

Greater Than:

Nuclear Threat Professionals Reimagine Their Field



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How might the nuclear threat reduction field become one of the brightest sources of creativity and innovation on the planet? In 2019, N Square interviewed 72 DC-based nuclear threat reduction professionals to gather diverse perspectives on the state of the field and hopes for its future. In *Greater Than: Nuclear Threat Professionals Reimagine the Field*, we share the findings of this research.

The report offers candid, firsthand insight into critical internal challenges facing the nuclear threat field—including serious workplace issues affecting the resilience and mental health of nuclear threat professionals, systemic barriers to innovation and collaboration, and the absence of basic structural supports that other fields take for granted. The individuals we interviewed—spanning early-career, mid-career, and advanced-career professionals—were extraordinarily forthcoming about the issues they saw as impeding their work and the field’s progress. The report is filled with direct quotes from these professionals, capturing the depth and range of their perspectives.

After sorting the data and noting key patterns from these interviews, we held a series of collaborative workshops designed to check our analysis, invite further input and elaboration, and begin turning what we’d heard into a springboard for creating a brighter future for the field. The result was not just a clearer definition of challenges but also the beginnings of a vision—and a series of first steps—for adaptation and reinvention to meet an evolving set of 21st-century nuclear threats.

DISSATISFACTION WITH THE CURRENT STATE

(pgs. 10–45)

Our interviews unearthed a range of views on the current state of the field and barriers to people doing their best work. Much of the dissatisfaction we heard fell into four distinct categories—different facets that together signal a field ripe for re-imagining.

Theme 1: Stasis + Risk Aversion

Many interviewees noted that the field feels old (in terms of both age and ideas) and static. They described a field that has grown “top heavy” with advanced-career leaders, advisors, and fellows, which they saw as preventing the field from adapting and evolving to keep pace with a changing world. Generational frictions played into these observations—but even advanced-career professionals described ways in which the field felt “stuck.” Younger professionals, however, saw danger in speaking up and challenging norms, especially when job security was on the line.

Theme 2: Fragmentation + Competition

Interviewees also described a field marked by fragmentation, with organizations operating as silos, hindering collaboration, and creating unnecessary duplication of effort. There was also a sense that this lack of connectivity was not accidental, with organizations often feeling the need to guard their work, a dynamic linked to competition for resources and the currency afforded by the publication of ideas in the field. Interviewees across experience levels also showed concern that the field seemed calibrated to reward personal gain over collective impact.

Theme 3: Exclusivity + Toxicity

Another key theme related to the field’s culture—both who gets to be in the field and how people are treated once they enter it. Many interviewees stated a desire for more inclusivity in the field. While most focused on race, ethnicity, and gender in these comments, they also described other kinds of diversity—of viewpoint, professional and socioeconomic backgrounds, and more. The interviews were also full of commentary—largely from early- and mid-career professionals—about what they saw as the

field’s “toxic” culture. They described a landscape marked by an intensely critical and sometimes biting culture where many are made to feel “less than,” to the point of driving good people out of the field.

Theme 4: Career Uncertainty + Lack of Structural Support

Interviewees almost universally described a field where well-defined advancement pathways don’t exist and where many of the career supports that other professions take for granted—including strong managerial and leadership training and career mentorship—were also widely absent. Of paramount importance to a majority of the early- to mid-career professionals we interviewed was compensation—not just sufficient base pay but benefits packages (e.g., parental leave, 401(k) plans, healthcare coverage) that would enable them to imagine staying in the field.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD

(pgs. 46–69)

Moving out of dissatisfaction requires knowing what you are moving toward: a new vision for a better way of operating. In this case, we considered what the field might look like if each of these dissatisfaction themes was turned on its head:

- The opposite of Stasis + Risk Aversion is Reinvention + Reinvigoration. Structures and fields that regularly renew and refresh themselves are far more sustainable than those that do not. Yet this field has not yet found a way to reshape itself to meet a changing landscape of external threats and internal needs. How might this community renew itself? What might it look like if the field made a commitment to sustainability rather than stasis?
- The opposite of Fragmentation + Competition is Coordination + Collaboration. Right now this community lacks the mechanisms, capacity, and competencies to coordinate efforts effectively, and incentives and rewards can be at cross-purposes with the goal of greater cohesion. How might a more systemic approach change how everyone works—and how progress gets measured? What supports might be needed to make collaboration a foundational part of the field?

“Most of the people who work in this field have been doing the same thing for 30 years and their thinking has not evolved at all. Especially in arms control. It’s the dogma. This community ... hasn’t evolved with changes in the security environment.”

—Advanced-Career Male

- The opposite of Exclusivity + Toxicity is Inclusiveness + Respect. Privileging certain voices and expertise over others, and excluding diverse perspectives and backgrounds, limits the kinds of technical ideas and policy solutions that will emerge. What if the field came to see diversity of thought and composition as a critical core strength? How might actively inviting new perspectives into the field reframe our understanding of nuclear threats and how best to combat them?
- The opposite of Career Uncertainty + Lack of Structural Support is Clear Career Pathways + Intentional Redesign. The nuclear threat field sprang up organically, without the benefit of intentional design. What if the field entered a period of intentional redesign? In that effort, how might we prioritize and show value for the well-being of this workforce? What if career pathways were clear and professional support universal?

“The nuclear field eats their young. I’ve been in other fields which are much more encouraging for younger folks to stay in the field. Same people, same tools, same ideas over and over again.”

—Mid-Career Female

What would it look like to successfully move from the present to this bold new vision for the future? We created four scenarios—provocative yet plausible stories about the future—to explore how new ideas might begin to take form. The scenarios explore how we might draw on research and learn from best practices in change management to replenish this field, reinvigorating its mission and its workforce for a new time. We then workshopped these scenarios—along with a set of fictional characters that personify the traits that interviewees said they admired and were needed in the field—with several groups of professionals, refining them through a collaborative review process.

In *A Fresh Start*, a group of respected leaders and funders hatches a plan for incentivizing and rewarding risk-taking as part of a larger field-building initiative. They launch a disruptive project, dubbed FRESH Start, that creates a new kind of learning community in the field. FRESH Start facilitates ongoing conversation about what does and doesn’t work in the field, forms new pathways for sharing and learning from best practices, and creates a “failure forum” where members can share stories of efforts that didn’t work. By 2025, the program becomes both a recruitment tool and a conduit for field-wide renewal.

In *The Spinoff*, a dogged group of change agents, determined to bring new vigor and progress to the nuclear field, forms a quirky, unconventional skunkworks called Project Spinoff. By employing a potent combination of systems theory and design, this unlikely team prototypes and eventually scales a new mechanism for field-wide coordination and collaboration. After creating a systems-level view of the DC-based nuclear threat reduction community and how it functions, they begin to address the structural barriers getting in the way of collaboration and bring organizations into alignment on strategy and mission.

In *Detox*, a group of early-career professionals enlists a few well-respected senior leaders to partner with them in addressing the field’s toxic culture. By creating connection and relationship across generations, the group achieves a radical shift in mental models—a shift from “we are in battle” to “we are building a community.” Eventually, this leads to consensus that unless this field attends to its own health and well-being—and embraces coalition-building as a foundational leadership skill—policy goals will be nearly impossible to achieve.

In *Evolution*, scores of advanced-career professionals retire and the field looks different as a result. These emeritus leaders become part of a learning community to ensure that their institutional and field wisdom is not lost. Boards and hiring committees begin to separate subject matter expertise from leadership ability, so that many of the individuals stepping into new leadership are not nuclear experts at all. Rather, they come from other fields and have established track records of leading highly effective and highly diverse teams. These leaders see their job as humanizing the workplace, unleashing the potential of every contributor, and making sure every member of the community is authentically valued.

FEASIBLE FIRST STEPS

[pgs. 70–77]

If these scenarios represent a new vision for the field, then how might we pragmatically get there? While this report does not provide those answers, it does offer a catalog of feasible first steps that three different groups of stakeholders could take right now to begin moving the field toward this new vision. Specifically, we outlined a series of first steps for three stakeholder groups: vanguards, or established leaders who have recognized the need for innovative approaches and partners; heirs, or up-and-coming nuclear professionals who value collaboration and intersectionality and are eager to make change; and funders, or those with financial and other resources who want to help strengthen the field's capacity to innovate and solve problems.

In the report, these first steps are broken out by theme and by which combinations of stakeholders could work together to move the field toward this better state. To counter stasis and risk aversion, for example, vanguards and funders could regularly solicit, value, and implement ideas from early-career staff, while vanguards, heirs, and funders together could commit to supporting innovative projects or those with less clear deliverables. This section also includes additional thoughts on steps that each group can take individually to move toward this new vision.

A CALL TO ACTION

[pgs. 80–86]

Looking across the breadth and depth of this research, two things stood out. First, that some fundamental issues are preventing the field from turning up its capacity for innovation and even trusting that doing so could open exciting pathways forward. Second, that this mission-driven field has real hunger to do more together to tackle nuclear threat, and significant imagination about what that could look like. We heard these two things, side by side, again and again, throughout this process. Frustration and aspiration. A sense of feeling held back but the energy to move forward in bold new ways.

The report's final section tackles resistance—a natural reaction to any proposal for change and a force that could impede progress toward this new vision. But if any field can buck the trend to become a positive deviant—a pathbreaker—in regard to cultural challenges, we think it is this one. Our research revealed a great hunger among nuclear professionals for redesigning and optimizing the field so that it is more welcoming of diverse perspectives, embraces the varied needs and talents of everyone who participates in it, and is better positioned to do its crucial work well. Importantly, we believe that refining the way the field works will not detract from making progress on policy goals. In fact, we propose that it is only by addressing these issues of health and sustainability head-on that there is any hope of reaching these goals in our lifetimes.

Ultimately, it will be up to the community to decide whether resistance will be greater than the desire to systemically address the critical dissatisfactions that are holding the field back. We hope this report shoots a flare across the field, illuminating the contours of a new, collaboratively developed future along with ideas about how we might collectively begin to get there.

Read the full report here:

[“Greater Than: Nuclear Threat Professionals Reimagine Their Field”](#)

“I have a great group of horizontal peers. My best work comes from learning from them. We don't agree on everything and we have some great discussions. That has pushed me to do better work.”

—Early-Career Female