Conference shares tools of negotiation

Story and Photo by Mike Strasser
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Negotiation is a skill that can be applied to all facets of life, Firstie Stephen Koshansky explained at the start of the West Point Negotiation Project Conference March 25-26. Whether it's bargaining for a car or resolving a conflict among colleagues, negotiations are ever present. Koshansky said this was one of the reasons he became interested in this particular field of study.

"I'm constantly finding myself in situations where there might be conflicting interests, but we need to come to some resolution," the economics major said.

Koshansky said, as a future Army officer where the ability to negotiate can be a life-saving commodity, "I couldn't think of a more important skill at which to excel than this."

Sixty-six cadets, midshipmen and officers representing 10 service academies, including the Royal Military College of Canada, and ROTC programs attended the inaugural conference held at the Haig Room in Jefferson Hall.

Col. Thomas Kolditz, head of the Behavioral Sciences and Leadership Department, welcomed the participants to the conference. He said the event would not only develop critical negotiating skills but also serve them as a foundation of fellowship.

"You will see people that you've met here at some other point in your careers," Kolditz said. "I guarantee it. That's an important part of this experience, building that cross-services and cross-national (relationships) you will use later on."

The conference was a cadet-driven event, with WPNP Fellows Koshansky and Cow Joe Gallo, dedicating several months of effort bringing it to fruition. Assisted by WPNP senior members Firsties Nate Bennett and Alex Small, the group worked primarily behind-the-scenes during the two-day conference, but they also provided insight and knowledge during work group sessions and negotiation exercises.

Koshansky's area of research involves body language in negotiation with focus on Afghanistan. During the conference, he assisted a group of 15 cadets on this topic as they delivered a colorful presentation complete with skit illustrating positive and negative body language during a common negotiation played out in a social atmosphere.

Koshansky, an economics major, knew the academy's negotiation course had no direct correlation with his studies, but it was an area he wanted to explore. From there, he became a founding member of the West Point Negotiation Project.

The Project was officially founded in February 2009, with Professor Jeff Weiss and Maj. Aram Donigian as co-founders and co-directors. Recognizing the extent and frequency with which small unit leaders are required to negotiate at their duty stations and while deployed throughout the world, the Project focuses on Army outreach, research, publication, consulting and training on negotiation strategy. The conference is just one means of accomplishing the Project's mission. Both instructors lectured the conference participants on topics ranging from "Assumptions in Negotiation" to "Defining a Good Outcome in Negotiations." Donigian, a Behavioral Science and Leadership instructor, said that the conference topics were a more compact-version of what is taught in the MG390 course, "Negotiations for Leaders." That course was designed several years ago by Weiss and Maj. Brian Wortinger.

"This conference has been deliberately designed to give each of you exposure and a basic foundation in the way we are teaching negotiation at West Point," Donigian told the group.

During the conference, participants paired up for two challenging negotiation scenarios, one based on an actual experience Donigian had as a deployed infantry officer dealing with an Afghani petrol station owner. Work groups, scattered throughout the library, delved into discussions which would form polished negotiation presentations on managing perceptions, non-verbal communication and other topics.

Just hours into the conference, Bennett observed the collaboration and camaraderie developing among the participants.

"I thought Jeff Weiss brought a great energy into the conference from the start, and usually you see some general awkwardness around a group like this in the beginning," Bennett said. "(Weiss) was able to get everyone talking very easily. The atmosphere has been great."

During the West Point Negotiation Project Conference March 25-26, participants paired up for an exercise on assumptions to open the inaugural event in the Haig Room.

INSIDE THE STORY

- **The purpose of the West Point Negotiation Project, officially founded in February 2009, focuses on Army outreach, research, publication, consulting and training on negotiation strategy.**
- **The West Point Negotiation Project Conference is one means of accomplishing the Project's mission by creating a forum representing cross-services, cross-departments and cross-disciplines where a common vocabulary on negotiation could be shared among participants.**
- **West Point offers a course, MG390, "Negotiation for Leaders," which was developed several years ago to help cadets develop skills in the art and science of negotiation.**

Weiss said one of the objectives for the conference was establishing, across the academies and services, a common vocabulary and framework for negotiation.

"Also, this provides an opportunity both for cross-learning and sharing among the participants, and to engage in conversations with young officers who have been out in theater and who've used these negotiation skills and tools and can offer a perspective on what has worked, what has been challenging and what the cadets can expect later on in their careers."

The conference featured a panel of former West Point graduates from the Class of 2007, all first lieutenants who shared their negotiation experiences while deployed in support of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom. The Q&A concluded with each officer providing one piece of advice to impart upon the group. First Lt. Court Harris keyed in on relationship-building and how developing good rapport is a long-term goal. First Lt. Lindsey Gerheim emphasized good listening habits, as it applies to building relationships with subordinate troops and to foreign nationals.

"Listen and trust your instinct," Gerheim, a logistics officer with the 716th Military Police Battalion, said.

Rounding out the discussion, 1st Lt. Jamie Platky, who notably took the MG390 course twice at West Point, advised the group simply to "do the right thing."

"You will find yourselves in morally-ambiguous situations and to do the right thing, don't forget that. I know it sounds easy but it's not," he said. "The Army is built on relationships … in the end you have to maintain those relationships and respect the people around you."

Bruce Patton, co-founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project, partner of Vantage Partners and founder of Mercy Corps, was the conference's keynote speaker. Following up the question posed earlier to the deployed officers, Patton added another piece of advice for the future negotiators.

"Don't be afraid of not knowing the answer, and don't be afraid to ask questions to get the answer," Patton said. "It's a very powerful stance in negotiations. A lot of people find this hard because they want to have all the answers and be in control. It gets in the way of learning and finding good solutions and building good relationships. It's not always easy to do, but the first and hardest hurdle is usually within yourself."

At the end of the day, Koshansky said the feedback from the participants was wholly positive.

"Everyone I talked to felt they got something out of the negotiation instruction," Koshansky said. "Any time members of different armed services come together to learn and grow, there is a tremendous amount of value that can be attained through collaboration among different perspectives."