

National Aeronautics and
Space Administration
Office of the Administrator
Washington, DC 20546-0001



September 17, 2010

Vice Admiral Joseph W. Dyer, USN (Ret.)
Chairman
Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Washington, DC 20546

Dear ~~Admiral~~ ^{JOE} Dyer:

Enclosed is NASA's response to Recommendation 2010-02-04 from the 2010 Second Quarterly Meeting of the Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel (ASAP). Please do not hesitate to contact me if the Panel would like further background on the information provided in the enclosure.

I look forward to receiving continued advice from ASAP that results from your important fact-finding and quarterly meetings.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Bolden, Jr.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Charles F. Bolden, Jr.
Administrator

Enclosure

Tracking Number 2010-02-04
Public Affairs Office Role

ASAP Finding

PAO offers good advice to NASA's Program Offices: tell your own bad news; bad news does not get better with age; and shining light on things is good. PAO has identified seven communications issues and have highlighted some potential solutions—all are possible. The technical managers have a role to play and if PAO steps out and starts the process, the technical people should come on board. Public Affairs involves the entire Agency, including program managers and executive leadership. The public affairs operation can be improved.

Recommendation

ASAP suggests that PAO follow the advice that they give to NASA's Program Offices. The PAO needs to become more integrated with the technical people. It should aggressively pursue the solutions to the issues that they have already identified. The ASAP encourages PAO to take more direct control of their work and to play a bigger role than just the messenger.

Rationale

NASA can only benefit if more straightforward communications come out of PAO. The "spin" in NASA's public communications is not constructive to transparency, or to clear communications about safety and the changing nature of risk.

NASA Response

NASA's Office of Communications agrees that technical people have a role to play in communications. Embedded Public Affairs Officers work closely with the technical stakeholders they support, both at Headquarters and the Field Centers. They physically work in close proximity and interact daily through meetings, strategic planning sessions, and information discussions. Public Affairs Officers routinely engage technical project and program representatives to assess upcoming events that may have a high public profile and collaborate to determine an approach.

As identified by the ASAP, the role of the Office of Communications is often limited to that of "messenger." That is usually because the individual projects and programs make final decisions regarding the facts that will be disseminated, often relegating public communicators to little more than advisers. If that advice is not followed, the Agency's communicators only recourse is to do what it can to address the aftermath of negative news reports.

To address this issue and to help develop firmer lines of responsibility and accountability, the Office of Communications has taken the following specific steps:

- Worked directly with the NASA Advisory Council's (NAC) new Education and Outreach subcommittee to offer specific recommendations on how to make public communications a more integral part of mission planning and execution. NASA's current program management structure does not make open communication or public engagement a priority. To address this, the Office of Communications has asked that the NAC advise

the Office of the Administrator that public communication and engagement be made a “Level 1” requirement in the development and execution of Agency activities.

- Created and updated the Communications Coordinating Committee (CCC), made up of representatives from all of the Agency’s offices that are involved in public communications, including Outreach and Informal Education. Since the Office of Communications does not have line authority or responsibility over NASA’s many external communications efforts, the goal of this committee is to establish, for the first time, overarching communication strategic goals for NASA. As a result, the existing fragmented communications infrastructure can develop and execute specific tactical approaches to external communications. This approach was approved by the CCC in May 2010 and supported by the Deputy Administrator and will be the focus of its next meeting in October 2010.
- Leading the development and execution of an updated public communications policy. In March 2006, the “NASA Policy on the Release of Information to News and Information Media” was released to clarify the role of Agency communicators in the dissemination of news and information. The Office of Communications, working in collaboration with the Field Center public affairs leaders, the CCC, and other NASA organizations has developed a comprehensive update to the existing policy that directly addresses some of the concerns identified by the ASAP. That draft policy is now with the NAC and will be executed once final approval is given by the Office of the Administrator.

NASA’s Office of Communications agrees its primary goal is straightforward communication. We strive to relay the facts of our many missions and milestones in clear English that also informs and inspires the various internal and external audiences. We will continue to work toward this goal using the wide range of communications tools at our disposal. The Office of Communications agrees that it should aggressively pursue solutions to the communications issues identified.