Program Manager: Navy, Industry Must Change the Way It Communicates During Contract Process

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – The F/A-18 and EA-18G recently found a way to shrink a complex contract to a 90-day turnaround by changing their approach to contracting entirely, and it's the kind of approach the Navy needs in order to work better and more efficiently with industry, a Navy official said during comments at the Navy League's Sea-Air-Space conference April 4.

Capt. Jason M. Denney, F/A-18 and EA-18G program manager (PMA-265) at Naval Air Systems Command, said that the program had figured out a way to dramatically shrink the contracting process in an experiment, and it involved doing a few things fundamentally different to how they had been done in the past.

"[We asked] can we do a contract with industry, a full-up complex contract from start to finish in 90 days?" Denney said. "Yeah, we can. On the industry and government side at the beginning there was a lot of naysaying, a lot of folks saying it's not possible, we can't do it and here's why. But then you say, 'Well, let's challenge those assumptions.' Instead of saying why you can't, turn those into what barriers need to be removed so that you can."

As the program began to answer those questions, they discovered new processes and a new way of interacting with industry and government that shortens those time frames, he said.

"And this can't be a stunt," he said. "It can't be something we do once, work overtime and weekends, get it across the

finish line, and say, ‘Oh my God, that was terrible. Let’s never do that again.’ We need to work on normal working hours per day. It can’t be something that completely consumes us because it’s not sustainable.”

So what the program did is rather than go back and forth between prime contractors and subcontractors over emails or through contracting letters, they brought everyone in at the beginning of the contracting effort – not just the prime contractor.

“We brought everyone … to the kickoff meeting to ensure alignment,” he said. “So we can ensure everyone had the same mental model of what we are trying to accomplish rather than a telephone game two or three steps down. I told them to bring your concerns and questions.

“For example, one of the things the prime said when we started discussing the timeline for the proposal, they said, ‘Well, we have a lot of assumptions,'” Denney continued. “OK, have you discussed those with your sub? ‘No.’ Well, they’re sitting right next to you right now. Talk about assumptions and turn them into facts.”

Instead of hashing those things out over email over a period of months, the program believes they were able to accomplish most of what they needed in an afternoon, Denney said.

Improving communication between the government, the prime contractor and the subcontractor also helps to resolve barriers that come up, Denney argued.

“We need to identify the barriers early and ask for that help so that leadership can get engaged and remove the barrier before it stops forward progress on it, so it’s not a weakness,” he said. “We’ve been taught our entire professional careers, ‘Hey, handle this at your own level and take it to a point where [you can’t go any further] and then elevate it.’ Well, that’s too late.”