



By Zachary Griffiths

Military officers plan and execute complex operations. Junior officers cut their teeth on platoon attacks, convoys, [military balls](#), and even conferences. These latter events are hardly new challenges. The [Army Officer's Guide of 1917](#) recommends event planners establish six planning committees, covering everything from invitations to music and dancing. Planning big events begins up to a year out and requires [detailed planning](#).

The lessons outlined below come from my two years of experience with Senior Conference,

an annual event administered by West Point's [Department of Social Sciences](#). Senior Conference brings about 60 distinguished guests – 30 panelists and 30 participants – to West Point for about two days each April. This year's conference aimed to help the United States Army Pacific develop a more comprehensive understanding of the Indo-Pacific region.

Once a conference wraps up, planning for the next year begins immediately. Senior Conference relies on a team that consists of three part-time planners but surges to more than thirty during execution.

Other events may differ significantly from our model, but these tips, presented in rough chronological order, should resonate with anyone assigned to lead a military event.

1-Reserve the venue.

Depending on your location, few venues may exist to accommodate your event. After a hasty mission analysis, snap up suitable event space, lodging, and catering. Ensure they have a generous cancellation policy. Senior Conference locks in reservations a year out from execution.

2-Start from the mission.

Military frameworks provide powerful tools for successful events. When your boss tasks you with an event, get guidance and then schedule a follow-up to present your proposed commander's intent. Through mission analysis, you'll also identify resource requirements. Conferences are expensive in time and money. Manage unit expectations by forecasting manpower and financial requirements early. Early buy-in on the mission, purpose, key tasks, and endstate ensures that your vision stays synchronized with the commander. After the commander approves the intent, stay on azimuth with regular check-ins.

Clear understanding of the commander's intent helps prioritize efforts, especially when resource constraints lead to disagreements among the planning staff.

3-Get a legal review

Taxpayers are sensitive to how their money is spent. Ensure you properly steward their funds by getting a legal review to ensure you are in compliance with [Department of Defense policy](#) and [Army Directive 2016-14 \(Army Conference Policy\)](#). Initiate your legal review soon after you publish the commander's approved intent so you're covered throughout planning and execution.

4-Build your team.

Large events require a team for successful execution. Whether formed before or after the commander's intent is approved, building your team is the second most important component of event execution. Manpower requirements should nest with the commander's intent. While your commander may handpick the primary staff, the event lead should suggest others with substantive expertise who they don't mind spending a lot of time with. As I stepped into the lead role last year, I recruited a [China-expert and friend from graduate school](#) to assist my efforts. Whoever you pick, protect them from other responsibilities so they can focus on planning.

Planners should consider whether to build out a mini-military staff, or organize [functionally](#). Both approaches have merits. Staffs who clearly define responsibilities are better suited for less-defined problems, but come with greater manpower requirements. Functional organization requires less overhead but greater knowledge of event management.

Senior Conference is organized functionally. Responsibility falls on three department members organized around substance and administration. Because Senior Conference is an annual event, the deputy apprentices to the executive secretary before assuming that role in

the following year. This system retains institutional knowledge for the process, allowing continued reflection and improvement.

During event execution, we added two major roles and about thirty less taxing positions. First, our department administrative staff supported conference registration through their presence and production of name cards. Second, we hired a [rapporteur](#) to assemble our conference report. Six department members supported her as note-takers, ensuring she had sufficient information to write a detailed report. Beyond these note-takers, Senior Conference also required drivers, registration staff, manual labor, and escorts for distinguished visitors.

No event is possible without a team. When possible, handpick your team and train them so the event executes smoothly. Whether planning a multi-day conference or hail and farewell, you will work closely with your team. Pick problem solvers with functional expertise that react smoothly to changes — there will be changes.

5-Manage your vendors.

Consider your vendors like those bulldozers attached to your battalion. You have [tactical control](#) over them - but with a twist. Like the engineer platoon, vendors provide essential services, but require detailed direction and control. The event organizer must keep diligent notes, track assigned tasks, and integrate vendors into rehearsals. Never take anything for granted. Always verify that vendors have completed assigned tasks. Unlike the engineer platoon that comes with two dozers regardless of how badly you want three, everything is negotiable with your vendor. Ask for reductions in price or for them to throw in extra goodies. Never let them see you sweat.

6-Outreach.

Conferences often aim to reach both resident and external audiences. Senior Conference

was no different – we brought together diverse speakers and participants to better understand the Indo-Pacific. We also sought to spread our findings to the broader policy community via a variety of products. When reaching outside your unit, consider integrating your specially trained [PAO](#).

Tailor your outreach to your audience. Clearly defining that audience in your commander's intent will assist with this. If you seek to make a mark on how the Army executes operations, encourage panelists to write articles to blogs like the [Modern War Institute](#) leading up to the conference, consider streaming or live-blogging your panels, and publish your conference's conclusions with [Military Review](#). For conferences aimed at the strategic-level, consider a [post](#) with accompanying [podcasts](#) at the War College's [War Room](#) blog, a monograph from the War College's *Strategic Studies Institute*, and or perhaps a forum of articles in *Parameters*. Dedicating staff to this role could further engage non-military audiences on [Twitter](#) or kickstarting the conversation at blogs like [War on the Rocks](#) with broader reach.

But how can you know if your efforts reached your audience? Direct feedback from surveyed participants is great, but doesn't capture how your message resonates with external audiences. Most social media platforms offer fine platforms for measuring effectiveness. For example, [Twitter's analytics](#) give you a sense of who's engaging with your messages. Likewise, blogs hosting your posts can provide reflections on your writing. Based on these measures, you can better assess whether your message landed as desired and even dynamically shift your outreach plan based on results.

7-Be hospitable to your guests.

Whether it's soldiers attending your battalion ball or an audience of global leaders attending the former [Prime Minister of Australia's](#) keynote address, all guests deserve attention to their experience. Expectations about hospitality depend on the event, your commander's

intent, and the resources available. At a minimum, guests should feel welcomed, appreciated throughout the event, and receive a thank-you note after their departure. Consider appropriate gifts for keynote speakers or panelists that may remind the speaker of their time at your event - but again, make sure you have a legal review approving those gifts.

If you are inviting distinguished visitors, ensure you assign [escort officers \(see page 76\)](#). Local escorts bring knowledge of the conference and area that augment their everyday staff. Some guests will not want their services, but even the easiest distinguished visitor may need remarks printed or transportation to a side event.

Guests may not remember good hospitality, but they will remember dirty bathrooms or missed connections. Get an outside perspective on your hospitality with a participant survey, ideally delivered as guests prepare to leave so they are still thinking about your event. Google forms and other tools simplify data collection and analysis, though paper surveys still work great.

Large events highlight your unit. Good events start from a clearly understood commander's intent. This commander's intent should touch on the event's goal, who the event seeks to influence, and how it seeks to influence that audience. From the intent, the lead planner can build their team and the event to best meet the commander's goals. Event planners should [challenge assumptions](#) that obstruct execution of the commander's intent.

Novice event planners should reach for resources beyond this post. All industries hold events, so consider lessons from sources like the [Harvard Business Review](#) or take online classes from the [Professional Convention Management Association](#). Likewise, the wide literature on event planning will enhance your event. Consider books by [Judy Allen](#), the queen of the event writing space, or others that aim to help you [differentiate your event](#) from every other hail and farewell.

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