TRANSCRIPT
CSIS Event

“Leadership in the 21st Century: A Conversation with Three CIA Deputies”

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FEATURING
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Deputy Director for Support, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

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Kathleen H. Hicks: Hello. Good evening, everyone. Welcome to CSIS. I’m Kathleen Hicks. I direct the International Security Program here at CSIS. And I have the great honor, along with Beverly Kirk, to oversee the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative. We are celebrating the 5th anniversary this year of Smart Woman, Smart Power. And tonight we’re also celebrating the upcoming International Women’s Day. And we’re doing that with an incredible panel of women leaders. For the first time ever five of the CIA’s top deputy positions are held by women. Three of them are here with us tonight. And it’s the first time, I’m told, they’ve been on stage together for a public event, so you’re in for a real treat. I just want to take a moment to recognize that we originally also had a fourth, Deputy Didi Rapp, but she is not able to join us tonight. And I’m sure her colleagues will be representing her very well.

With that said, the three deputies we do have are going to discuss leadership at the CIA in the 21st century and their own long careers at the agency. And I’m told one of them was even recruited out of high school, so hopefully we’ll hear a little bit about that. First, a few social media reminders. I hope you’re following us on Twitter. We are at @SmartWomen. And also, please make sure that you’re listening to Beverly Kirk and her Smart Women podcast. It’s available on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you listen to good content. Also, if you are tweeting tonight, please use the hashtag #CSISLive.

If a fire alarm goes off in the building, I will be with you here and I will instruct you on where to go. And then I also want to now hand over to Candi Wolff, the executive vice president for global government affairs at Citi. Citi is who makes it possible through their generous support to have this Smart Women, Smart Power speaker series. Thank you, Candi, and to your colleagues at Citi for being our founding sponsor and helping us to amplify the voices of women in foreign policy, national security, international business, and international development. Please join me in welcoming Candi. (Applause.)

Candida Wolff: Well, thank you, Kathleen. And thank you all for joining us tonight in another of our special events in the Smart Women, Smart Power series. We are so excited, as Kathleen said, to be celebrating our fifth year. And we’ve had some really great panels, but I think even this will be one of the more interesting ones that we have tonight.

We’re proud at Citi to call ourselves a leading global bank. And we’re present in more than 100 countries. And so we often talk about our distinctive lines of business that our global footprint offers us. But it also gives us a unique vantage point to look at the challenges and opportunities in a myriad of economic and political climates around the world. And so as we confront those challenges, we do so in a way that enables us to provide financial services that enable growth and economic progress around the world.
And I think the women on stage tonight are familiar with confronting many of those challenging issues and environments that the world has to offer. And I’m, for one, comforted by the fact that we have women in these critical roles and positions, and grateful that – their unique and measured perspective that they can bring as women to these leadership roles.

And Kathleen will certainly introduce all of our panelists, but I think it’s just really cool – simply put, it’s really cool to have five women and, equally important, the first woman director in the history of the agency. So it’s no coincidence, I think, that we put more women in – it’s no coincidence, I think, that when more women are put in the top leadership positions, they tend to find more great women for senior roles.

We find that to be the case also at Citi as we strive to make our own progress with gender diversity at the top of the firm, so I’m excited to hear really about their experiences from the panelists tonight.

I want to thank you again for all joining us and also to celebrate International Women’s Day, and with that, I’ll turn it back over to Kathleen.

Thank you. (Applause.)

Kathleen Hicks: Thank you, Candi, for helping us to spotlight women who are true trailblazers – excuse me – and tonight is no exception.

So let me briefly introduce our three panelists and our host. First we have Dawn Meyerriecks, who is CIA’s deputy director for Science and Technology. We have Betsy Davis, who is CIA’s deputy director for Support, and we have Sonya Holt, who is CIA’s deputy associate director for Talent and Diversity and the chief diversity and inclusion officer at CIA. And our moderator is the director of the Smart Woman Smart (Power) Program, Beverly Kirk.

Beverly, take it away.

Beverly Kirk: And just so everyone knows, our regular moderator, Nina Easton, is very sorry she could not be here tonight. She is out on travel on the West Coast. She will be back for our next event coming up on March 26 when we will host Her Highness Intisar of Kuwait to talk about the One Million Arab Women peacemaking initiative, so I hope you will join us for that.

In the meantime, we have a wonderful conversation here tonight. The way that it will go, I’m going to ask them to talk a little bit first about their jobs, and their roles at the CIA, and how they’ve changed over the years. Then we’re going to talk about leadership. And then get your questions ready. There should have been cards on your seats so that you can submit questions to ask of them.
One caveat, I’ve already asked them all the questions that you may be curious about that you’ve heard about in the news, and they told me backstage they’re not going to answer those questions. (Laughter.) So fair warning.

All right, ladies, let me turn right here to Betsy, director of Support. Talk about what support means at the CIA, and it’s really interesting because you spent half your career as an analyst and then the second half as the director of Support.

Elizabeth “Betsy” Davis: Yes, happy to do that. Thanks very much, Bev, appreciate it. Thanks for being here today. We’re very excited. And I’m excited to talk a little bit about what my part of the organization does. So just like in any big organization, you have to run the infrastructure of that organization. So I like to say we run the city. We run the city that powers CIA, and that ranges from facilities, to security, to finance and accounting. It’s our HR and talent folks. It is our medical professionals, whether those are doctors, nurses or psychologists. It’s our travel infrastructure. It’s all those pieces. We are the most diverse directorate in the CIA, whether that’s racial and ethnic diversity, or gender diversity, and also occupational diversity, so 33 different occupations in our directorate.

So I came in, as Bev mentioned, as a weapons and technology analyst, right out of school, and spent about 15 years doing that, but then I moved over to the support side because I knew I really liked to make things happen, and I like to enable the mission. And so that’s what I did. I came in through the HR side of the house and was doing recruitment for a number of years, and found out how incredibly rewarding that was – to build the next generation of CIA officers – and then was able to take that into a couple of program management roles, and work at the ODNI, and it has just been – it has been great.

Beverly Kirk: All right, thank you.

Dawn, science and technology.

Dawn Meyerriecks: Yes, so I’m the youngster in the crowd, not chronologically I will say – (laughter) – but in terms of experience with the agency. I’ve been there six years, which I think speaks to how they’re willing to engage with people at various points in their career. But I have the honor and privilege of being Q – the equivalent of Q, for those of you that are familiar with that. (Laughter.) It’s just an easy shorthand.

Beverly Kirk: For those who are not?

Dawn Meyerriecks: OK. So have people seen 007, right, or Ethan Hunt? OK. So it’s not 007 anymore. It’s Ethan Hunt. It’s a team sport, right, and all of the people that surround. So the CIA has two missions that we talk about. One is
the HUMINT mission, right? So it’s not 007. It’s Ethan Hunt and all of that cool gadgetry stuff is the responsibility of my organization and partnership to supply.

And then the other thing that we do that we talk about is the president’s daily brief and provide information, facts, basically, to policymakers to help them make policy decisions. So we also then have a thing that my organization does is it does a variety of technical collection kinds of things. So those are the two, I think, incredibly cool things that I get to be responsible for in the organization.

Beverly Kirk: OK. Sonya Holt, the CIA recruited you straight out of high school. How did that happen?

Sonya Holt: Well, we had a wonderful regional recruiter by the name of Art Delaney (sp), who actually would recruit in the Washington, D.C., area. So I do remember at the age – ripe old age of 17 him coming to my high school, having conversations about employment opportunities.

I will tell you, at that particular time the agency used to hire clerical support and administrative opportunities and so that’s how I ended up entering on duty and I will tell you that for those of you that if you have gone through a polygraph, I was fortunate enough to have it on my 18th birthday – (laughter) – because I was told that they could not do so until I turned 18, and I started working at the agency seven weeks later.

So I will tell you, for my career I was fortunate enough to have some really great sponsors, which weren’t known as sponsors at that particular time, who, evidently, saw something in me and provided that opportunity and to say, hey, you know, we think you would be really great in this field.

I’ve worked for Betsy in recruitment. So I’ve done that for about 12 years. But I can tell you right now, as the agency’s chief diversity and inclusion officer I have oversight of all things diversity and inclusion at CIA from diversity recruitment – it’s through weaving everything through the talent process and our succession planning. So it’s really about creating a sense of belonging and inclusion for every agency officer. So we are trying to make sure that everyone can see themselves as a part of the agency, and then to intentionally develop officers for those opportunities so that we – as we move on to other assignments had a vast pool of talent that can come in behind us that represent who we look like and, of course, the audience here today.

Beverly Kirk: And Dawn, you mentioned team. You were talking about Ethan Hunt versus 007. Do you guys constantly work together?

Dawn Meyerrieks: We do. We do it overtly and we also just do it because it’s the only way we can get things done, right. So these great capabilities that we provide
to our officers in the field, unless somebody makes sure that they show up – you know, we can have great ideas in the back room and build great stuff. But unless Betsy’s team makes sure that it actually shows up at the point that it needs to be used, it’s just a great idea from a back room, right. So we do a lot of, I’ll say, integration and collaboration across the organization because it takes the entire team for us to be able to deliver mission.

Beverly Kirk: Let’s talk a little bit about leadership. Since – well, you came out of the private sector only six years ago but Betsy and Sonya have been there for quite a while. So let’s talk about how leadership at the CIA has changed over the years since, perhaps, when you first arrived until now.

Dawn Meyerriecks: So that’s a great question. I was thinking about that on the way over here, and I would look back 15, 20 years ago and I would say we made our substantive experts into leaders. But today we have substantive leaders. Leaders who started to practice the trade craft of leadership when they were first line supervisors and really started to focus on what it meant to bring a team together and make that team focus on a mission objective and to use their expertise.

So I would say that’s the biggest change that I have seen over the decades that I have been with the CIA is really getting people who wanted to lead people, who wanted to lead programs, who wanted to be part of that leadership team and bring their trade craft and their expertise because, after all, we are an organization that values expertise.

So you first have to bring that expertise to the table and then we ask you, OK, what do you want to do with that expertise? How are you going to apply your facilities program management to develop and put something together in the overseas environment? How are you going to take that financial trade craft or that medical expertise and apply it? So that’s probably the biggest thing I’ve seen.

Beverly Kirk: Sonya?

Sonya Holt: Yeah. So for me, when I think back for the 36 years that I’ve been at the agency, as you mentioned, the current construct looks a little bit different. But I just see – I feel more touch points. When I think back, more connected with the workforce in the sense of how we reach out. The communication is there. So I think that most officers now feel more engaged with – I can tell you, when I first got to the agency I honestly probably would not be able to say at that time who were the leaders within our workforce. And so when I take a look at the image of who we reflect today, it’s more of we’re a part of the mission versus just sitting at our seats and being in a place where we’re not approachable. So that’s some of the things that have changed over the 36 years.
Dawn Meyerriecks: And if I could, just coming from the outside, I worked with DOD, I’ve worked with NASA, I worked a lot of places. John Brennan actually accused me of not being able to hold a job when I interviewed for this one. (Laughter.) But I’ve never been any place where there was so much investment in training leaders, as well as giving people the experience to actually put that training to work. It actually blows me away, and I’m humbled by how much time the organization puts into developing the expertise, but then also the leaders.

Beverly Kirk: And is it different since there are now so many women at the top level of the leadership? Starting at the very top, and then going on downward to your level? Has that made a difference?

Elizabeth Davis: Yeah, I don’t know that it’s made a difference. I think it’s made us look around and realize that at some point in our career someone invested in us. Someone brought us to the table. Sonya used the word “sponsor” a little bit ago. And I never really thought of it that way, but that’s probably true. And so now as we look around that table and we see all of the senior deputy directors, and much of our entire senior leadership team is women right now, we recognize that that happened. And so we have to start to reach down. We need to identify the talent that is that next generation. We need to put them into the right jobs, and connect them to the right people, and give them the right opportunities, as Dawn was mentioning, to make sure that they can come up as well.

I would say probably the only difference I’ve noticed with this leadership team – and this could be just because we all work so well together, but we are in almost constant communication, to your earlier point. I mean, my instant message conversation at work basically has these guys on it every single day. And whether that’s Didi, or that’s the new director of the – director of digital innovation, or Dawn, or Sonya. I mean, we’re constantly communicating.

Beverly Kirk: So in a world that is constantly changing, the challenges are out there, how do you keep up? Oh, don’t all answer at once. (Laughter.) I mean, there’s nothing going on right now in the world that, you know, would keep you busy at all.

Dawn Meyerriecks: I mean, I think this is where the value of the team comes together, right? We have the best analytic cadre on the planet, right? So I don’t have to personally maintain all of my expertise in technology. If I need to go find out what’s going on with 5G, or AI, or something, there is a product that I can go access, right? And that’s somebody’s full-time job. And it is world class, right? So it’s a natural inclination for me to do that, but I also then recognize that, look, if you want me to be making technical decisions at this point in my career, we’re probably in a bad place. (Laughter.) I mean, just honestly. But I can go find those people. And that’s a huge source, for me, of what I need to be paying attention to, as the director of science and technology.
Beverly Kirk: But we were talking in the green room before we came out about how your phone kind of constantly goes off.

Elizabeth Davis: Oh, yeah. It definitely does. And, you know, I worry a lot about our people, about our facilities, about our information, about keeping people safe and healthy. And so that phone is constantly going off. I’m trying to stay connected. So what I finally had to do was say, listen, I am going to turn off the alerts overnight. And if you need me, you must call me. Because I need at least five hours of sleep every night. (Laughter.) Six would be preferable. So it is hard, though.

Beverly Kirk: Now, something else that is unique about the time and place we’re talking about, the CIA, is that for the first time in a long time there is a real cadre of senior leaders, people who’ve been with the agency a long time, are now in these senior roles. How did that happen? And does that make a difference in how the agency functions and is led?

Elizabeth Davis: Well, I think that it gets to the point that I made a minute ago in terms of the investment that was made in us early in our careers. And so the fact that I moved from one part of the organization to the other was because someone tapped me on the shoulder and said: Hey, you’re really good at this infrastructure stuff. You’re really good at this program management stuff. You know, do you really want to be an analyst the rest of your career? And I was like, no, maybe not. So I’ll come over. But it’s those relationships that were built throughout our careers that we now, to your point, can leverage in the positions that we sit in today. We understand how the organization works. We understand how it connects. We’ve almost all served in the intelligence community in other jobs, whether it was at the ODNI or another government organization. And so we can pull those threads and connect those pieces together and make stuff happen.

Dawn Meyerriecks: And if I might pick up onto the point about sponsorship, I think we’ve all had sponsors throughout our careers. And I have to – a lot of it were, you know, white males, honestly. I mean, that’s – how many science and technologists were there when I joined – you know, when I came out?

So I’ll give a stat. I graduated with 400 electrical engineers; nine of them were women, right? That was kind of my graduating class. And it stayed that way for a very long time. And so people have invested in us, and we really feel like it’s our responsibility now to make those same investments in terms of sponsorship.

And just because he’s sitting here and I can see him, one of the people that’s been a great sponsor of mine throughout my career is General Mike Hayden. And he sponsored me when it wasn’t the cool thing to do, and it made a tremendous difference. And as we talked about it, we all have those stories that we can share.
Beverly Kirk: Sonya?

Sonya Holt: I’m in agreement. So for me, when I think of, again, with the sponsorship piece, early on most of my sponsors didn’t look like me. They were either white women or white men that were able to have those honest conversations and said, have you thought about this? And said, hey, it’s time for you to go check that box to get you a degree so that you can continue to be competitive with your peers.

So the agency had a program at that particular time. I did the 2020 Program for one year and then went to school full-time for the next two years while I worked full-time. But every opportunity that I’ve gotten, I’ve earned it but someone has helped lay the foundation.

Or I will tell you even before I became a senior officer one of my mentor-sponsors – I was over doing a joint duty opportunity at the DOD and she said to me, hey, I want you to come back for a luncheon. I’m getting ready to leave. Little did I know or find out, when I arrived at the luncheon, it was to introduce me to other senior women. And she said: I’m leaving the organization. I want you all to take care of her. She’s really good. And so to have that spoke volumes because she didn’t have to invite me back to introduce me to her network, who are now my network as well.

So the agency has done such a phenomenal job of helping us look at how do we intentionally develop officers, making sure that we acknowledge those that have talent, and then having some of those tough conversations on what do we look like when we’re talking about succession planning or the next level. And we’re able to do that because we have trust and respect with each other, and we make those changes so that we can continue to make progress going forward.

Beverly Kirk: Before I jump to AI – because I have lots of questions for you, Dawn, on that – but I want to pull this thread because both of you said something interesting here: you had sponsors who did not look like you. How important a message is that for the younger women in the audience here in person and watching online, to know that perhaps their sponsor won’t look like them and to be OK with going out and seeking sponsors who don’t look anything like them, may not have anything in common with them except they’re doing a job that they want to do someday?

Dawn Meyerrieckks: I guess my question would be, why would you limit yourself to people that only look like you? And even now it’s very difficult in any organization; the higher you go, the less likely you’re actually told the things you need to know as opposed to what people want you to know.

So I actually have a couple of reverse mentors that don’t look like me in any sense, right, that will come and tell me exactly what the new EOD
class thinks – sorry, we use – but the new incoming class thinks of what’s going on organizationally. And then there’s a – there’s a blog called Volantold (ph) that I lurk in. I don’t post there because I want there to be real conversation, but –

Beverly Kirk: You just told them –

Dawn Meyerriecks: Yes. (Laughter.)

(Cross talk.)

Beverly Kirk: In case you weren’t paying attention, Dawn is lurking on Volantold (ph). (Laughter.)

Dawn Meyerriecks: But I don’t think it’s ruined anybody’s career yet, so. (Laughter.) But it is a way to find out what’s actually going on. And so I think having those sponsors that don’t look like you, that can reap enormous benefits throughout your career.

Beverly Kirk: Yeah.

Sonya Holt: I can tell you from leading the Director’s Advisor Group on Women in Leadership one of the things that we often would talk about when we talked about sponsorship is making sure that you always did your best. And you know, performing – do networking not only with individuals that look like you because you do want different perspectives. You do want – you have champions that champion you for different things. So it’s important, as Dawn mentioned, not to limit yourself to someone because they were the same gender or the same race. I always found value in the different perspectives. And at the time those were the individuals that had a seat at the table and in the room who could teach me things. So you know, open your aperture to just having relationships with individuals of all demographics and backgrounds.

Beverly Kirk: And one more question before we move to AI. Just to pull on this thread a little bit longer, talk about what you’re doing in terms of recruiting people. The statistics say that the America of the 21st century that the CIA will, obviously, play a huge role in helping the country develop policies, stay safe, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, is not going to look like the current America. It’s going to be way more diverse. How do you make sure that there are people in a pipeline coming along to fill roles?

Sonya Holt: So right now we have recruiters that are – they recruit for each of the different directorates. So there are some that specialize in science and technology, within Betsy’s area, and so those individuals are the ones that will go ahead and maintain relationships on the various campuses that we go to.
We touch a lot of campuses. We want to make sure that those campuses are diverse, not only in skillsets but with women, with minorities, with persons with disabilities. And then we do professional and student outreach, or student organization outreach. And so it’s important for us to keep engagement with organizations within the communities, but also those hiring requirements will help drive us, first of all, to where we go based on where the talent is. But we’ve got regional recruiters and folks who just have that strategy and plan of where can we find the talent.

We do advertising and marketing through different venues. So you may hear us on a progressive station. You may hear us on WHUR or just other stations that may not be the traditional mainstream stations. We’ve done advertising in airports. We’ve also done it in some of the different Metro stations. So, again, this is all-encompassing, and I think that allows us to hit at the vast majority of individuals.

Our folks also use social media as a way of reaching out to individuals. So again, it’s just a wide array of ways that we get out there to the community and the different officers or individuals that we’re seeking.

Elizabeth Davis: Yeah. And over the years, too, we have increased our focus on mid-career hires, and that has been an important infusion of expertise and diversity into the organization. So in my part of the agency, about 20 percent of our new hires are mid-career hires. And we haven’t always done the best job as an agency integrating those new mid-career hires into our culture and really respecting the expertise that they bring to the table, but I really believe in the last probably eight or nine years we’ve done a much better job of that.

And you can see that in some of our promotion statistics as well. People with – coming in with seven to 10 years of experience are getting promoted much more quickly and reaching the grade levels that are commensurate with the people who came right in out of college. So we need that expertise and we need to do a better job of using it.

Beverly Kirk: Dawn, AI. How is it impacting what you do?

Dawn Meyerriecks: Oh, it’s going to obsolete all of us. No, I’m – (laughter). But it might – it might make a few jobs obsolete, right?

You know, so I have to say that based on what we’re seeing there’s a lot of hype out there right now. And there will always be the need for expert analytic skills, which is what we have, right? What we hope AI can do for us – and it’s going to – this is a – we’re definitely, I would say, in the crawl phase – is make better use of that expert analyst’s mind so they’re spending less time finding the data that they need to be aware of and more time actually thinking about what that means in terms of analytic understanding of what the – you know, what the actual facts on the ground are, so to speak, right?
So I think there is a lot of promise. We are – we have, I think I’ve been quoted as saying, about 170 pilots inside the organization. Yes, all true. There’s a lot of work still left to be done. And for those of you that are geeks at all in the audience, I will say that the first step is tagging all of your data, which is very, very intensive. That takes a lot of expertise to tag it and tag it right, so that you’re actually able to use it for anything else. And so there is lots of work that has to go on there before we will be talking about replacing – we will never replace our expert analysts. What we hope to do is that they spend more time doing the things we pay them to do, and less time trying to find the needles in the haystack.

Beverly Kirk: And other tech advances, can you get – and maybe this might be one of those questions you can’t answer – but do you get access to advanced technology from the private sector? That they ask you to say, hey, go test this out, see how it works?

Dawn Meyerriecks: We have great partnerships. And, yes, people are very often interested in sharing their learnings with us. We also look for it. And we’ll look for, you know, particular academic institutions or partners that have specific expertise. It would be crazy for us not to take advantage of that where we can find it. So I think that’s one of the key changes that I would think has happened organizationally. But I will defer to my partners here. Partnership for us so much more pervasive, and so much more important, just so we can keep up with what’s real and not be reinventing things ourselves. If we can just leverage what other people have done. So I think there’s a much more vibrant conversation in terms of partnerships of all stripes within the organization.

Beverly Kirk: And you also launched the senior technical service in order to make sure that people who are working in your area, I guess, stay with you for a longer period of time.

Dawn Meyerriecks: We have a number of initiatives. I mean, I am aware that government may not be the best paying employer if you’re a techie. So we look – we work really hard, starting from recruiting to try and not be mysterious. We have to keep secrets, but that doesn’t mean we have to be mysterious. And so one of the initiatives that we have that you referenced is the senior technical service that we stood up, because there was a disparity between folks that pursued being managers and the rates at which they were promoted and technical experts and the rates at which they were promoted. So we kind of look at all of these things through various lenses from a diversity and inclusion perspective. And so we decided that we needed to be more overt about addressing that so that we can recruit and retain the high level of technical competence that we need to stay relevant.

Beverly Kirk: And do you guys also worry about geopolitical competition for people?
Dawn Meyerriecks: Well, we worry about all kinds of competition, right? I mean, honestly, Amazon moving to this area, you know, makes me a little sleepless at night because –

Beverly Kirk: Really? Why?

Dawn Meyerriecks: Because we have the best analytic cadre on the planet. And they probably could make more money doing something else, right? Now, we believe the mission is a big differentiator, but all of us have life events, right, like elder care, or kids starting college, or whatever. And so that – you know, those are the kinds of things that it would be irresponsible for us to just wait for that to show up and hope that the mission is compelling enough that we’re not making every effort to make sure that the experts that we acquire and retain want to stay with us.

Beverly Kirk: And if I may ask about movies, because I read an article where you were quoted talking about the portrayal of the agency in movies. And you talked about – well, you mentioned earlier you’re more Ethan Hunt than James Bond. But what about Argo? Because the jobs in Argo are all things that come out of science and technology and support.

Dawn Meyerriecks: They are. They are, yes. I think they did a wonderful job with that movie. (Laughter.)

Beverly Kirk: Well, at this point in the conversation I hope all of you have thought of questions that you would like to ask. And if you’ve written them down, please hold them up. And the team around the back of the room will come by and pick them up for you. We’ll be happy to take some of those questions.

In the meantime, what keeps you guys up at night?

Elizabeth Davis: So I think I touched on this a little bit ago. Given that we run the city that powers an organization, the thing that does keep me up every night and often wakes me up in the middle of the night is the safety and the security of our workforce. And whether it’s the people, which is number one on my list, or it’s the facilities, or it’s the data and the information technology, that’s the piece that keeps me up. It’s hard to manage sometimes, but it is a motivating factor every day. In fact, up on my wall in my office I have kind of my four performance objectives, right? We all have performance objectives, or key job elements, I guess. And my number one is keep people safe and healthy. So I figure it was kind of big, kind of all-encompassing, I could probably get a lot of stuff in there. But it is, keep people safe and healthy every day.

Sonya Holt: So, for me, mine is simply the workforce because if they don’t feel valued, if they don’t feel engaged or if they don’t feel included or that sense of belonging, they’re not going to bring their full self to work, and when they don’t bring their full self to work they’re not bringing those
ideas. They’re not being innovative. They’re not connecting in conversations. And, again, that’s when we have the capacity to lose individuals who just don’t feel connected. So how do we make sure that we are connected as a workforce where folks feel and know that they’re valued so that they have the workforce that they need.

Dawn Meyerriecks: And I think my – we talked about this a little bit. Yes, absolutely it’s the workforce. If I was going to be just a technologist that was only focused on that for just a second, personalized medicine and how that comports with we will do things that comport with our values. I wish I could say that was true across the board, right, because for any technology it can be used for good or it can be used for ill, and it’s really the context and how you think about it that is really, really critical and, you know, where there is – there is, questionably, room to run, I do worry about how that gets employed in other areas.

Beverly Kirk: Well, we have a question here. We mentioned your boss so we have a question about your boss. What can you tell us about Director Gina Haspel’s management style?

Elizabeth Davis: I would share a couple things about it. First, she has tried since she’s been in the chair almost two years now to push decision-making down. So she lets us run our organizations and we then, in turn, try to push down decision-making as far as we can into the organization. And number two, we see her, right. We see her at our mission update meetings. We see her with the workforce. We see her walking the halls. The communication from her is frequent and deep in terms of what she’s sharing with the workforce. And so I think that reminds people that she’s there in their corner.

Dawn Meyerriecks: She is a systems thinker. She has not quite a photographic memory but if you’ve told her something in the past you better have included that into whatever you’re giving her because she will remember it. I love interacting with her because she’s a very broad strategic thinker, but woe betide you if you come in and you’re not well prepared for the – she’s demanding, but given the job that she’s in, you absolutely want somebody like that in that job.

Sonya Holt: I have the privilege of meeting with her on a monthly basis and I will tell you it’s probably one of the most comfortable spaces when you go in to meet with the leader, and she makes you feel that way. There’s that welcomingness. There’s that inclusiveness. But for her to put diversity and inclusion as one of her priorities for the agency speaks volumes. And she just doesn’t say that in her messaging. It’s in her actions. It’s in the day-to-day. So if a workforce message or something comes out, diversity and inclusion is included in that. And so it’s that piece that you can really feel that she cares about the workforce and I think the workforce can sense and feel that.
Beverly Kirk: We have a question that follows on perfectly what you were just talking about. Can you discuss the agency’s five-year study on women at the CIA and what was the impetus for the study and what were the results, and that’s a study you led.

Sonya Holt: Yes. So the Director’s Advisory Group on Women and Leadership. The whole purpose of it was because women weren’t advancing at the same rate as their male counterparts and weren’t being promoted at the same rate. What the study found was that there wasn’t any single reason why that was happening.

So what we did was that we had working groups around 10 recommendations at that time that became priorities for us and we had project teams. It was a grassroots effort. We actually leaned on the workforce to really help us get this done. The working groups, we let them have – we gave them problem sets and said, come up with some solutions. Of course, we met with them on a regular basis. But then we had project teams that really led some of the development of things like the sponsorship package, other things that we had identified. And through that, we were able to educate the workforce.

I will tell you one of the challenges that we did have when we initially start were the Director’s Advisory Group on Women and Leadership, so that title itself men stepped back. They were, like, well, we don’t see ourselves in this. I had a few volunteers. So we ended up changing our title to the DAG and we had to make sure that what we were doing was for all agency officers, not just for the women.

So when we talk about intentionally developing officers it means developing every officer so that they can meet their full potential. When we talk about sponsorship, what does that look like for all officers. And what we found was that we then had men who were volunteering. So, again, that engagement, people were starting to learn from each other, but they also were getting exposure to senior leaders that they traditionally may not have, briefings.

And one of the things that – when we start looking at the metrics piece of it, when we started in 2012, we were at 31 percent women at the senior ranks at the agency. By the end of the DAG study we were at 36 percent, and now we’re at 37 percent. So we still see an increase because we still put into practice some of the things. When we talk about succession planning, when we talk about sponsorship, when we talk about feedback – and we’re talking about actionable feedback – those are the things that are now woven into what we do as a part of our talent cycle at CIA. And those all came out of the DAG study. And so for us to be able to pull those processes in and to continue to evolve them and move forward, I think, speaks volumes and has set a foundation for us to continue the work that we started under that.
Beverly Kirk: And currently 44 percent of CIA employees are women.

Sonya Holt: Yes, 44 percent women, we’re 25 percent minority, and then 6 percent persons with disabilities. Yes, we have a lot of work still to do, and so we’re working with our talent acquisition office on their strategy, on places that we can go. And then, as you mentioned, partnerships – having some of those conversations, but also reaching out to other industries who have those best practices, and learning from them, but also sharing some of our best practices.

Beverly Kirk: And that 44 percent is distributed throughout the different ranks?

Sonya Holt: Yes.

Beverly Kirk: It’s not all people who are either in entry level or mid-level, but –

Sonya Holt: Of the workforce, we’re 44 percent women, and that’s across the directorates and at every level.

Elizabeth Davis: And one of the heartening things that Dawn and I have seen since the recommendations from the DAG have been put in place is those actually now being implemented. And so succession planning is a great example of that because it used to be that succession planning didn’t command the kind of time and attention that it needed to at the directorate level.

And right now, we have scheduled at the end of this month an entire day where we will sit down, and we will look at the top – I don’t know – call it 25, 30 jobs in the agency, and we will start making depth charts for those jobs; you know, ready now, ready in two years, ready five-years plus, and we will identify what needs to happen for those officers to be ready in the future, so that’s just one example of something that really didn’t exist, I don’t know, ten years ago.

Dawn Meyerriecks: And we’re held accountable.

Elizabeth Davis: Uh-huh, absolutely.

Dawn Meyerriecks: If I don’t have officers that are ready for those jobs, then my peer group will say, hey, what – you know, what are you doing about that, right? So it’s an active mentoring that goes on – (laughter) – across – I mean, in a –

Beverly Kirk: But that applies pressure.

Dawn Meyerriecks: – very professional way. Yes, it does.

Beverly Kirk: That applies pressure.

Dawn Meyerriecks: And we’re just a little competitive, so – (laughter) –
Elizabeth Davis: A tiny bit.

Dawn Meyerriecks: Yeah, no Type As here. (Laughter.) So we don’t want to be taking those questions.

Elizabeth Davis: Right.

Beverly Kirk: Here’s a question following on on this: What skills are important for the next generation of leaders at the CIA that is unique to the agency?

(Pause.)

Beverly Kirk: OK, who asked this question? (Laughter.)

Dawn Meyerriecks: I’m hard pressed to think that it’s unique, right?

Elizabeth Davis: Ability to pass a polygraph. (Laughter.)

Beverly Kirk: I’ve done one of those. It’s harder than it looks!

Dawn Meyerriecks: Do anything when you have a teenager, I don’t know. That may be – yeah.

Elizabeth Davis: I mean, in general, the kinds of things that we’re looking for in our new hires, whether they’re right out of school or mid-career hires, are the same things that any Fortune 500 company is going to be looking for. Be really good at the thing that you decided to make your passion, right, whether you majored in it in college or you are doing it now. Have great collaboration and teamwork skills, really exceptional communication skills – whether it’s written or, you know, person to person. Those interpersonal skills will never be replaced by a computer, never be replaced by instant messaging. You have to be able to work across the team, and you have to be able to bring people together.

Beverly Kirk: What qualities are the leaders in the agency looking for to sponsor in future generations of analysts?

Elizabeth Davis: Future generations of analysts?

Beverly Kirk: Wish we had Didi here for that.

Elizabeth Davis: Yeah. I think, again, the partnership piece and the willingness to work across organizations. And I think we alluded to it a little bit earlier, but when I was line chemical and biological warfare analyst, you know, we cared about what we were doing in the group, and maybe we cared about Defense Intelligence Agency a little bit because they were our partners, right? But beyond that, we didn’t reach out all that much.
It is completely different right now in terms of the kinds of collaboration and the kinds of partnerships that have to exist for all of us in the intelligence community to be doing our work.

Beverly Kirk: And what would your number-one recommendation or piece of advice be for an entry-level analyst? Or let’s make that across the board: entry-level science person, entry-level support person, entry-level person coming into HR?

Elizabeth Davis: Raise your hand. Raise your hand. There’s a lot to do.

Sonya Holt: That’s so true. Volunteer. Network. And always be flexible, you know, agile. Have fun, you know? I mean, those are really key things. I mean, if you come in and you work hard, somebody’s going to notice. And if you’re volunteering for, like, some of the working groups or a taskforce, it gives you the opportunity to flex and demonstrate some skills that you may not traditionally do in your day-to-day job, and you’re building those network of individuals that you may not work with on a day-to-day basis. So get involved.

We’ve got agency resource groups. Join one of those that you may not be a racial or a gender member of, so that way you can learn about your colleagues and peers. So –

Dawn Meyerriecks: I think for us in particular owning your craft is really, really important. If you’re – if you’re talking about entry level, like right out of, you know, school, right, the differentiator for us really is – in those early years is really understanding in a very detailed way the science or the technology for which you’re responsible.

Beverly Kirk: And one thing that you guys told me when we were talking before we got together out here is that you actually need some artists within the agency. And we’ve talked a lot about science and technology here, lots of skills that analysts need, but I was actually surprised to hear you guys say, you know, we need some artists. We need some sculptors. We need – this is not exactly what I envisioned when I would think, oh, I want to work at the CIA.

Dawn Meyerriecks: Yeah. So we actually talk about STEAM for that very reason. We do – we seek out artists for a variety of things – print artists. You know, people here are capable of, like, imagining why we would care about people who are really good at printing, for example. I talk about, you know, we do mascara to spacecraft, right, so – and everything in between. We’ve recruited puppeteers from Disney, for example. Again, “Argo” did a really nice job of kind of –

Beverly Kirk: Can I ask why you had puppeteers, or is that classified? (Laughter.)
Dawn Meyerriecks: Well, let’s see. So if you’re wearing a mask and you want to make sure that it actually looks like it’s you and not something else, it might be good to actually know what the state of the art is with respect to puppetry.

Beverly Kirk: Got it. That’s absolutely fascinating.

OK. Another question here: How important are foreign partners to your agency, particularly in light of your culture of secrecy and insulated workforce?

(Pause.)

Sonya Holt: Well – (laughter) – from the diversity and inclusion space, I can only speak to that portion of it, but I can tell you that, again, it’s a great opportunity for us to learn. We share best practices, we – across the board, things that help us become better employees. So again, helping to shape that workforce so if they’ve got the right talent and they’re bringing in the right talent, or if they’re having challenges, we kind of share, here’s how we’ve done it and here are some ways that you can probably do a little bit better, and vice versa. So for us that’s the piece that follows –

Dawn Meyerriecks: I talked about this. We have folks that concentrate on what’s happening in academia. This is just to stay relevant, right? We have an office that does vital industrial partnerships because that – the bulk of the R&D dollars in the U.S. today are coming from industry, right? So we’d be crazy not to take advantage of that. For folks that are not familiar with In-Q-Tel and the QIC, that’s another way that we reach out and touch venture capitalists and the venture capital community in the startup area. So we have a wide range of – and that’s – I talked about partnerships. That was explicitly what I was thinking about, right? We have very little, I’ll say, peer R&D. It’s all applied. So we are constantly looking for opportunities with a diverse set of candidates to leverage the best and the brightest minds either directly into our mission or by incorporation of their products or their intellectual property with their permission and agreement.

Beverly Kirk: And what about the insulated workforce and the secrecy? We kind of jokingly talked about this backstage. You know, you can’t exactly go home and say, guess what I did at work today.

Dawn Meyerriecks: So I believe that there’s not anything I could tell you about what we’re interested in technologically, like the puppet example that I used – is anybody here shocked? You never would have thought that we would be interested in puppeteers, given what it is that we do. I just think people aren’t that explicit about it.

So we spend a lot of time. We partner with IARPA and do a lot of unclassified work, right, with them, with the idea that we can then figure out – take the best and the brightest and incorporate them into our actual
work. So we have an unclassified list, a problem list, of the technologies that we’re interested in. No one here, if they’re technical, would be shocked by anything on that list, right? This is back to the we have to keep secrets, but we don’t have to be mysterious. And we are – the only way we can stay relevant from a science and technology perspective is to be constantly having unclassified conversations with experts wherever they are, in each of the disciplines that we pursue.

Beverly Kirk: Oh, go ahead. Oh, good. What is the best career decision you’ve made to get to where you are?

Dawn Meyerriecks: That’s a great question.

Elizabeth Davis: I’ll say, probably the best career decision that I made, and I mentioned this a minute ago, was raising my hand as an analyst, and doing the kind of things that I was interested in, but not too many other people were interested in. So whether that was managing the budget, or contracts, or facilities, or renovations – the kinds of things that made me say, hey, I really like this infrastructure end of the organization. I really like making sure that the city runs appropriately, that we have all the capabilities that we need to apply to mission. And so that opened the door that got me into the support and administrative side of the organization. And then here I am.

Dawn Meyerriecks: I’ve always pursued doing really cool problem-solving with great teams. And then you never work a day in your life. If it gets too hard to go to work, it’s probably time for you to think about doing something else.

Sonya Holt: So for me, I think the best decision that I’ve made is taking on some of those broadening opportunities. I mean, I’m a former S&T officer. I’ve worked in some DS-related positions. I’ve worked over on the Department of Defense in the Office of the Undersecretary, Human Capital Management Office. So stepping outside the unusual to broaden my knowledge base, and to bring some of those experiences back. Because that’s important for us. When we start having those conversations about promotion to the senior levels, we take a look to see, you know, what is it that they’ve done? You know, if they’re an expert, that’s one thing. But have they managed in other areas? How can we use their skills in transferable places within the agency? So you definitely want to demonstrate that you’re able to move and do other things.

Beverly Kirk: You guys mentioned how important it is to be reaching down. How can younger women facilitate that by reaching up? And I know you guys both mentioned – or, all mentioned raising your hand, and the importance of stepping out and volunteering for things. But is there anything that younger – this question is specific for women, but I would think that the same thing might apply for younger men – to do in terms of making sure they identify someone as a sponsor or as a mentor, because there’s a
difference between the two. Is there something that they should be looking for?

Elizabeth Davis: Well, I think officers need to take the initiative, right? Put themselves out there and connect at the – every opportunity that they have. And so I’ve run into some folks in the agency before who’ve said that I don’t know how to make those relationships happen. I said, well, did you go to the networking events? Did you go to the all-hands? Did you go to the kinds of things that are available to them? And they’re, like, well, no. Well, it’s not going to drop in your lap, right? You have to kind of put – you have to meet us halfway. There’s a shared responsibility there to kind of build those relationships.

Beverly Kirk: And we have another question here. What’s the agency’s maternity leave policy? And is having kids a barrier to progression?

Elizabeth Davis: Yeah. So I’ve got a lot of kids. (Laughter.) Five of them, including my youngest, who’s sitting over here in the corner. I brought her along with me today. So it is absolutely – let me start at the top, though. Maternity leave policy. So many of you might know that in this past legislative cycle there are new federal rules for maternity and paternity leave that will take effect on the 1st of October. And that will be 12 weeks of paid leave for all federal employees upon the birth or adoption of a child. So we will implement that on the 1st of October, along with our other federal government partners.

Is it a barrier? No it is absolutely not a barrier. Does it present a challenge? Sometimes it does. So I’ve got five kids. She’s the youngest. My oldest is 26. And it has resulted in having to make some choices, right? I think we all face that. and we talked a little bit about the balance question earlier. And you know, I don’t really like that word anymore, right? Dawn’s convinced me not to like that word. It’s about, you know, filling up the jar that is your life with the things that matter, and putting those big rocks in first. And what are the big rocks? You know, the big rocks are your family, the things that matter on the outside, your kids, the things you’re most interested in, and then the mission you support. And then you start filling it in with all those little things, which are the – which is the sand. And ultimately, that jar gets filled all the way up to the top. Hopefully, you’ve filled it correctly. A couple times in my career I had to take some of those big rocks out because they weren’t the big – right big rocks and replace them. I’ve made, like I said, not the best choices all the time. But I’ve owned those decisions and I have tried not to lose any sleep over not having made the best ones.

Beverly Kirk: I imagine it’s different for every person.

Elizabeth Davis: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Beverly Kirk: And you have to figure out what’s important to you and –
Dawn Meyerriecks: And at that season in your life, because that changes as well.

Elizabeth Davis: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beverly Kirk: Right, right, right, because what’s important when you’re first out of college is probably not the same thing that’s important to you after 20 years in a – in a particular career.

Sonya Holt: So I can tell you as a single mom – my son is 34. But as a single mom, I mean, I had him at a young age. I was 20 when I had him. And so there came a point in my careers where I had to make those choices. I didn’t have to, but I chose to take on those assignments that were opportunities for me to continue advancing. You know, so I had to really take a look at, am I going to travel? Am I going to do all these different things? And I made the choice to do that because in my mind I told myself I want my son to have those opportunities that two-parent households have. And in order for me to do that, it was like, you need to take these opportunities while they present themselves.

Did I miss some of his activities? Absolutely. But I also had an amazing boss who before we started talking about workplace flexibility and flexible work schedules said, hey, you’re traveling on the weekends, well, you can leave – why don’t you leave early on Tuesday so you can get to a soccer game. And some folks used to categorize me as a workaholic, and my chief of staff, who’s here, keeps telling me I still am, but I don’t think so. (Laughter.) So – but the thing –

Beverly Kirk: She’s shaking her head. (Laughter.)

Sonya Holt: I know. She’s looking and her eyes jump out: Yes, you are.

But I made a choice to step away from management for a couple of years, you know. My dad was dying of cancer and my son was getting ready to go off into college, and I really had to reflect to kind of say, wow, you know, what is it that’s a priority for me right now. So I needed to take that break for me, and then I came back two years later after working in one of our regional areas and got back into management. So it doesn’t – it may divert you for a moment, but it doesn’t necessarily have to keep you off track from moving forward.

Beverly Kirk: We have time for a couple more questions and the one that I was just handed is really interesting. What would you say you’ve learned over the course of your career that you wish you’d learned or otherwise known beforehand?

Dawn Meyerriecks: That one’s easy for me because I talk a lot to particularly younger women. We need to extend grace to ourselves a lot more than we do. I was also a single mom at one point and, you know, was folding laundry at
2:00 in the morning because my type A personality was I needed a point where all the laundry was put away just so I could check that block. (Laughter.) And I – see, it’s guilty giggle right here. (Laughter.) And I had to figure out – literally, finally it came to me. It’s like, I got to be up in four hours to get the kids ready to go; I’m – this is ridiculous, right? And so I think we’re very hard on ourselves. And making sure that we extend grace not only to ourselves, but to those around us who find themselves in those situations, the good bosses, right – that’s like, I got it, you’re great, we’re going to work this out. I think – I wish I had thought – I wish I had figured it out not at 2:00 in the morning, you know – (laughter) – this epiphany.

Beverly Kirk: Yeah.

And final question here. It’s for each of you, but it’s – we’re going to try to end on a – on a fun note. Your favorite or must-read book, lastly. Comic, national security, leadership, USG, et cetera.

Elizabeth Davis: So my favorite book is an easy one because I’m an engineer, too, and so I like my leadership books in the form of fables. So it’s called “Leadership and Self-Deception” and it’s about – largely about assuming noble intent and not putting people in a box in terms of the kinds of reactions and the interactions that you have with them.

Beverly Kirk: Dawn? Sonya?

Sonya Holt: I’m still pondering.


Sonya Holt: It’s a hard one for me because I’ve got so many on my shelf that I’ve read maybe three-fourths of. (Laughter.)

Beverly Kirk: It’s OK; everybody does. People just want to impress people when they come to their house and they have all these books on their bookshelf.

Dawn Meyerriecks: There’s great-looking books. I’m not sure this is my favorite but we’re – all of our leadership team we’ve had read your “Leadership Legacy.” It’s a very simple read. If you’re a gardener like I am, it talks – sorry, it talks about raising ferns. Hopefully, that’s enough of a teaser that you’ll go out and check it out. But it really is about how you develop relationships in order to convey whatever it is that you think is really, really important and we’ve actually had every level of our leadership team go through that book in groups of 30 and spent a lot of time – I just came back from our last offsite with the last group. Spent a lot of time talking about what got you here. That technical expertise I talked about won’t get you there, which is about the soft skills, and this book is a lot about how you introduce that topic and then work through it with some pragmatic examples.
Sonya Holt: So when I start thinking back, for me it’s really the time when I was reading, like, “Lean In” and those sorts of books who really helped lay some of the foundations. So when we start talking about authentic executive presence, things that we are teaching now, we are doing things around science of exclusion. So anything that the neuroleadership puts out has been really helpful for us.

And then there’s the book that I have in my bag now, and I’m looking at Tiffany’s – not that bag. But it’s – (laughter) – on the topic of race, the one we’re having a speaker come in. Yes, “White Fragility.” It’s an interesting read and it’s about – it’s by Robin DiAngelo. See? Thank you for being here. And it’s really – it’s from a – the author is a white woman. It’s from her perspective but there’s some really good examples in there were it talks about racism and some of those hard conversations. So we’re looking to have her come in and really start having some of those foundational things at the agency.

Beverly Kirk: Well, I want to thank you all for joining us here this evening. This has been an absolutely fascinating conversation and it’s wonderful to meet you. Thank you all so much for being here. Thank you for coming. (Applause.)

(END)