After Project Maven Uproar: How to Handle Government Partnerships

Google missed an opportunity to say no, with clear consequences.

Patric Palm
Tue, 07/24/2018 - 09:02

Illustration: DrAfter123/iStock and Jon Halling/GovernmentCIO Media

Patric Palm is CEO and co-founder of Favro, an application for enterprisewide agile workflow management used by organizations worldwide and government entities in Northern Europe.

In March, Google faced a firestorm of backlash from employees after announcing its involvement with the Defense Defense's Project Maven.

While Google attempted to message the contract as serving “nonoffensive uses only,” the media immediately began to analyze the ethical implications of the
partnership and question how the technology could be used as weaponry.

While Google’s leadership team likely expected this response externally, it certainly wasn't prepared for the internal backlash that was to come. When news broke of Google’s involvement with Project Maven, employees claimed they were working for “the business of war.” Some even left in protest. In April, around 4,000 Google employees signed a letter to the CEO requesting an end to the company’s involvement with the project.

Within two months of receiving the petition, Google’s leadership announced it won’t be renewing its contract with DOD when it expires. The company also shared it would be updating its code of ethics.

After all of this, Google is still competing against companies like Amazon, Oracle and Microsoft to secure a 2-year DOD contract to build a military cloud system. So, although there are obvious drawbacks to pursuing high-value and highly visible government contracts, landing such contracts remains a priority in the tech industry. These types of government contracts bring the promise of big profits and relative security. But for tech companies, they can prove to be a slippery slope, something Google learned the hard way.

Here are three ways tech companies can better handle government contracts:

- **Put transparency first:** Employees and other stakeholders recognize corporate speak and see right through it. When Google referred to its DOD partnership as “nonoffensive,” employees and the general public began to question the company’s ethics. Rather than making the same mistake, other companies should prioritize top-down transparency while making a decision with implications this far-reaching.

- **Know your core values:** In the protest letter, Google employees called out the leadership team, saying, “This contract puts Google’s reputation at risk and stands in direct opposition to our core values.” The letter signals that Google’s leadership team hadn’t taken the time to consider how the partnership with DOD collided with business values. This is why tech
companies must take time to assess all projects against their core values.

• **Don’t be afraid to push back:** Because of benefits that come with partnering with the government, tech companies often forget to think about whether a government contract is actually in line with their core values. When presented with a potential windfall like a government deal, companies can sometimes become so dazzled, they forget saying no is an option. But if the contract risks compromising your mission or values, it may be better in the long-run to refuse. In this instance, Google missed an opportunity to say no, with clear consequences.

Tech and government will only become more intertwined, and high-value government contracts will continue to emerge as this connection deepens. But as tech companies fight to land bigger contracts, they should take time to consider the implications of doing so. That doesn’t mean they need to fear these deals, but simply be more mindful of how they pursue them. Understand your core values and listen to your employees to know if taking on a government deal is right for your company.