

Officers Gain Corporate Experience in Fellows Program

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 29, 2001 – Many people believe the military has “its own way of doing things” and will never change. But DoD officials are trying to debunk that thought through a program that gains military officers hands-on experience in civilian corporations.

Two officers from each Service are chosen every year to participate in the Secretary of Defense Corporate Fellows Program. The officers, in grades O-5 or O-6, spend one year working at a high level in a civilian corporation to learn other ways of doing business, program director Eric Briggs said.

“It’s an opportunity for normally busy military guys that have a career-path set out – the operators, the fliers, the tank drivers, and the ship drivers, and so forth – to see how the outside world is doing business, having to continually innovate, adapt, and change in a competitive environment,” Briggs explained.

He said civilian corporations are sometimes more “open to change” than the Defense Department, and that this is a valuable lesson for military officers to learn. Military officers are generally pretty savvy on new technology, he said, but “It’s the organizations and processes that are perhaps more important than the new technology itself.”

Army Col. Colin Dunn, an alumnus of the program, agreed. The current commander of Army Broadcasting Service in Alexandria, Va., spent a year with the Cable News Network [CNN] in 1996 and 1997. He said the Corporate Fellows Program broadened his perspective.

“There are many other ways of doing things besides the military way,” Dunn said. “And you find that by immersing yourself in a corporation that you find best practices, best business practices that are eminently applicable to what we do in DoD.”

Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps officers are chosen for the program when their records go before Senior Service College selection boards. Navy officers have to apply directly to their Service’s Federal Executive Fellowship Program, Briggs said.

The program has both long- and short-term goals. In the short term, participants brief the Secretary of Defense, other senior leaders in the Secretary’s office, and their own Services’ senior leaders after completing their year in the corporate world. “Whatever relevant information they find when they’re out there, they can come back and talk directly to the people in the Pentagon who can do something about it,” Briggs said.

The more important, long-term benefit of the program is in opening these future

senior leaders' eyes that there's more than one way of doing business. "When the officers come back, they're motivated to change their Services, improve their Services, and improve DoD," Briggs said.

He quoted the old adage that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. "Maybe the real secret is to teach the young dogs better tricks as they're coming up, and then they're going to be making smarter decisions for the rest of their military careers," Briggs said. "They're going to be more knowledgeable about the outside world, and so it's going to improve them and, in turn, improve the Department in the long-term."

Dunn agreed with this as well. He said his year at CNN taught him to be a better leader and to be more accessible to his troops. Dunn said he believes there is a "good idea firewall" in many military organizations. "It might be a person, it might be a policy, or bureaucracy that stops you from giving the good idea to the person or people who need to hear it," he said.

The most successful organizations break down these firewalls and let good ideas in, he said. He also noted that people at CNN weren't punished for having ideas that ultimately didn't work. On the contrary, he said, those persons were rewarded for trying.

"So what you had was a lot of folks who were taking chances," he said. "You might

not have victory every time, but because people knew they could take a chance, they were willing to come forward with ideas."

The company harnessed the innovative capability of the entire organization, not just the leaders, "which is what we do in government," Dunn said.

Another thing alumni of the program have learned is that it's important to manage change. "Change is no easier on the outside than it is in the military," Briggs said. "We tend to disparage the DoD and say, 'Oh, we're all a bunch of dinosaurs and we can never change.' But change is not any easier on the outside.

"*Change management* is a term most of our officers haven't heard of until they come to the program," he said. "Corporate leaders don't just write a directive and expect significant change to happen. They also need a plan for how to lead their personnel through the change that will take place. And the senior leaders stay involved.

For more information on the Secretary of Defense Corporate Fellows Program, visit the program's Internet home page at <http://www.ndu.edu/sdcfp/sdcfshom.html>.

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