



Tomorrow I head back home from the best professional event I've ever attended. Before leaving, I would like to briefly share what I learned from Defense Entrepreneurs Forum 2013 in Chicago. In addition to the workshops, connections made, and superb line-up of speakers, I got a glimpse of what a great military conference looks like.:

1.) Lose the Uniforms- I'm not sure of the science behind it, but the lack of uniforms and visible rank this weekend broke down barriers to discussion. Navy ensigns conversed with Army majors, and Air Force colonels spoke with Marine Corps sergeants. For 72 hours, rank and service took a backseat to professional discussion.

2.) Don't Turn Off All Cell Phones- The backdrop for the event was a Tweetwall that gave all new meaning to "sidebar conversations". Not only was Twitter allowed, it was encouraged. As speakers gave their presentations, the tweet wall served as a running discourse between the attendees and those following the conference from remote locations. Additional points, counterpoints, and random musings flowed throughout the weekend. To read these check out #DEF2013 on Twitter.

3.) Offer Variety- DEF also gave me options. I could choose whether I wanted to attend a

Booth Business School Professor's talk on fostering creative organizations or a DARPA representative's take on building an organizational culture focused on innovation. Attendees could also select what working groups they wanted to attend. Some chose to work on the acquisitions process while others focused on military education. The atmosphere felt constructive, not constrictive.

4.) Require Deliverables- I've been to military conferences where working groups deliberated on some defense related issue, and when the dust settled there was nothing to show for it. At DEF, working groups were encouraged to produce a short white paper with actionable recommendations, and a brief presentation on the solution to their topic. These outcomes forced professionals to work in teams, under condensed timelines, with people they had never met before. It was an awesome social experiment!

5.) Diversify- DEF was the first the time in my military career that I tackled a problem with a Marine sergeant, a Navy ensign, an Australian major, and a middle school teacher. While some might argue the benefit of this diverse group, the perspectives and experiences brought to table were much more valuable, producing fresh thoughts and insights that might not have otherwise been possible.

As we continue to reduce defense budgets, there may be fewer military conferences on the horizon. We must get the most out of these events, and I think by adopting some of the practices of DEF, organizations will be able to see a greater return on investment. I'm already looking forward to seeing what DEF 2014 has to offer!

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