

By: Luke Hutchison

When it comes to creating change in the largest bureaucracy on earth - the Department of Defense - it can often seem like a challenging, if not impossible, task. However, there are some Intrapreneurs who have seen a problem, developed a solution, mobilized support around it and gone on to have a significant impact on the DoD. The story of the West Point Negotiation Project (WPNP) provides a great example of leaders who have done just that, and in this case significantly impacted the way that our military negotiates today. At the upcoming [DEFxColorado](#) at the Air Force Academy on August 12th we'll be highlighting the story of WPNP and many others organizations that have created a positive change and drove innovation in the defense community.

Identifying a Problem

In 2003 then Captain Aram Donigian deployed with an Infantry Battalion to Eastern Afghanistan where part of his job required resolving disputes with local Afghans. One dispute in particular, with an influential gas station owner in the area, had frustrated the previous unit and had spilled into Aram's deployment. The gas station owner had seen his business close as a result of American activity in the area and had filed a claim to recoup his lost business as well as save face for what had happened to him. Like most Army leaders who deployed at the time, Aram had no formal negotiation training and simply used some 'common sense' to resolve the dispute. Aram made a low-ball 'take it or leave it' offer and resolved the dispute, turned the tracker from red to green and earned praise from his chain of command.

Following his Command time, Aram went on to the MBA program at the Tuck School of Business where he met Professor [Jeff Weiss](#), an experienced negotiator with nearly 30 years of negotiation experience and recent author of Harvard Business Review's [Guide to Negotiating](#). It was there in Jeff's course that Aram realized the Principled Negotiation

approach taught in the course would have helped him achieve a much better outcome in Afghanistan. The approach was first described in the book [Getting To Yes](#) and advocates four fundamental [principles](#) of negotiation: 1) separate the people from the problem; 2) focus on interests, not positions; 3) invent options for mutual gain; and 4) insist on objective criteria. The positional approach that he used damaged any possibility of having an effective relationship with an influential Afghan leader who could have been a valuable source for intelligence and ally to influence other leaders in the area. With this in mind, Aram went on to teach the negotiation course at West Point which had just started a couple years earlier in 2006.

Soon after Aram started teaching at West Point though, he began receiving calls from some of the course's early graduates who had started arriving at their units. The newly commissioned officers found themselves using the Principled Negotiation approach they'd been taught on a regular basis and especially deployed. At the time there was some negotiation and key leader engagement training occurring in the Army, but most approaches lacked the systematic approach and results, that the Principled Negotiation approach offered. Graduates of the course increasingly found themselves being asked by their Commanders to reach back to West Point for more resources and training so they could then teach their units Principled Negotiation.

Developing a Solution

Seeing the need for more Principled Negotiation training beyond just the 60 cadets being taught in the course each year, Aram and Jeff co-founded the [West Point Negotiation Project](#) in 2009 to enhance the ability of military leaders to engage in the complex and challenging negotiations they face in both peace and combat situations. One of the biggest impacts the project has had was in 2010 after Aram, Jeff and their colleague Jonathan Hughes published "[Extreme Negotiations](#)" in the *Harvard Business Review* which highlighted a number of extreme negotiations military leaders had deployed. An instructor at the Navy SEAL's

Platoon Leaders Course read the article and contacted Aram to see if they could provide a Mobile Training Team for SEALs going through the course. Aram obliged and cadets and faculty from WPNP began flying to train Navy SEALs going through the course year after year. The project also provided consulting work for then Brigadier General H.R. McMaster's anti-corruption task force, Shafafiyat (Transparency). Aram served as the task force's Chief of Engagements while cadets from the project worked on specific issues for the task force back at West Point.

The project has also helped drive the conversation on how the US military negotiates through other articles such as "[*Failure to Engage: Current Negotiation Strategies and Approaches*](#)" in *Military Review* and "[*Beyond Formality: A Better Way to Negotiate in Afghanistan*](#)" in the *Armed Forces Journal*. WPNP has also directly shaped doctrine such as the writing of the Army Training Network Task's "*Prepare for a Cross Cultural Negotiation*" and "*Conduct a Cross Cultural Negotiation*" and also contributed to the revision of the leader competency 'Extend Influence Beyond the Chain of Command' in *ADRP 6-22: Army Leadership* and ensured the language in the manual built on what had been taught by WPNP over the preceding years.

Going on almost a decade now, WPNP continues to have an outsized impact on the way the military negotiates. It continues to send Mobile Training Teams to various units, hosts an annual conference for 100 cadets from across the country and has written cases and other material specific to the negotiations military leaders face. Thousands of cadets and military leaders from every branch of service in the DoD, and even a few Canadians, have now been exposed to Principled Negotiation as a result of the West Point Negotiation Project.

Learn More at DEFxColorado

To hear Aram's story and other Intrapreneurs in our military who have not just seen problems in the military - but actually done something about them - join us on August 12th

at the Air Force Academy for the inaugural *DEFxColorado*. Our keynote speaker will be Brigadier General Andrew Armacost the Dean of the Faculty at the Air Force Academy who has been a champion of innovative initiatives such as the creation of the technological innovation program at USAFA where cadets develop new technologies for military and civilian use and the launch of Air Force [Cyberworx](#). We then have an all-star speaker lineup of current and former military leaders who have founded new organizations, led innovation in counter-terrorism units, written articles for the *Harvard Business Review*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Military Review* and elsewhere and spearheaded the fastest weapon system delivered from concept to combat since the [P-51 Mustang in World War II](#).

In addition to hearing some awesome stories about innovation, we'll also learn and apply tools to drive innovation. We're combining two pre-existing tools to create the "Intrapreneur's Toolbox" which combines Influence Strategies based off of the Principled Negotiation approach described earlier and Lean Startup principles based off of the [Hacking 4 Defense](#) course started at Stanford University. We will form groups around current challenges, apply these concepts, and then pitch them to a Shark Tank style panel.

Most importantly though, there will be plenty of time to connect with other innovators and Intrapreneurs throughout the day and during our two happy hours. In the book *How Google Works*, the authors discuss how a Google hiring philosophy is to "Hire enough great people, and the resulting intellectual mixture will inevitably combust into creativity and success."^[1] Although no one is being hired, we intend for that combustion of creativity to happen at *DEFxColorado* and spread across Colorado's Front Range. Along with the new relationships built, we hope to see tangible results as well, such as universities establishing Hacking 4 Defense programs and partnering with the numerous military bases within the state to solve national security challenges from the ground up and providing civilian students a way to contribute to our national security in a meaningful way. We look forward to seeing you at the inaugural *DEFxColorado* and joining the combustion.

Luke Hutchison and Joe Byerly are both Army officers stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado and are also facilitators for DEFxColorado. For additional information or to register for DEFxColorado visit our [website](#) or email Luke at luke@defenseentrepreneurs.org.

[1] How Google Works (p. 23).

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