Keith Kruse

Culture First

Keith Kruse's father was a Naval Engineer, and from a young age, Keith had an interest in the military. In particular, he dreamed of aviation, although his poor vision meant he wouldn't be a pilot. But Keith knew that in the Navy, there were many coveted backseat aviation roles. After high school, he headed to the highly regarded ROTC program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, NY. RPI is one of the top engineering schools in the country, and their ROTC program is one of the largest.

Keith did well in his military training courses scored positive evaluations from midshipman supervisors. During his senior year, he wound up in one of the top leadership positions in the Midshipman Battalion, the second in command, Battalion Executive Officer. During the summers, his military continued. education After freshman year, he was sent to experience life as an enlisted man onboard the aircraft carrier, USS

America. Between sophomore and junior years, he tried out different military communities within the Navy. He spent a time with the Marines, time learning about submarines, time learning about surface warfare, and finally time with the aviation group. "I loved aviation," recalls Keith. "But I tell everyone that the Marine Corps week was the most fun. We would storm a beach and sleep outside. I loved it but would never want to do that as a career." Before his senior year, Keith became a Junior Officer aboard the USS Chandler. The ship was a destroyer out in San Diego, and the experience was a fascinating one for him.

In 1988, Keith finished school with a Mechanical Engineering degree. After graduation, it was time to select which branch of the Navy he wanted to enter. For Keith it was a no-brainer: aviation. "Top Gun happened to come out right around that time," laughs Keith. "I had always

wanted to fly, but suddenly the top ten midshipmen graduating my senior year were going into aviation. All of us were called into the Captain's office to explain why we had chosen flight school over the nuclear Navy, but he couldn't have done anything to change my mind. RPI was one of the top sources of officers for the Navy nuclear program and the Captain would have to explain to his superiors why they wouldn't be getting the top talent in the nuclear engineering program that year!"

Keith headed to Pensacola, Florida for flight training. "After the initial phase of flight school, you select your aircraft," he explains. "I wanted to go P-3s because they have the best career opportunities for Naval Officers who don't have good eyesight. I didn't want to choose F-14s and ride in the back seat since people always joked that pilots would rather have the extra 200 pounds of gas. On the P-3 you could be mission commander, and I was

fortunate enough to get that."

The P-3 is a land-based anti-submarine warfare aircraft. From Pensacola, Keith went to an Air Force Base in Sacramento before going to Jacksonville for more specialized training. Finally, he joined Patrol Squadron Twenty-Three (VP-23) which was a life-changing experience. "That squadron was unique," Keith reminisces. "We all meshed, and I consider myself lucky to get that assignment. I had some great commanding officers who are good friends to this day. Being in that environment was enjoyable because of the missions we were doing and because of the camaraderie of my squadron. We were travelling all over the world together and were doing deployments and detachments in support of many of the contingency response and combat operations going on at the end of the Cold War. It was exciting to be a part of such an important time



in history. We became a very unified group, and they became my best friends. I really enjoyed that culture."

At the end of a three-year tour, Keith returned to the DC area to complete a Master's Program at George Washington University. While completing his degree in Science, Technology and Public Policy, he was still in the Navy. Now a young Lieutenant, he took a position managing a division within the Bureau of Naval Personnel. The job was a major adjustment. "Even though it was a military organization, there wasn't the same tight-knit military culture I experienced in the squadron," Keith reflects. "It was an office environment with military and civilians coming in, working their hours, and rushing home to beat traffic. I realized how much I had preferred the camaraderie in the squadron, and I started to wonder whether it was possible to create that type of culture in the private sector?"

Today, Keith is the President and COO of Federal Conference, and he prides himself on putting culture first. "Wherever I go, I like to put that mark on an organization. It goes back to the first small company I worked for after I left the Navy when I had the opportunity to become Vice President of Operations. I viewed that as my chance to build the company I'd always wanted to work for," Keith explains. "I've tried to build that company everywhere I've gone. While you may not always be able to achieve it, you can still transform an organization's culture by focusing on bringing the best people in the door, helping them thrive in what they're doing, and retaining top talent for the long-term. Building a performance driven culture means creating an environment that attracts capable people and inspires them to do their best. Make them feel like they are part of something larger than themselves, give them clear guidance on what success looks like, and then stand back and let them show you their talents."

Federal Conference was launched as National Conferencing, Inc. in 2006 by partners Paul Trapp and Steve Davis. At the time, the business focused on event management planning for the government. Over time, they began to expand their offerings and moved into the commercial sector as well by starting a sister company, DavisTrapp. Federal Conference focused on government customers, and DavisTrapp focused exclusively on corporate and association businesses. By 2017, the partners wanted to focus

more on launching a new business, a franchisemodel event planning company called EventPrep and needed someone highly competent to take over Federal Conference.

Enter Keith. The men had met a number of years back, and both Paul and Steve were impressed by Keith's commitment and philosophy. They hired him to take over operations for their government business, Federal Conference since Keith had years of experience as an executive with other government contracting companies. Keith was committed to making change in a disciplined and responsible manner. That meant learning everything there was to know about the business. "That first year I focused on learning about the business, the events, and in particular, the Army Strong Bonds project since it was the biggest program we run. It's a relatively complicated project, but we have a comprehensive training program for all new planners to get up-to-speed. I basically became a Strong Bonds intern to learn the business and learn about our biggest program. It was helpful for me to see all the details and to take notes on what everyone's doing. If I took the time to fully understand what the team was doing and the challenges they faced, I would be able to make the maximum impact."

While Keith was running Federal Conference, Paul and Steve began to focus on their new start-up, EventPrep. Once they knew that Federal Conference was in good hands they moved to Florida and decided to merge their commercial business, DavisTrapp, under Federal Conference and create a new commercial division under Keith's leadership. The merger meant more responsibility and a brand new industry for Keith who had always focused on government customers throughout his business career. "I was learning all of the nuances of how the hospitality industry worked," smiles Keith. "It was all new to me, and I found that exciting. Even though it was a new market for me, the basic aspects of managing company operations and delivering quality service were still the same whether for a commercial or government customer. By this time in my career, I knew operations like the back of my hand so it was easy to focus on learning the differences between the two and how to adjust my decision-making to take best advantage of both sides of the business."

During Keith's tenure, Federal Conference grew from about 50 employees to 67 and revenues more than doubled within his first two years at the company. The new positions are mostly on the commercial and association side which Keith has enjoyed expanding. Government contracts, while more familiar to Keith, are far more onerous to pursue. "There aren't a lot of opportunities for event planning in the government space because often they have their own planners," Keith explains. "Then if there is an opportunity, you go through 18 months of the contracting process. On the commercial side, if we meet a customer and impress them with our expertise and experience, that can translate directly into a business opportunity. It's nice to know that if they like you, and you do good work at a good price, they're going to go with you. No recompetes and dealing with byzantine government contracting rules that often result in unpredictable and perplexing procurement decisions. I love that we can be in control of our own success by focusing on delivering high-quality service and retaining our customers. I have really enjoyed learning the commercial side of the business."

One important aspect of that growth was reimagining the company's marketing pitch and website. Previously, the business had mostly brought in new clients via referral, but Keith realized they were leaving a lot on the table with that approach. While a government customer may look at a business's website during the contracting process, that ultimately wasn't the deciding factor when it came to awarding contracts. On the commercial side, conversely, a well-designed website could well be a motivating factor in the client's decision. Additionally, true to his desire to create a culture of commitment and camaraderie, Keith emphasized the importance of teamwork. "I wanted to be less top-down in terms of defining what our mission was and what services we provided," he states. "I wanted to make sure I had buy-in from my leadership team. We did an off site and reviewed what our service offerings were, where we had gaps, what we were seeing from competitors, and then created a new elevator pitch. Essentially, offer full-service event management planning for commercial, government, and association customers. What we really try to focus on are customized, tailored solutions which allow our customers to forget the logistical headaches and focus on what's important to them, the content, the speakers, and the experience of their event. We help them bring that vision to life."

Keith has done fantastic a implementing the Navy values he encountered during his nine years of active duty. But he encountered those values during his childhood long before joining the Navy. He was born in Newport, Rhode Island, where his father was stationed. Like many military families, the Kruses moved frequently in Keith's early years. His father started out as a surface warfare officer in the Navy, then decided he would attend MIT to pursue a Master's in Mechanical and Ocean Engineering. The little family moved to the Boston area when Keith was four and settled in Brockton. After MIT, his father went into the Engineering Duty Officer Program which focused on designing and building Navy ships. For this role, he did have to travel quite frequently to attend to problems onboard aircraft carriers, ships, and submarines supported, but he wasn't usually gone for extended periods of time.

In Boston, Keith became a lifetime fan of baseball and fondly remembers attending Red Sox games with his father. The team was terrible at the time, but he hung a Red Sox pennant on the wall and watched every game. He was never much of an athlete; his Little League career was short-lived. But he reveled in fandom. Keith's love of baseball continues to this day as a season ticket holder for the Washington Nationals. He also enjoyed hockey, and while living in New England he'd often play with the neighborhood kids on the frozen ponds. He never became a Patriots fan; his father preferred the Dallas Cowboys and Keith became a loyal fan of them, too.

From Boston, the family moved to the Philadelphia area and later to Norfolk, Virginia, before finally settling in the Washington, DC area when Keith was about 12. His father was still taking tours in other parts of the country, but his parents had decided that Keith needed some stability during his middle and high-school years. From seventh grade on, the family home was DC.

That opportunity to stay in one location allowed him to finally build some close and long-lasting friendships. He is still close with his best friend from middle school, Chris, as well as his friend Brian, who lived next door. "Chris and I are like brothers. We've traveled overseas together. We were both each other's best man at our weddings. Our families frequently vacation together during our annual outing to Bethany Beach. Until I met Chris, I never really was in any

one place long enough to form a close friendship," Keith says.

As Keith got older, he became more active in school. He was in the gifted and talented program and had a knack for literature. He took AP English and ended up winning the High School English Award from the department. He was in the Junior Achievement program where he learned about business and eventually became the club's President. Although he didn't yet know he wanted to go into business, he had a strong practical side, and knew that while his English classes were his favorite at school, he ought to focus on a more technical career path. He also loved science and math and knew engineering could be an interesting and lucrative field. Keith also loved aviation and for a time, he even considered becoming an astronaut with NASA. Unfortunately, his poor eyesight nipped that idea in the bud.

Family was important to Keith. His maternal grandparents lived nearby in Silver Spring, and he saw them a couple times a month. They had boxwoods in front of their house, a smell Keith still loves to this day. And somewhat more sentimentally, Keith has a particular affection for a cranberry glass Gone with the Wind lamp his grandmother always kept in the window. He liked it so much, he searched far and wide to find one just like it that he could have of his own. Finally, after exhaustive searches on e-Bay, he found one. "That lamp is important to me because it reminds me so much of my grandparents and how much I loved visiting them as a kid, even though it's not really hers," smiles Keith. "It makes me feel at home."

His parents, too, were strong influences. From dad, he got his analytical mind. "He's the person I go to for advice when I'm in a tough situation, even professionally," Keith admits. "He's run large organizations and had a full career in the Navy. He then led the American Society of Naval Engineers for 20 years which was essentially another career. He's been a good role model for me when it comes to leading organizations and getting the most out of people." His mother, meanwhile, keeps things lighter. "We laugh a lot with each other," nods Keith. "I think I get more of my sense of humor from her. And my Catholic faith also comes from my mom's influence as well. When dad was traveling so much for the Navy, my mom and I had plenty of time to bond."

Keith was an only child for most of his

childhood, but when he was 17, his parents had a major surprise for him: a baby sister. As a high schooler, he was taking care of the baby, changing diapers, and generally learning parenting skills he'd use later in life with his own kids. "My best friend, Chris, who was also an only child unceremoniously kicked me out of the Only Child Club," Keith laughs. "My sister and I always talk about how we basically knew two different sets of parents. When I was a kid my dad was a young officer, wasn't making much money, but over the intervening decades things changed. When she arrived he was already a Commander, and had been a commanding officer, so it was a very different life experience."

After ROTC and the Navy, Keith got his first civilian job with a then-small company called DFI International Government Services (DFI). He joined as employee number 15 in 1997, doing military policy work for government contracts. He'd been doing well in his role, and in 2001, was offered the life-changing opportunity to move to the operations side. It was certainly a trial by fire. A few months after accepting the role, the entire country dealt with the fallout of September 11th. DFI dealt with the crisis a little differently than most. "There were no new contracts coming out, and it hit our bottom line significantly," he says. "We had to figure out how to conserve resources while trying to keep the team we had. We decided that all the senior leaders would take a voluntary salary deferral." When most companies went directly to layoffs, DFI valued its team. Their bet paid off; the work came back within a year, and the business was stronger than ever. It was a valuable lesson to Keith. "If you have the right culture, people will do what it takes to help the team succeed," he remarks.

He stayed with DFI for 11 years, through their sale to a large British company called Detica. Then, Keith decided to take some time off and reassess. After 18 months, he returned to the workforce, serving as COO at several other organizations before hanging out a shingle as a consultant. It was while he was consulting that Paul and Steve sought him out. The rest is history.

Through it all, Keith has had the crucial support of his wife, Leslie, whom he met in DC just before he left the Navy. Leslie has a music degree and sings professionally, in addition to working in accounting. "She helps me look out for myself," he praises her. "She keeps me from

becoming a workaholic which would be very easy for me to do if left to my own devices. She's part of the reason I decided to try consulting and take a step back to find the right fit for myself. She's the core that keeps the family together." The couple have two children.

When asked about leadership, Keith invokes a quote from General Patton. "Don't tell people how to do things; tell them what to do and they'll surprise you with their ingenuity," he relates. "That's what I try to do. I try to set goals and expectations and let them come to me with solutions. I try to be hands-off, where I can."

To young people, Keith advises taking chances. "Otherwise, you're never going to know how far you can push yourself," he points out. "Failure is not a bad thing as long as you learn from it. If I'm going to give people the latitude to try things, I've got to be tolerant of a little bit of failure. They can't be afraid to try. It's the same for young people. You have to experience life and take chances in order to grow and succeed."

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