

## Kathryn Aten reflects on the impact of Katie Witt's CHDS thesis, "Why We Serve: Public Service Motivation and what the USCIS Mission Means to its Workforce"

By Kathryn Aten

Katie Witt's thesis informs Homeland Security by explaining how policy changes can influence employee public service motivation.<sup>1</sup> Witt traces changes in the USCIS mission and alignment between the organization's and employees' public service values—beliefs about which behaviors are desirable and what it means to “do good” for society<sup>2</sup>—concluding that misalignment may generate a decline in public service motivation. Her work suggests that the political environment—administration and policy changes—alters the fit between public servants' motivations and perceived opportunities to serve within their organizations. Witt recommends that USCIS leaders mitigate employees' perceptions of decreased opportunities to serve in ways congruent with their public service values, but her research also has implications for the development of the Homeland Security field.

As a developing field encompassing diverse organizations and professions, Homeland Security faces the difficulty of building legitimacy, a challenging process exacerbated by political tumult. Legitimacy is a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some...system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions.”<sup>3</sup> Witt discovered that USCIS employees interpret their roles in providing security through the lens of personal values and motivations to serve. Beyond misalignment leading to negative organizational-level outcomes, her work suggests that seismic shifts in policy may undermine the necessary consensus underpinning field legitimacy. Homeland Security leaders should construct field-level norms, values, beliefs, and definitions<sup>4</sup>, and draw on that system to reach a necessarily evolving consensus on organizationally-specific and appropriate actions to protect the nation.

## About the Author

Kathryn Aten is an Associate Professor of Organization Science at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. She teaches strategic management and change, strategic management of information technology, research design, and qualitative and applied research methods. Kathryn holds a joint appointment with Defense Management and Information Sciences and teaches courses for the Center for Homeland Defense and Security. Her research investigates how individuals and organizations adopt and transition technologies as well as how technology implementations influence work and communication. Her research is published in diverse academic journals including, the *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *Journal of World Business* and in technical reports and has been recognized for its impact on decision making by Navy and Marine leaders.

---

## Notes

1. Katie Witt, "Why We Serve: Public Service Motivation and What the USCIS Mission Means to its Workforce" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2021) <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/67194>.
  2. Ulrich Thy Jensen, Lotte Bøgh Andersen, and Christian Bøtcher Jacobsen, "Only When We Agree! How Value Congruence Moderates the Impact of Goal-oriented Leadership on Public Service Motivation." *Public Administration Review* 79, no. 1 (2019): 12-24, 14.
  3. Roy Suddaby, Alex Bitektine, and Patrick Haack, "Legitimacy." *Academy of Management Annals* 11, no. 1 (2017): 451-478; Mark C. Suchman, "Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches." *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): 571-610, 574.
  4. Lawrence, T. B.; Suddaby, R. (2006). "Institutions and Institutional Work." In Clegg, S; Hardy, C; Lawrence, T (eds.). *Handbook of Organization Studies* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Sage. pp. 215–254.
- 

## Copyright

Copyright © 2021 by the author(s). Homeland Security Affairs is an academic journal available free of charge to individuals and institutions. Because the purpose of this publication is the widest possible dissemination of knowledge, copies of this journal and the articles contained herein may be printed or downloaded and redistributed for personal, research or educational purposes free of charge and without permission. Any commercial use of Homeland Security Affairs or the articles published herein is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the copyright holder. The copyright of all articles published in Homeland Security Affairs rests with the author(s) of the article. Homeland Security Affairs is the online journal of the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS).