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Chris Vein: What Forensics Did for Me

Chris Vein

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Alumni Corner

Chris Vein: What Forensics Did For Me University of North Dakota (1979) Miami University (OH) (1980-1983)

Chris Vein



Chris Vein is passionate about using science, technology, and innovation to solve some of the biggest challenges facing the world today. He served as Deputy US Chief Technology Officer for Government Innovation in the White House Office of Science & Technology, the Chief Innovation Officer for Global Technology Development at the World Bank, and the Chief Information Officer of City and county of San Francisco. Chris is intensely curious and never afraid to take risks, Chris says he owes any success in his career to his years of competition in forensics for the University of North Dakota and Miami of Ohio.

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Chris Vein

Non-executive Chairman at the Startup Policy Lab
Former Partner for Global Digital Government Transformation at PwC Australia

***ALUMNI CORNER:** The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program's very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni's stories.*

Keywords: forensics, benefits of forensics, Alumni Corner

My mother was turning 90 and I asked what she wanted for her birthday. She asked me to write the story of my life. That was not what I expected. There is only so long before mom's win. So for her 91st birthday I wrote it. As I did, I was reminded about how much forensics shaped not only who I am but provided the foundation for success in my career. Of all the benefits of forensics that exist, three skills stand out: learning strength, courage, and wisdom. So, from that simple request from my mother, here are three stories that explain how forensics helped me become a global leader.

Strength

One of the most important lessons from competing in forensics is to dig deep within oneself to find strength to face any situation, regardless of the odds. Walking into a competition, it is you and the judge with no one else. You either find the strength to win or you don't. Developing the strength to face any situation is one of the lasting gifts of forensics.

On my first day as Chief Innovation Officer at the World Bank, I walked several blocks to meet my new administrative assistant, attend new hire training and at 5:00, board a plane to Moscow. At a conference several days later, I was asked to teach Russian government officials about global best practices in government. In the afternoon, I was approached by the master of ceremony (MC) for the closing session and told that the Russian Prime Minister (PM) Medvedev wanted to pass instructions to me. I listened with growing dread. The MC said that the PM and I would be the sole participants on stage. Invited dignitaries would be behind us. There would be about 500 people in the audience and the event would be televised on Russian TV. The PM would not be preparing remarks. Rather I would go first and he would respond to my remarks. There would be general question and answer afterwards. He stopped and asked me if I had any questions. I responded by saying that I didn't think I was authorized to do this. He responded by saying that I didn't have any choice and walked away.

For the next 45 agonizing minutes, I thought about what to say, how to say it, and what to do if I got in trouble. Stressful to say the least, my speech training came in handy. I dug deep, found strength in believing I could win the “round” with the PM, and spoke extemporaneously for 2 hours. I was invited back to Russia several months later to participate in another and larger forum.

It’s funny but I hated extemporaneous speaking when I was a competitor, and yet the skills I learned from it are used every day. Winning is rarely by luck. There is a structure, a process, and practice to it - lots of practice. I’ve found in my career, I rarely had all (or even enough of) the data, information, or knowledge. But I could leverage what I did have to creatively resolve the challenge and most important, tell a story that provided understanding.

Courage

We all have bad days. We face crises that require a decision: either we give in to the circumstances we face and accept the outcome or we act courageously and perform as if we had prepared for that moment our entire life. Sounds like a round in forensics.

I was working as the Chief Information Officer (CIO) for the City and County of San Francisco. One of my employees decided that he was the only one who understood the technology needs of the City, that management could not to be trusted, and that he needed to lock out everyone and blow up the system if we reprimanded him.

I remember getting a call from the Mayor asking me if I was watching the news. I said no. He then told me that the City Attorney was indicting my employee on four felony counts. He went to jail. But the real and emerging issue was the time bomb he set. Time was rapidly taking us to the point where access to every management system in the City would be destroyed for an unknown period of time. And as the head of the agency for centralized technology and communications systems, it was my problem to solve.

In the end, I had to ask the Mayor to go the jail and visit my employee to get the access codes to servers so we could prevent their self-destruction. The codes didn’t work. I had to ask the Mayor to go again. He did and the codes didn’t work. It wasn’t until the third time the codes worked and crisis was stopped.

This made local, national and international news. No one in the world had dealt with such a public situation. So I did what I did every time I walked into a speaking round – I dug deep for strength and against the odds, had the guts, or courage to do the best I could in a situation out of my control. We won that round. Barely.

Of all the events in forensics, the art of persuasion is the most universal skill. Every day we persuade others to listen to us, or to do as we ask, or to support us. Again, there is a structure and a process to this. Usually in three parts – we define the problem, provide options, and then



Forensics Alumni Chris Vein with then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

show how one or all of the options will actually make the life of the listener just a little bit easier. Whether one administers, manages, or leads, being persuasive is fundamental to success.

Wisdom

There is nothing like losing. My successes blur in my mind but my failures keep pushing me toward success. Forensics can be a great equalizer. Even the best, the most successful can lose. There will always be someone who is better than you - competition never ends. What sets one apart is our wisdom – the collective experience of learning, of winning and losing.

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Sometimes wisdom though comes from surprising places. As a corporate leader, I did the usual developing of strategies and plans, communicating areas where focus was needed, but also celebrating success. These events were quarterly and I usually did my best Steve Jobs impression on stage. And I thought I was inspirational.



Forensics Alumni Chris Vein with then President Barack Obama.

I remember one day, after such a session, walking back to the office and meeting a payroll clerk on the street. As she came up to me I assumed she was going to thank me for the inspiring and insightful meeting I'd just led. She didn't. She stopped to thank me not for my leadership but for my smile, my friendly greeting each day, for my remembering her name.

Sometimes what sets you apart is something different from what you think. Sometimes wisdom is a simple gesture, a simple act. But always it is about making a connection with your audience.

As technology increasingly dictates our communication, we've also learned that making an emotional connection with a listener is becoming more important. Much has been written about emotional intelligence, but any success I've had in my career has started with empathy. Interpretive in nature, if my audience doesn't trust me, it doesn't matter how much structure, process, or practice I do, success will always be elusive.

ADVICE FROM CHRIS

"Many of us in our professional and personal lives spend our day convincing others to follow our lead or to do something they'd rather not. Success is found, in part, in our skill at persuasive and impromptu communication. This will only become more important as technology changes the very fabric of our lives."

