Threats to national security in the United States have increased in number and form. Perpetrators are using increasingly clever means in hopes of outmaneuvering new technology. As the Transportation Security Administration ramped up its efforts, an unfortunate side effect surfaced—the traveling public felt stressed and at odds with Transportation Security Officers, who were working to protect both airline passengers and the country.

As a result, leadership at TSA created a dramatic change in approach. Rather than focusing solely on the detection of objects, they sought to focus on two things: explosives and people with “hostile intent.” It was clear that trying to observe the subtleties of hostile intent would be less effective in a chaotic environment filled with stressed passengers. **IDEO was engaged to design a solution that calmed the environment of the checkpoint, thus making potential threats stand out.**

By reducing stress in the checkpoint, both security and the passenger experience are improved by making hostile intent more visible. A better passenger experience may lead to a better partnership between the public and the Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) who are watching for anomalous behavior.

**Researching the Checkpoint Experience**

Based on ethnographic research with passengers, TSOs, and airport security stakeholders, IDEO uncovered a series of opportunities to improve the checkpoint experience had by all and, ultimately, improve security. Research insights pointed to a need to foster an ongoing alliance between...
need to foster an ongoing alliance between passengers and security officers. The alliance encouraged an organizational transformation that was embraced by the TSA at large, from security officers to the TSA’s top leadership. Additionally, IDEO found that the airport checkpoint experience could benefit from enabling TSO expertise and dynamic response, facilitating improved passenger flow, and creating an overall sense of collaboration and collectedness during traveler and TSO interaction. To enact these changes, IDEO designed an experience blueprint that reconsidered the spatial feel of the checkpoint, TSO roles and training protocol, communication and information systems, and appropriate and empowering interactions between TSOs and passengers.

IDEO began by first exploring the physical space of several airports. Through observations, interviews, and feedback sessions, the team collected insights about airport lobbies and expanded checkpoint areas. In turn, the data helped uncover potential areas for further development in passenger flow, traffic, and messaging.

In the 300-plus interviews in dozens of airports and other locations, IDEO observed travelers, identifying key emotional characteristics, moods, traveler archetypes, and reactive behaviors typically found in various security situations. The team also explored how TSOs played a role in traveler behavior, which later helped define the appropriate tone and strategy for training both TSOs and TSA managers.

Prototyping a Calmer Passenger Experience

After several rounds of prototyping and feedback sessions, IDEO reworked the physical checkpoint to smooth the transition from lobby to final checkpoint, by creating a calmer passenger experience that enhances security. The physical space took form as a live working prototype in the Baltimore-Washington International Airport, where it currently stands as a demonstration of TSA’s strategic shift toward behavioral, human-centered security.

Through the BWI airport demonstration, TSA employees gained extensive hands-on experience with both the spatial prototype and the teams working on the space, tone, and strategy. As more TSA employees became involved in testing and iterating the work, so too did the layers of leadership within TSA, including the officers of Intelligence and Security Operations.
Moving Toward Human-Centered Design

TSA employs a risk-based, layered approach to security. The transformational culture change undertaken with IDEO moved the agency to embrace the notion that its employees, from front-line security officers to management and leadership, are crucial to improving both checkpoint security and the overall experience. As TSA leadership became more familiar with IDEO’s research findings and as other organization shareholders became involved, the project gained buy-in across all levels. Additionally, an understanding of what was needed for security in the twenty-first century expanded throughout the TSA.

After establishing the blueprint for the physical space, tone, and strategy of the checkpoint experience, IDEO created a training curriculum to empower TSOs and passengers to improve airport security. The curriculum works to create a sustainable solution for improving human interactions during a passenger’s journey through airport security. Working with IDEO designers and the TSA, the team piloted several programs in airports nationwide and incorporated vital TSA information from various areas of the organization, including an Intelligence brief and techniques used by bomb appraisal officers and behavior detection officers. The newly crafted TSO training encourages a broadening out from rote-based procedures and workflows to a more flexible yet rigorous reliance on critical thinking. The new training includes an emphasis on understanding behaviors, people, and security measures, while instilling confidence among colleagues and passengers.

To better facilitate an overarching change within TSA, IDEO also created a curriculum for TSA managers to use when training security officers about the organization’s new human-centered approach and checkpoint experience. The management and leadership curriculum includes exercises and guidelines to help managers empower TSOs, support and encourage feedback within the organization, give recognition, and embody these ideas as role models, not big brothers. According to Kip Hawley, assistant secretary of Homeland Security and TSA administrator, “TSA was created to never forget [9/11]. That’s what we do every day, every shift, every checkpoint is never forget.”

TSA is training its entire workforce of 50,000 employees at 450 domestic airports. Foreign governments have contacted IDEO for assistance with their airport security. At selected locations, elements of the modular Checkpoint Evolution were implemented in 2009.