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Seminar Helps Senior Officials Fine-Tune Leadership Skills

Matthew Schehl | September 18, 2018



Attendees at the latest NPS Center for Executive Education (CEE) Navy Senior Leadership Seminar (NSLS) practice the craft of strategic negotiations during a course exercise. Held multiple times annually, CEE's NSLS provides Navy leaders with a range of emerging best practices in strategic leadership.

Senior leaders from across the Navy recently converged at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) to learn new ways to lean into the service's toughest command challenges.

Dozens of participants at the Navy Senior Leader Seminar (NSLS), hosted by NPS' **Center for Executive Education** (CEE), in late August, discovered a range of emerging "best practices" in strategic leadership: planning, communications, negotiations, effects-based thinking, risk and financial management, and innovation.

"The overall goal of this seminar is to empower these leaders to become more effective change agents and better informed stewards of the Navy's resources," said NSLS program manager Bob Huddleston. "The attendees are a diverse mix of everything from an O-5 about to take on a first command, to a senior O-6 going to take over a major command."

NSLS attendees – usually O-6s and high-potential O-5s, as well as senior civilians and senior enlisted – are preparing themselves to meet increasingly complex organizational challenges in their current and future assignments, he continued.

"Once they go to their new assignment, they often say, 'I'm inheriting a large organization and I've never done a major change effort; I could sure use some help.' So that's exactly what we do," Huddleston said.

The intense, nine-day workshop was split between presentations and small group working sessions, where attendees are paired with leading academics, thought leaders and senior executives from both the Navy and private sector.

The NSLS strategic negotiations segment, for example, introduced participants to **William Lincoln**, one of the world's pre-eminent mediations experts.

During an interactive group presentation, Lincoln imparted his personal expertise gleaned through more than 40 years as a practitioner in critical, often highly-volatile negotiations around the globe.

Lincoln then coached small group teams as they role-played through high-stakes strategic negotiations scenarios, where they had the opportunity to refine their tactics, techniques and procedures.

Seminar topics also covered a wide gamut of other critical issues, including Navy strategic planning, conflict management, leadership types and styles, wellness and nutrition, ethics, communications, emerging technology trends and innovative thinking.

Through NSLS, CEE leaders say, participants learn to unlock their full potential as a leader, and more holistically understand their environment, beginning with themselves.

"This has been one of the better courses I've been through in my 30-year career," said Navy Capt. Tim 'Lucky' Kinsella, prospective commanding officer of **Naval Air Station Pensacola**.

“I think I’d best describe it as a journey of discovery about myself: reconnecting with myself as a leader, what the Navy means to me, and what my job means to me,” he added. “It’s a recalibration of myself within the organization.

August’s senior leadership seminar is just the latest NSLS offered by CEE. Seven NSLS’s per year have been funded by the Chief of Naval Personnel since it was formed in 2012 to replace its predecessor, the Navy Corporate Business Course, and CEE also regularly takes the seminar to commands which request tailored training.

“These seminars are made up of all communities: aviators, submariners, ship-drivers, nurses, dentists, [explosive ordnance disposal], lawyers and civilians,” Huddleston said. “We have so much going on and it’s all high quality.”

Word of mouth has driven the success of NSLS, and the program continues to be in high demand, he added.

That’s what brought Navy Capt. Matthew Duffy to NPS to attend this most recent NSLS. As the deputy wing commander of the Airborne Command & Control and Logistics Wing (ACCLW), he is always seeking to become a better leader.

“[NSLS’s] reputation really drove me here,” he said. “We have some really fantastic training courses in the Navy – some better than others – but to a tee, all of my colleagues that have attended in the past have raved about this very unique two-week course.”

Specifically, Duffy said, NSLS affords him the opportunity to do some deep thinking on potential strategies for his wing, which he will assume command of next year.

“The NSLS allowed me to really start thinking about where I want to position and take the community,” he said. “It’s a chance to do some deep self-reflection and expose some of my weaknesses that I need to improve upon, as well as some of my strengths, which I hope to not only continue but to pass on to those junior to me.”

Duffy compared the NSLS to executive leadership boot camps and seminars, which Fortune 500 companies use to cultivate their leadership.

“For the Navy to invest significant resources in this speaks volumes about its desire to ensure that senior leaders can take some of the best practices from business in the private sector and incorporate those into the Navy,” he said.

This represents a win-win for both the individual and the Navy, according to attendee Master Chief Petty Officer Thaddeus Wright, who aims to bring the wealth of information gleaned at NSLS back to Naval Supply Systems Command (**NAVSUP**).

This ranges, he said, from big picture items such as national defense-level discussions and strategic review, to the granular: basic human interaction, personality assessment, physical fitness and sleep studies and – most importantly – how these all fit together.

“When you get that information, it takes you a step back and maybe see some things that either A, we weren’t doing well as the organization or B, as an individual I wasn’t doing as a leader,” Wright said. “The takeaways have been tremendous; I’ve really learned a lot and I’m just grateful to be here.”

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