



Past Event: 2022 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference - Leadership Lessons from Mission Control Video Transcript

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Event

2022 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference

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Presenter

Ginger Kerrick, First Latina Director of NASA Mission Control and 30-Year Veteran of the Johnson Space Center; Chief Strategy Officer of Barrios Technology

- [Ginger] Thank you so much and thank you for bringing me out of the gross, humid, disgusting weather we have in Houston to here. And you may think it's humid here, but come to Houston once and you'll enjoy it. And the water's actually blue.

Who knew? But I wanted to thank you today for inviting me here. There's at least one member of the audience who has seen me before at a previous talk. And I appreciated his recommendation as well. But my job here today, you know, after talking to the organizers, I was like, "What can I do for you? You know, what are folks going to want to hear about?"

And, you know, you have a pretty exciting timeline. It sounds like you had a lot of great sessions already. You're going to meet one of my friends tomorrow, I think, Astronaut Don Thomas. He and I spent some time working together out in Russia. And so it'll be a joy to hear from him. And what I'd like to offer you, as he stated, is the perspective from mission control. And I take a different approach to talking to you about leadership and leadership lessons.

I can come up here and I can lecture and we can talk about all of the elements of leadership, or I can tell you all of the fun stories that I have had the privilege of participating in and leading and tie those back to some leadership conference. Because ultimately, my goal here today is to, one, entertain you, but two, provide you tools and examples of how to use those tools so that you can use back in your industry.

So, to start off with, I know that there were some objectives that I had to submit to make sure we're covering them so you can get credit for this class. So, class, these are my objectives. We're going to talk about these concepts, but we're going to talk about them in the context of storytelling.

So I am a huge student of leadership and I am also very interested in the human psyche. I have learned as I have pursued my career, through NASA, and now in the private sector, that understanding people is probably the most important thing you can do as leaders.

And those of us that grew up as med scientists, rocket scientists at NASA don't always put that in the forefront of their learning. But I have always studied these books and then tried to figure out how can I take the information that's in there and apply them to make me a better leader at NASA. So I'll be talking to you about those today.

And we're going to start off with one. I don't know if you've heard about this before. Arbing's Outward Mindset. If you haven't I'm going to simplify it for you. If you think about everything bad that is happening in the world today, wars, political divides, cancel culture, people being offended by other groups, people being prejudiced toward other groups, you can simplify that by understanding this concept.

And it's basically, those are all reflections of people having an inward mindset. I'm focused on me, me, me, me, me, and I have goals to achieve. And you aren't like me, so I don't like you. And you're getting in the way. That is an inward mindset. Outward mindset is how can we work together to achieve our goals.

How can we collaborate? How can we better understand all of the diverse opinions or seek out diverse opinions? That is an outward mindset. So my first story deals with this. So when I first started working at NASA, early on, I got assigned to be an instructor for the astronauts. And one of my first assignments was to get assigned to the first crew that was going to fly on board the International Space Station.

Today, we are on crew number 68. So this was way back, early years, 1997. And when I got assigned to them, there was one American and two Russians. And the American is the gentleman in the middle. His name is Captain William Shepherd. Ex-Navy SEAL. Zero social skills.

And oh my gosh, he was making everybody angry, in the U.S. and in Russia. "Why is it designed this way? Why are you teaching me like that? What kind of material is that? Why don't you use common sets of icons and graphics and colors?" And everybody was just like, Bah, I can't take it anymore. So meanwhile, our Russian counterparts, we had Yuri Gidzenko who was on the left, and Sergei Krikalev, hero of Russia.

Sergei flew on the Mir space station and actually got stuck up there when the Soviet Union collapsed because there was no one left to bring him home. He's like, "Hello, anyone?" So he wound up being up there for like 13 months, bless him. But he was kind of like, Shep. Wasn't a Navy SEAL, but he was an engineer and he had a low tolerance for people that didn't think like him. So he was also making everybody angry.

So my boss says, "Hey, I know what would be good. I'm going to assign you to these two and I'm going to send you to Russia and you got to fix those Russians because they don't know what they're doing." You know, the first people to actually send a man into space, but they don't know what they're doing. They don't know what they're doing. And they're making our crews angry and they're operating as if it's, you know, back in the '60s and '70s during the Apollo–Soyuz programs.

And you just got to go fix them and make sure that they get on board because we're doing everything right." So totally program me with an outward mindset. I am not programmable, however. So I go out there and I make friends because I knew... I was 27 years old at the time.

I'd been working at NASA for what, maybe four years. I didn't know anything. I go over here and I meet these people and I met... You know, have you ever heard of the dog Laika that the Russians flew? I met

the man who owns Laika's, great, great, great, great, great, great grand dog. So I got to meet little tiny Laika, you know, junior of the fourth or fifth, sixth, seventh, or whatever she is.

Oh my God, I was scared to be the first to do this, and I didn't want to screw this up, but I did it and I enjoyed it and I was good at it because I knew the technical subject matter and I knew these crews. When we were training the first crew, the first five crews were out there with us. So I knew these folks. I knew what they thought, I knew when they were feeling sad, I knew how to joke with them, I knew their families.

So I loved it. So while I was doing this job, I wound up having to have an experience that I wish I didn't have to have. An exercise in critical communications. So most of you should be familiar with the Columbia tragedy that we had in 2003. In mission control, when there's a shuttle flying there are actually two mission controls.

There's a shuttle mission control and there is a Space Station mission control. I was in Space Station mission control. The scene you see here at the bottom is shuttle mission control. But in this particular crew, historically, the shuttles had docked with the Space Station because we were constructing the Space Station around this time.

This was a science mission. So this crew did not dock to the Space Station, but they had talked to my crew, the day before because we had arranged for a ship-to-ship communication because I just thought it was neat that we had one crew out in space and another crew out in a different part of space. Hey, let's have them talk over dinner.

So we scheduled a com over dinner. And they loved that. So my Space Station crew knew the shuttle crew was supposed to be landing that day. But I'm in mission control. And this picture on "CNN" is how we found out what happened. All we knew in the shuttle room was that they were not answering our calls. Then we turn on the TV and there it is.

As soon as I put that up on my screen and I'm looking at the flight director who's in charge of mission control, we're like, oh my God, our crew calls down, "Hey Ginger, according to my watch it shows the shuttle should have landed by now. How are things going?" And I looked at the flight director and she just shook her head. And so I just took a deep breath and I said, "Hey, SOCs.

[SP] Yeah, it's been really busy down here today, gimme a quick sec and I'm going to go double-check." That afforded me an opportunity to privatize the communication link because normally, all of that communications is livestreamed everywhere. You can tune in if you know how, and the whole world can hear it.

And I did not want the world to hear his reaction to what I was about to tell him. So, you know, communication in a crisis is one of the things you're talking about here. So I privatized the com and then I called up and I explained to him that there was not going to be a landing today. That there'd been a horrible accident. And he was still lingering in the hope phase with, "No, but we have the parachutes and we have the beacons, and surely you're going to find someone."

And I said, "Not at the mock speed that they were traveling. No." I said, "I'm looking at CNN right now. If you allow me to, I can pipe up this television feed Tf667(7d, "3(7(I w)667(6(a7c7c71c8pTc[If w)667(7(0 616N) a

So that's not the part we're interested in because the foam had hit the underside. But normally, when the shuttle flies in, it flies in like this. So some engineer says, "Oh, I know. Well, yeah, it'll still fly like that, but then we'll have it pause here and we'll have it do this backflip so that crew members can take pictures while they're looking out of the window."

And if you are a physicist, you freeze the moment someone says that because the Space Station is traveling 17,500 miles an hour. This is coming in at 17,500 miles an hour. And now, the window is probably about, you know, yay big.

To line up exactly where the shuttle should be, positionally, rotationally, and the velocity, park it there, and do a flip is about the most absurd thing I have ever heard in my life. But we didn't react that way.

The leadership team did not react that way. They were like, "Okay, that would get us the photos. Tell me more. How might that work?" So part of emotional intelligence, and you know you've done this with your employees or your spouse, and they come up with this idea and you're like, that'll never work.

Oh my gosh. You know

some similarities to what we do in mission control and your industry as well. But I want to tell you a story.

So when the shuttle just started to, actually, right after Columbia, the picture on the left is what the

that the solar array will be structurally sound and then we continue expanding it so that the shuttle can undock."

"Okay. Only the tear is really, really high up. How do you propose that we'll get the astronauts there to install these cufflinks?" "Oh, don't worry about that. I've already talked to the robotics guys." And so

but it took a lot of collaboration and building coalitions, and influence leadership on my part and the part of a lot of the NASA managers to make this happen.

So they were able to have their successful flight. And right around that time, I get another new job, like it happens every four years or so. So, there was an opportunity for me, I had been focusing on low-earth

some innovation in that area too. But like right now, they'll do small competitions or they'll do what's called a BAA, or a Space Act agreement, which is a lot quicker to get through.

So I'm seeing progress, but there's a lot more to be made in that area. Good question.

- [Woman] First of all, thank you. Great presentation and thank you for your service to our country.

- Oh, thank you.

