

Florida Today

Harris CEO: Helping meet nation's biggest threats

To address the fast-changing threat environment, accelerating technology innovations and the need to operate in a constrained and uncertain budget environment, the U.S. government is searching for new ideas to secure our nation.

Initiatives such as the Defense Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx) have been established to better tap into technology capabilities in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. Although commercial technology has and will continue to play an important role in government acquisition, the business models of “pure play” technology companies may be challenged by the exacting requirements of government contracting.

Government and commercial procurement models share some common elements, but differ in some important areas. Government procurement often involves acquiring new capabilities that must operate safely and reliably in severe environments over long periods of time. The process of setting detailed requirements, soliciting and evaluating proposals, deciding on a winning bidder (and resolving the ever more frequent protest), and developing, testing and certifying a solution, can translate into years before users receive the capability. And during that lengthy period, threats and technologies continue to evolve and program managers move on in their careers, potentially resulting in extensive changes to the original requirements, cost overruns, or solutions becoming obsolete or outdated before they are ever fielded.

Commercial models typically are quicker to implement and can address some of these challenges. Rather than responding to requirements outlined in a request for proposal, RFP, commercial entrepreneurs instead leverage their deep understanding of customer needs, market trends, and the technology landscape to preemptively create innovative solutions to problems. They take risks and invest ahead of the curve; they operate with speed and agility. It's a completely different mindset.

To protect our nation's interests we need a technology procurement approach that embraces the strengths of both government and commercial models in a new “innovation ecosystem” – an approach that combines a deep understanding of the government customers' mission with the agility of a commercial innovator, delivered within the framework of a regulated procurement process.

Harris Corporation provides a good case study of this innovation ecosystem in action. We successfully bridge the government-to-commercial procurement divide – leveraging a commercial mindset with extensive government technology expertise to create unique solutions to address some of our nation's most critical challenges.

Our formula is founded on four essential fundamentals:

Intimate knowledge of the customer mission: Understanding customer needs often requires experiencing their challenges firsthand. Harris employees worked side-by-side with air traffic controllers to develop the FAA Telecommunications Infrastructure system, a unique public-private partnership that increased the bandwidth in the nation's air traffic management system by 500 percent, while driving down the agency's telecommunications costs by 50 percent and virtually eliminating related air traffic delays.

Sustained investment in research and development: Harris has committed an industry-leading percent of its revenues to research and development – even during market downturns. The investment enables us to continuously develop solutions based on evolving technologies and changing customers' needs – often before a formal request. Harris invested significant company-funded research and development dollars to develop the world leading Falcon tactical

radio family. The radios extensively leverage commercially available components and are packaged into a product tailored to meet the mission critical needs of warfighters. The result is radios that are a better value and that can be upgraded with new features and functions as the warfighters' needs change and new advances in technology become available.

Willingness to accept risk: Although we use extensive research, analysis and "stage-gate" decision processes, there is never a guarantee of success. Over several recent years, Harris engineers worked tirelessly to solve the rising cost and complexity of delivering satellite capabilities into space. The team introduced an innovative solution – reconfigurable hosted satellite payloads that enable multiple missions on a single satellite and with capabilities that can be updated while in orbit, significantly reducing life cycle costs versus traditional approaches.

A culture that fosters innovation: History teaches us that true innovation and technology breakthroughs cannot be predicted and do not magically occur overnight. They require a confluence of factors. One of the most often overlooked, but most important factors, is culture. Establishing this culture starts by bringing together smart, passionate, entrepreneurial people with different backgrounds, skill sets and experiences. Harris is fortunate to have more than 21,000 of them – 40 percent of whom are engineers and scientists. We then provide the resources, tools and advanced facilities to foster collaboration. We built a state-of-the-art Harris Technology Center which now serves as an innovation hub for the company. And finally, we recognize and reward truly groundbreaking work through a recently introduced Board of Directors' award for technology innovation and our highest individual company-wide recognition for technical achievement, the Harris Fellow Award.



The state-of-the-art Harris Technology Center now serves as an innovation hub for the company. (Photo: For FLORIDA TODAY)

I am proud that Harris Corporation and its employees are leading the way in building an "innovation ecosystem." By embracing an agile commercial mindset within a traditional contracting environment, we are building solutions to address threats to our nation's safety, security and technology leadership.

William M. Brown is chairman, president and CEO of Harris Corporation.

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