

Cultivating Security Leadership

Foreword from Steve Schmidt, CISO, Amazon Web Services

Security leadership is a collective pursuit.

What matters most to Chief Information Security Officers—operational excellence? Business continuity? Staying out of the headlines? Maybe it's all of the above.

The role of CISOs is to help guide the board and their peer C-suite leaders as they proactively protect their brands and customers.

With the exponential growth of data in today's businesses, there has been a new emphasis on IT's role in securing that data.

Security, which used to be more infrastructure-centric, demands a new focus on software, and technology leaders have to be deeply involved in software development and investments.

At the same time, security teams also require different skills and mindsets to succeed in new domains. So, while they might be technologists first and foremost, the most successful CISOs recognize that strong security goes well beyond bits and bytes.



Stephen Schmidt, CISO, AWS, shares three key behaviors of security leaders

- 1 THEY LOOK AHEAD**—they do not wait to address risks to the organization. Instead, they lean in on emerging research and threats to stay ahead, while keeping compliance and regulatory requirements front of mind.
- 2 THEY INVEST IN PEOPLE**—collaboration is critical in security, and they recognize security teams need to work well with CIOs, IT teams, and other groups.
- 3 THEY ACT FAST**—risk decisions need to be made quickly, and they do not delay. When things escalate, they use their relationships and experience to pick up the phone and address the problem.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CULTIVATE SECURITY LEADERSHIP?

Most CISOs wear many hats: guardian, strategist, and technologist, but it's the role of mentor that often gets left behind.

This is especially problematic when a recent [Black Hat survey](#) indicated that 73% of organizations need more skilled security talent. Investing in people is a good way to both prevent turnover and continue building the organization's strong security apparatus into the future.

And more importantly, in an increasingly competitive environment, CISOs can't expect to act as the sole guardian at the gate. Sharing knowledge, encouraging a diverse skill-set, and building a talented team increases agility and adaptability. At the end of the day, these habits make the business far more secure.

Let's meet two security leaders who recognize that advancing talent is just as important as investing in technology.





Driving a Culture of Security at One of the World's Most Well-Known Financial Brands



Michele Iacovone

CISO,
INTUIT

Michele Iacovone talks culture, confidence, and community—and how he's empowering future leaders to stay ahead of the cybersecurity curve.

When it comes to security, start at the top

Given the nature of their business—software that helps individuals and organizations manage their finances and taxes—Intuit takes security very seriously. Michele feels very fortunate to have unbelievable support from the highest parts of the organization.

“Our leadership acknowledges that security is very important.” Getting security to be among the top business priorities takes a different mindset, according to Michele. It’s one where the CISO is not just required to be a technical leader, but also a business and change leader.

In large part, he sees his role as one of being “chief influencer.” It’s a recognition that security cannot happen in siloed ways, and that the best and most frictionless approach is one where everyone owns a role in security—from C-suite leaders on down.



Our CEO understands that, more and more, security is a board-level, mission-critical issue, and foundational to deliver on our mission to power prosperity around the world.”



Build a security culture through education

“

When we want people to change their behaviors, it's very hard to do that at the time of need.”

One valuable lesson that Michele has learned in his career is that a proactive approach to security education is paramount.

He has noted that when people work on a project with specific outcomes, they're often committed to a preconceived notion of how they will execute. It takes a lot of energy to try to change people's ways of thinking in the moment—they're just naturally resistant to it.

A more effective approach is to pave the way for that change so that it becomes smoother. He does that by continually educating people on the why behind imperatives for change when it comes to security.

“Investing in making sure people understand the why, and then what the goals, outcomes, and methods are, [means that] when you are executing, or figuring out how to do things, having those conversations becomes far, far easier,” Michele says.



Get security leaders to know the business, and vice versa

Some years back, Intuit evolved its product strategy from a portfolio to a set of interconnected products in an ecosystem, recognizing that most customers use multiple products. The new strategy meant groups had to work much more closely together.

To aid that change, the company champions mobility across groups, as a way of promoting learning and empathy. It's something that Michele practices regularly with his security leadership team, rotating leaders into other functional or business groups.

"It's really important that as a company, Intuit-badged employees are part of the same team and not pitted against each other. We use mobility as a way to fuel this mindset—what we call 'One Intuit.' And this, I think, is even more important in security."

For example, recently the Quickbooks Security Director moved to TurboTax, to learn what it takes to operate security in a different business unit. At the same time, Michele then asked his VP of Cybersecurity to serve as acting security leader for the Quickbooks unit. The goal was to drive empathy for what it means to lead security from within a business unit when one is used to leading from within the company's central security team.

Michele notes: "Without a doubt, those six months made him a far more effective and powerful leader in the center. It probably would have taken him years to get those learnings, and really understand and measure the implications of how you lead from the center."

What has Michele learned about leadership by working with AWS?



Overall, working with AWS has made us all better leaders."

As one of the original trio of leaders that selected AWS, Michele notes "it's been a great partnership from the beginning." And while Intuit was moving to the public cloud, the company also had an opportunity to learn from AWS as well.

"Our partners at AWS have been incredibly gracious with their time, to have us come and study and look at how Amazon runs its business and leads its people and culture."

Intuit encourages its people to be active learners. For Michele, it's been a valuable experience to learn from AWS, a company that he says takes an "incredibly complementary" approach to Intuit's own.

"We've adopted things like the six-pager practices, and many other things that came from seeing AWS operate and having such a close partnership."

For Michele, these kinds of learning opportunities are exactly what's needed to keep himself and his security leadership team on a path of continual advancement. Learning not only makes his team better, but as his leaders become more effective, it also translates into better security for customers.

NETFLIX

Writing the Script on Security Leadership



Jason Chan

VP, CLOUD SECURITY
NETFLIX

Jason Chan takes a moment to discuss his people-centric approach to security in a TV and movie empire, and how it's kept them on top of the marquee—and out of the headlines.

Encourage visibility

For Jason, much of developing security leaders at Netflix is about something surprisingly simple: visibility. He makes it a point to consistently provide details on his actions and initiatives. To that end, every week he sends out a “week in review” message to the security team, which lists key meetings and external activities, as well as their current status.

Not only does this give the team a feeling of participation and purpose, it also gives them much more business context than they’d normally be exposed to.

Jason finds that the end result of this is that his people are generally more equipped to make informed decisions with much less guidance.



Bring people along



Something else Jason feels strongly about is practicing inclusion. Apart from his “week in review” email, he also invites other security leaders to C-suite meetings, especially where key business decisions are being made.

Jason believes that Netflix’s culture encourages transparency, which he uses at regular opportunities to give his security people direct exposure to leadership. It gives them insight into the business decision-making process, while reinforcing the importance of security being at the table as early as possible.

“

At Netflix, direct communication helps my leaders get exposure to senior executives.”

This is especially true in a corporate world where traditionally C-suite executives haven’t given CISOs a place on the organization’s leadership team.

He’s discovered that this practice also leads to better and more efficient outcomes and decisions because the folks most directly involved in security implementation are present.

Foster effective communication skills

“

I often work with my leaders on clarity and precision in writing to make sure their message is heard.”

One thing that seems to hold a lot of tech and security people back in the business, Jason notes, is over-sharing when it comes to memos and status updates—they tend to be overly verbose and too technically detailed. “They’re really just overestimating how much time their audience is willing to invest to digest their messages,” he says.

As security leaders get more and more invites to the business table, this can be a real obstacle when part of the role of the CISO is to communicate the organization’s security and privacy strategy to all of its stakeholders.

Jason goes for a direct feedback approach with his team and engages in coaching them on communication styles. The outcome is that leaders become more effective on the whole in what they say and how they say it, and they are more targeted when sharing less of the unnecessary techy details—something business stakeholders find refreshing.

What has Jason learned about leadership by working with AWS?



AWS has not only been a great cloud partner—they've helped us to sharpen some of the cultural synergies we already share."

Netflix is no stranger to innovation where it relates to company culture, yet Jason is confident that there is much they can learn from their cloud partner of over a decade.

Jason likes to reference Amazon's single-threaded leader approach. This is about keeping the right people laser-focused on the right things so that they aren't distracted by multiple initiatives. The Netflix model can benefit from the same specialist-versus-generalist mentality as the business and technical environment grows in scale and complexity.

It creates intention around product creation, and aids in strong decision making: if you really believe in a product, you will build a focused team around it.

Another similarity AWS and Netflix share is in their feedback mechanism. Amazon's leadership principle "have backbone; disagree and commit" asserts that speaking one's opinion is an obligation (not merely an option)—Jason believes in creating an inclusive culture where "it's your responsibility to disagree, even when it's uncomfortable."

To enact this philosophy, Jason tells us that Netflix often relies on a shared document approach, where stakeholders can "speak" freely in margins, making forthright feedback possible for those who might not be the loudest in the room.

IN CLOSING

Use the AWS Cloud to transform the way you do business. Automate security and compliance tasks to reduce risk so you can innovate faster and free up the resources to focus on important areas like cultivating future security business leaders.



Related content

Creating a Culture of Security

Explore the techniques that contribute to a culture where there is no trade-off between being secure and satisfying customers.

AWS Security and Compliance Quick Reference Guide

Learn how you can achieve savings and scalability while maintaining robust security and regulatory compliance.

AWS re:Invent 2019 Security Leadership Session

Stephen Schmidt, AWS Chief Information Security Officer, shares his perspective on the current state of cloud security.



Innovative leaders share how they drive business growth and transformation.

[Learn more.](#)