that CMS was more secure in the cloud because that meant the platform was maintained by a larger company whose entire reputation was built upon their ability to securely deliver cloud capabilities. In contrast, his own data centers had too many variables to ensure security. Additionally, in alignment with a zero-trust approach, an internal metric consisting of over 400 access-acceptable risk standards was applied to all data center and cloud systems alike and was used to establish a secure perimeter and best practices.

9. Tie Security to Essential Business Functions

Around the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, Col. Saxon left his role as CTO to serve as the Acting Director for Emergency, Preparedness, and Response Operations (EPRO) within CMS. Fortunately for him, a recent Inspector General (IG) audit had uncovered some security deficiencies that necessitated immediate remediation, and senior leadership lent him their support to adopt a bold, aggressive remediation strategy. Faced with keeping mission-critical systems running and preparing personnel for a pandemic workplace, Col. Saxon began by improving the cybersecurity culture to one of proactive preparedness through additional training, internal seminars, pandemic exercises, detailed business processes, impact analyses, and the development of response plans.

10. Recognize Silver Linings

The pandemic crippled many organizations. According to Col. Saxon, surviving meant coming out the other side stronger than before the pandemic. Thus, he leveraged the pandemic as an opportunity to enhance the cyber hygiene awareness of his personnel and improve the telework capacity of CMS. As a result, CMS will have systems implemented to deal with similar future scenarios or adapt to shifting conditions.

11. Be Flexible

Col. Saxon admits that, before the pandemic, he was not a fan of telework; now, he is confident that the 6,000 people at CMS can do full-time telework and produce exceptional results. Furthermore, thanks to his change of perspective, the organization can now improve by leveraging telework to expand its talent pool. Personnel no longer need to be located on the East Coast, meaning CMS can recruit technical staff from other regions. He also permits his staff to be flexible with their schedules, provided they complete eight hours of quality work. Especially during the shutdown, those with children at home greatly benefited from flexibility in their work life.

12. Identify and Mitigate Risk

Finally, Col. Saxon stressed that while no one can eliminate all risk, it is vital to identify and mitigate as much as possible. Developing and practicing plans to respond to risks can help offset unexpected challenges and emerging threats.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Colonel (ret.) Bobby Saxon communicated that leaders could foster organizational growth, improve security, and achieve optimal outcomes on strategic initiatives by recognizing that people are at least as important as technology in information security. The cybersecurity practices and cyber hygiene awareness of the personnel are foundational to the security of the organizations' networks, assets, and data. His lessons demonstrate that powerful leaders empower others. They operate as a resource for their personnel rather than as an overlord. Impactful leaders foster their personnel's strengths, recognize the growth opportunities, and work to remediate any weaknesses.