



Thoughts on Leadership and Conflict in the Workplace

Dr. Woodrow Whitlow, Jr.

2 August 2023



Conflict – What is It?

Conflict can be defined as a difference or disagreement between two or more people

Conflict in the Workplace

- **Conflict in the workforce is inevitable; it will happen.**
- **It should be expected when employees of diverse backgrounds and work styles are brought together for a shared purpose**
- **In today's tense environment, the chance for workplace conflict has increased.**

Conflict in the Workplace

- **Handling and resolving conflict is one of the biggest challenges employees face.**
- **Conflict is commonly perceived as negative because it's often addressed ineffectively.**
- **Conflict must be resolved in a timely manner, constructively, and professionally.**
- **Unresolved conflict can have a damaging effect on the organization.**

How Does (Unhealthy) Conflict Manifest Itself?

- **Insults**
- **Noncooperation**
- **Anger**
- **Bullying**

Conflict Isn't Always Bad

- **Some conflict is normal and healthy (healthy tension).**
- **The most effective teams have members who feel safe when disagreeing with each other**
- **Allowing/encouraging dissent can lead to innovation, diversity of thought, better decision making, better products.**

Some Causes of Workplace Conflict

- **Conflicting priorities**
 - **Competition for resources**
 - **Incompatible goals**
 - **Reactions to organizational changes**
- **Conflicting perspectives**
 - **age, gender, ethnicity, religion, political views**
- **Misinterpretation of intentions**
 - **Ladder of inference**
- **Willingness to address conflict**

Some Causes Conflict in the Workplace

- **Personality clashes**
- **Poor leadership/management**
- **Misunderstood communication**
- **Poor performance**
- **Emotional Stress**

Unhealthy Conflict vs. Healthy Conflict

- **Unhealthy conflict interferes with employees' ability to work successfully; if not managed effectively, it can be counterproductive or destructive.**
- **Healthy conflict builds team connections by causing employees to change their attitudes and grow personally and professionally.**

Some Effects of Unhealthy Workplace Conflict

- **Work disruptions**
- **Decline in productivity**
- **Failure of projects**
- **Absenteeism**
- **Employee turnover**
- **Need to terminate employees**
- **Emotional Stress**

Some Effects of Healthy Workplace Conflict

- Positive change
- Better decision making/problem solving
- Stronger relationships
- Increased productivity
- Effective communication
- Better products

Methods of Addressing Conflict

- **Avoidance**
 - **Hope the issue will go away**
- **Collaboration**
 - **Work together for a mutually beneficial solution**
- **Compromise**
 - **Find middle ground where each party gives a little**

Methods of Addressing Conflict

- **Competing**
 - **May the best person win**
- **Accommodation**
 - **One person gives up their own needs and wishes to please the other person**

Methods of Addressing Conflict

- It's generally believed that either collaboration or compromise is the best way to deal with conflict.
 - There's no winner or loser
 - Both sides work together for the best possible solution.

Addressing Conflict

Effective communication is key.

- Address the issue in a face-to-face setting.
- Clearly state the cause of the issue.
- State clearly why you want the conflict resolved.
- Keep focus on the issue.

Some Steps You Can Take

- **Assess the situation**
- **Set up the situation**
- **Ensure an effective atmosphere**
- **Communicate for a successful outcome**
- **Develop options**
- **Implement a plan**

Enjoy the Positive Outcomes

- Cooperation from employees
- Performance and productivity improvement
- Less stress
- Better and more-efficient problem solving
- Improved teamwork
- Better creativity
- Increased morale

Some Types of Workplace Conflict

- Different working styles
- Leadership approach
- Personality conflict
 - The most common type of workplace conflict
- Organization-based

Conflict in the Workplace

Federal executives are expected to know how to address conflict.

ECQs

- **Leading Change: Bring about strategic change**
 - Encourages new ideas and innovations
 - Rapidly adapts to unexpected obstacles
 - Deals effectively with pressure
 - Builds a shared vision with others
- **Leading People**
 - Constructively resolves conflicts
 - Value individual differences
 - Inspire and foster team commitment

ECQs

- **Results Driven: Meet organizational goals**
 - **Holds self and others accountable**
 - **Makes decisions even solutions produce unpleasant consequences**
 - **Takes calculated risks**
- **Business Acumen: Manages resources strategically**
 - **Takes action to address performance problems**

ECQs

- **Building Coalitions: Build coalitions to achieve common goals**
 - **Builds consensus through give and take**
 - **Gains cooperation from others to accomplish goals**



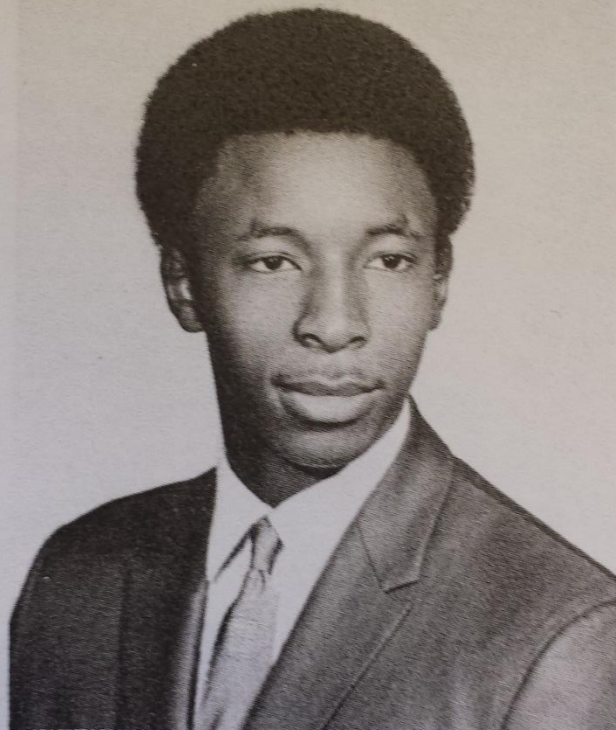
Real-World Examples



America's Original Seven Astronauts



My Goals are Set



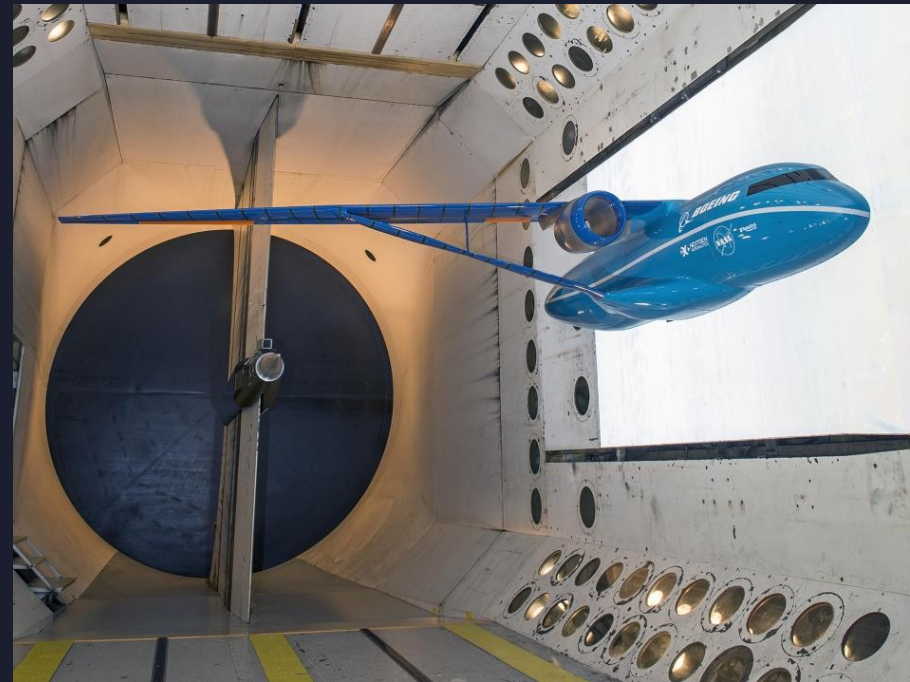
Woodrow Whitlow Jr.

Aeronautical Engineer

MIT



Arriving at Langley



Employee-Organization Conflict

Swearing-in ceremony
(well, not exactly)

Making the Transition Go Smoothly





Peer-to-Peer Conflict

Jockeying for computer access



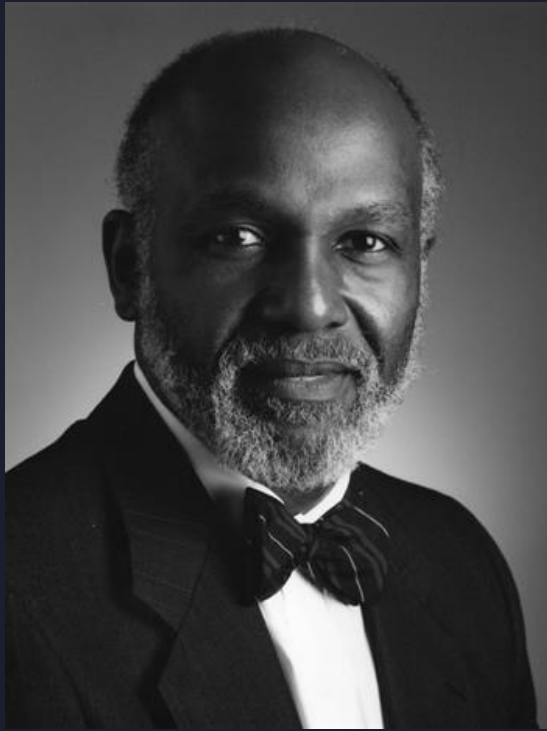
Healthy Conflict

- Peer-to-peer publication review
- Peer-to-supervisor publication review

Advancing Up the Leadership Ladder

- **First-level supervision**
 - **You might have to travel hundreds of miles to move a few feet!!**

It Helps to Have a Great Mentor. Or Two



First-Level Supervision

- MAST
- PDP
 - Clearly the best time of my NASA career
 - A real eye opener

Student Turns Supervisor



Tips and Observations

- **Set the (shared) direction**
- **You no longer are “one of the guys.”**
- **Don’t be the best technical person and the worst leader**
- **Accomplish organizational goals through leadership influence and management authority**

More Tips and Observations

- You are on stage, and the audience never takes an intermission
- Help your people reach their (realistic) career goals
- Determine what's fair, and make sure your people are treated fairly
- Deal with issues in a timely manner
 - Sometimes you have to change the people to change the people
- Know who you can trust and forge partnerships

So, What Happened to the Other Candidates?

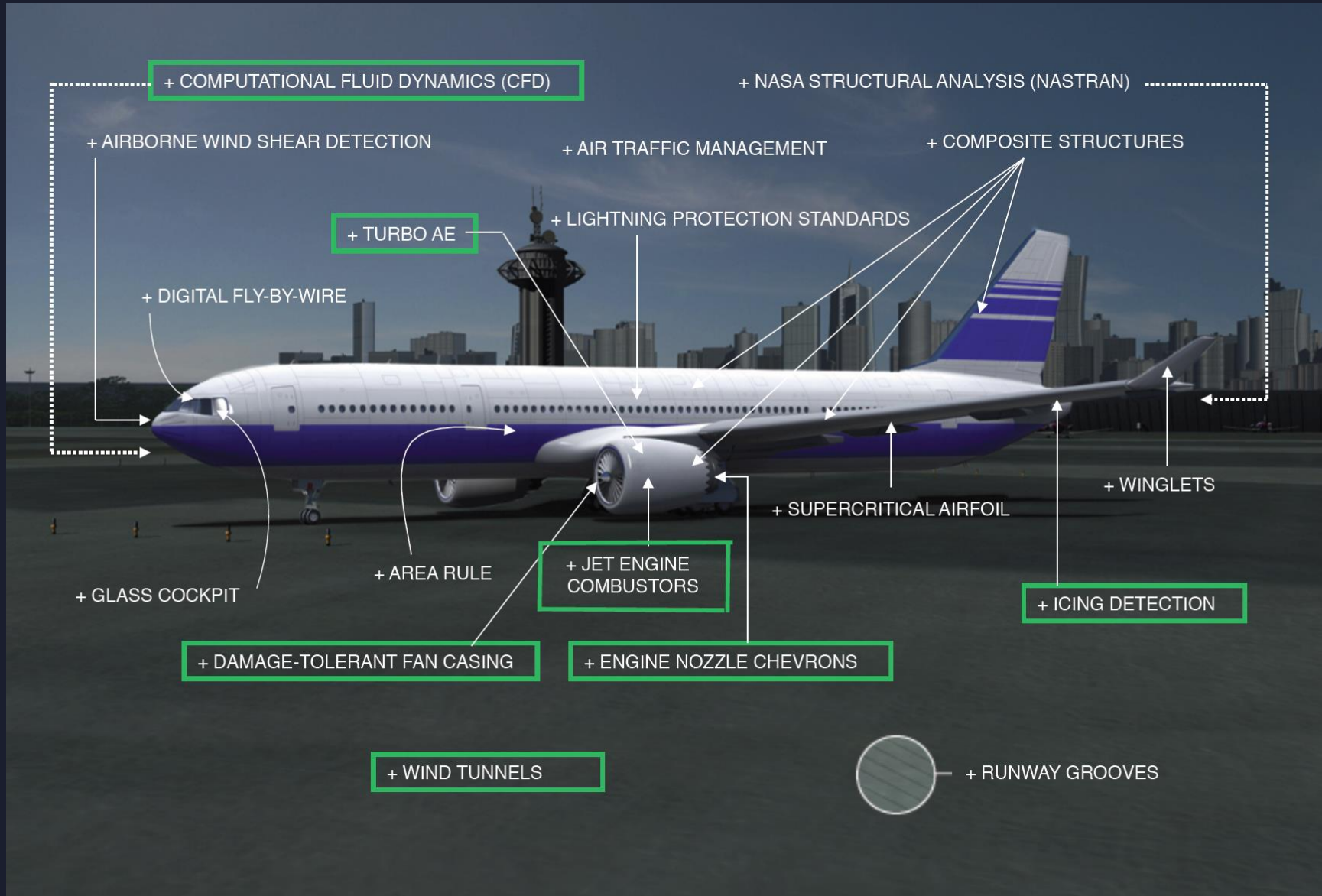
- Two peers applied for the position
- Both were co-workers
 - One healthy situation
 - One very unhealthy situation
- Competition for resources resulted in very healthy situations
 - Required a lot of trust between managers

Get Better and Prepare to Advance

- Copy those who have done what you want to do
- George Washington University
 - Linear/Nonlinear Control Theory
 - Contemporary Executive Development
- Pennsylvania State University
 - Engineer/Scientist as a Manager
- Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program



NASA Contributions to Modern Aircraft



Next-Generation Aircraft

- What do we do next?
- Assembled an Agency-wide team to decide

Be Prepared to Take Some Well-Calculated Risks

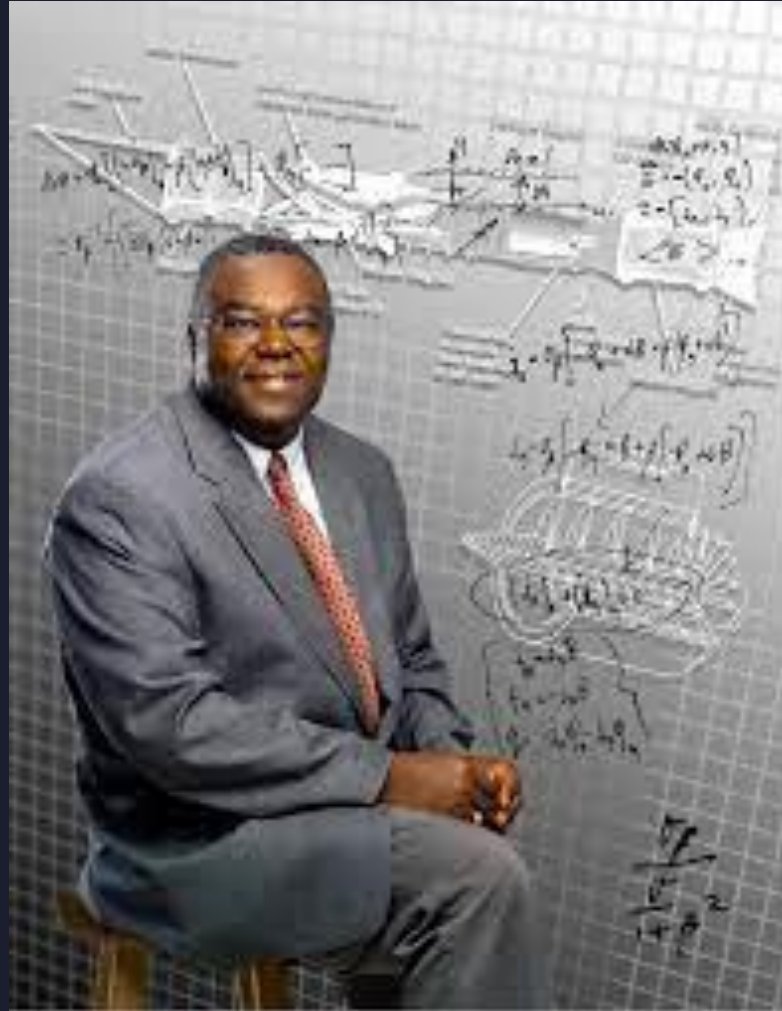


Blended Wing Body Aircraft Concept

Boeing X-48 Experimental Aircraft



Dr. Isaiah Blankson and the Future of Hypersonics in America



Return to Langley

Airframe Systems Program Office



NASA X-43 Hypersonic Aircraft

NASA's X-43A Scramjet Achieves Record-Breaking Mach 10 Speed



Return to My Roots



**Structures
Division**





**When the solution to a conflict is it's time
for a change, make it!!**



Lewis/Glenn Research Center



Research & Technology

- Structures
- Materials
- Turbomachinery
- Instrumentation & Controls
- Communications Technology

Plenty of Conflict Leading R&T

- **Leading in a matrix environment**
- **Lead only the civil servants**
- **Deciding the important competencies and planning to enhance them**
- **Acquiring a workforce that represents America**
- **Ensuring recognition, development, and career advancement of employees**
- **Ensuring that employees have realistic goals**
- **Building a technically excellent leadership team that genuinely cares about the workforce**

Leading R&T

- Dealing with reporting issues
- Address the workforce's concerns
 - Poor performance
 - Rewards system
- Lead with courage
- **Be prepared for those personnel situations for which you can't be prepared**
 - Employee-contractor issue
 - Employee-supervisor issue



Research vs. Human Resources



STS-107 Crew



Be Willing to Break the Rules if They Conflict with Progress



The Meeting



**Fred Gregory,
NASA Deputy Administrator**



**Sean O'Keefe,
NASA Administrator**



**Dr. Julian Earls,
GRC Director**

KSC Deputy Director



Plenty of Conflict Leading R&T

- Supervisor-subordinate conflict
 - Where's my airplane?



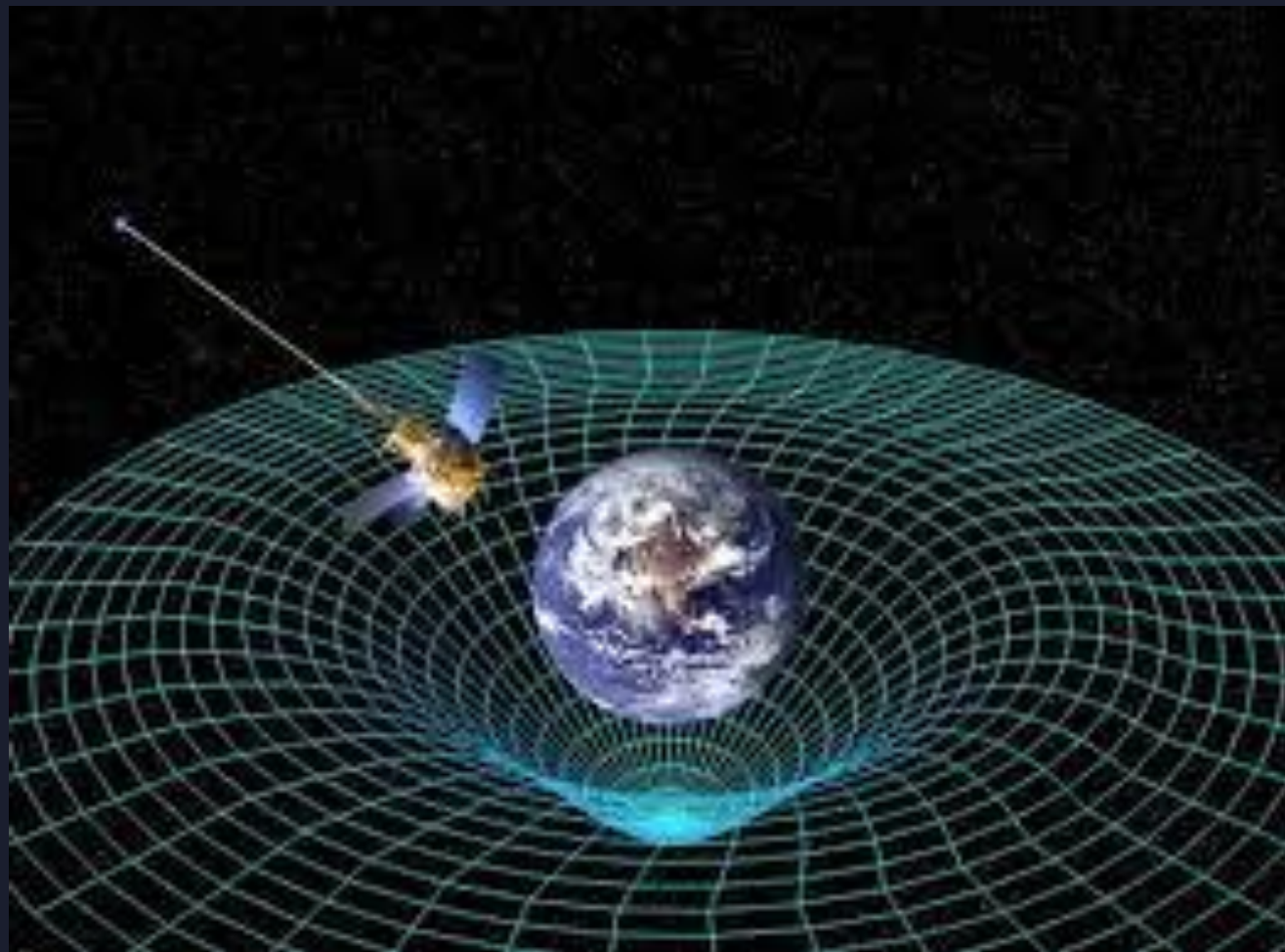
- Employee-employee conflict
 - I want my financial analyst!!



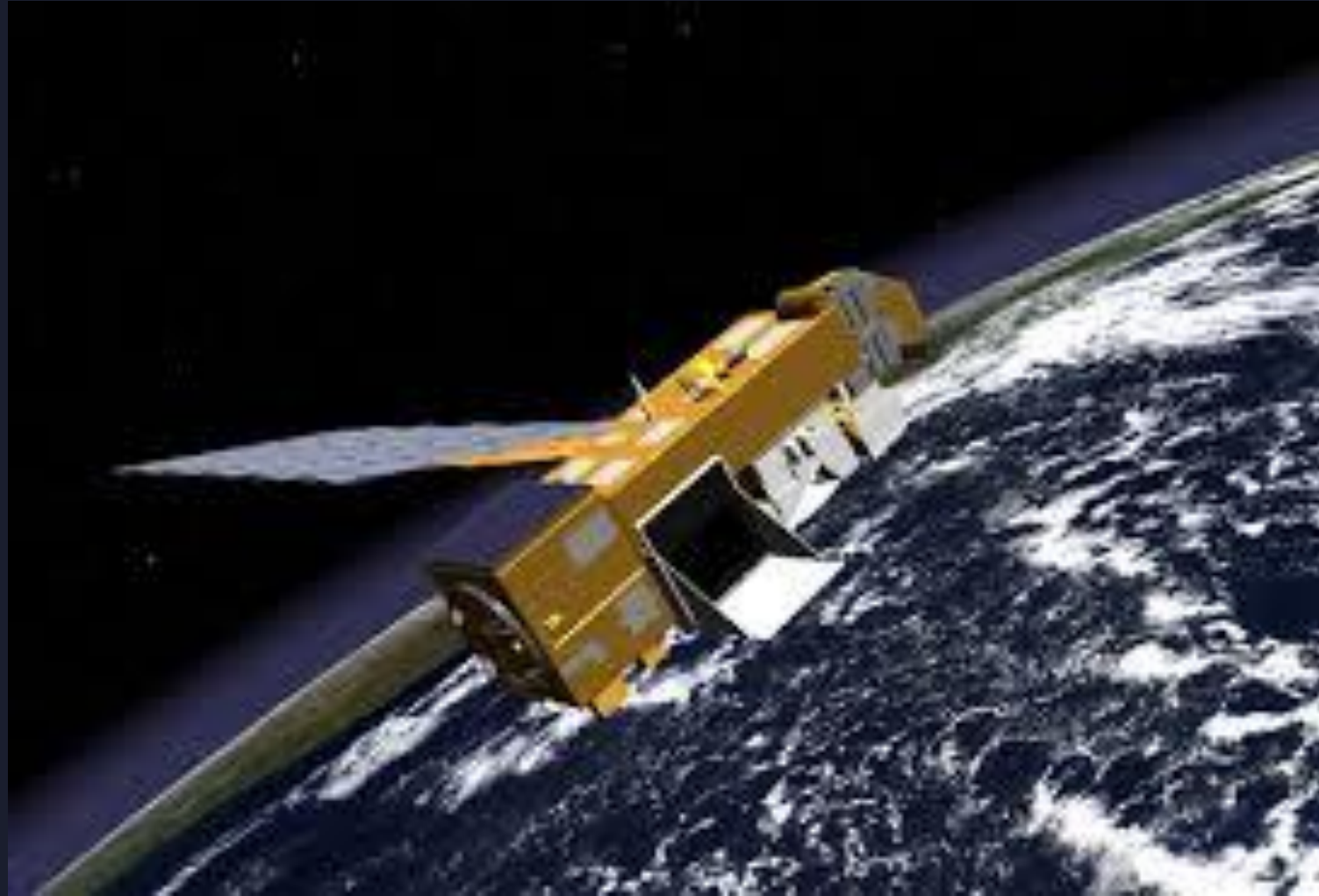
Know when to stop and when to go




Gravity Probe-B




Aura Spacecraft





Great leaders take calculated risks to benefit the organization



3:00 a.m. Meeting in the Garage



Space Shuttle Discovery Heads to the Launchpad for Return to Flight



STS-114 Liftoff



Discovery Returns Home



Glenn Research Center Director





Two big challenges before day one!!



Glenn Center Directors Campbell, Whitlow, and Earls



THE PLAIN DEALER



Great leaders will bet on themselves





The challenge of addressing “The Assessment”

We need programs and dollars. What are we going to do?



Conflict Competing for Resources

- **Subordinate-subordinate conflict**
 - **Research vs. Engineering**

Get the Team Involved in Planning the Future



Locations of NASA Centers/JPL



Competing for Resources

The NASA Administrator is committed to having nine healthy field centers.

Competing for Resources

- Framed, handwritten agreement for MSFC and GRC to cooperate on spaceflight development projects
- Personnel exchanges with JSC and GRC to develop spaceflight systems
- Now, let's change the workforce's mindset

Orion Service Module





In times of change, leaders must change organizations' ways of thinking and performing.

“This ain't no research project. If there is a rocket sitting on the pad, there damn well better be an upper stage stacked on top of it!”

Woodrow Whitlow, Jr.



Ares I-X in KSC VAB

(First Flight Hardware to Arrive)



Ares I-X on the Pad



A Perfect Flight!!

(Worthy of Front-Page Coverage in the Plain Dealer)



Letting the
spaceflight
community
know that
Glenn has
arrived





“Larry, I’m here to collect my nickel.”

Woodrow Whitlow, Jr.



The perception about Plum Brook is wrong!!



Saving Plum Brook Station

“I’ll be damned if I’m the director who loses Plum Brook”

Woodrow Whitlow, Jr.

Bringing Programs to Plum Brook Station

- **NASA can benefit greatly by using the capabilities at Plum Brook.**
- **What is required to bring service module testing to Ohio?**
- **Build effective partnerships and coalitions to address this issue**
 - **Turn \$0 into \$157M**



Sen. George Voinovich



Sen. Sherrod Brown



Gov. Ted Strickland



Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher



Cong. Marcy Kaptur



Cong. Dennis Kucinich

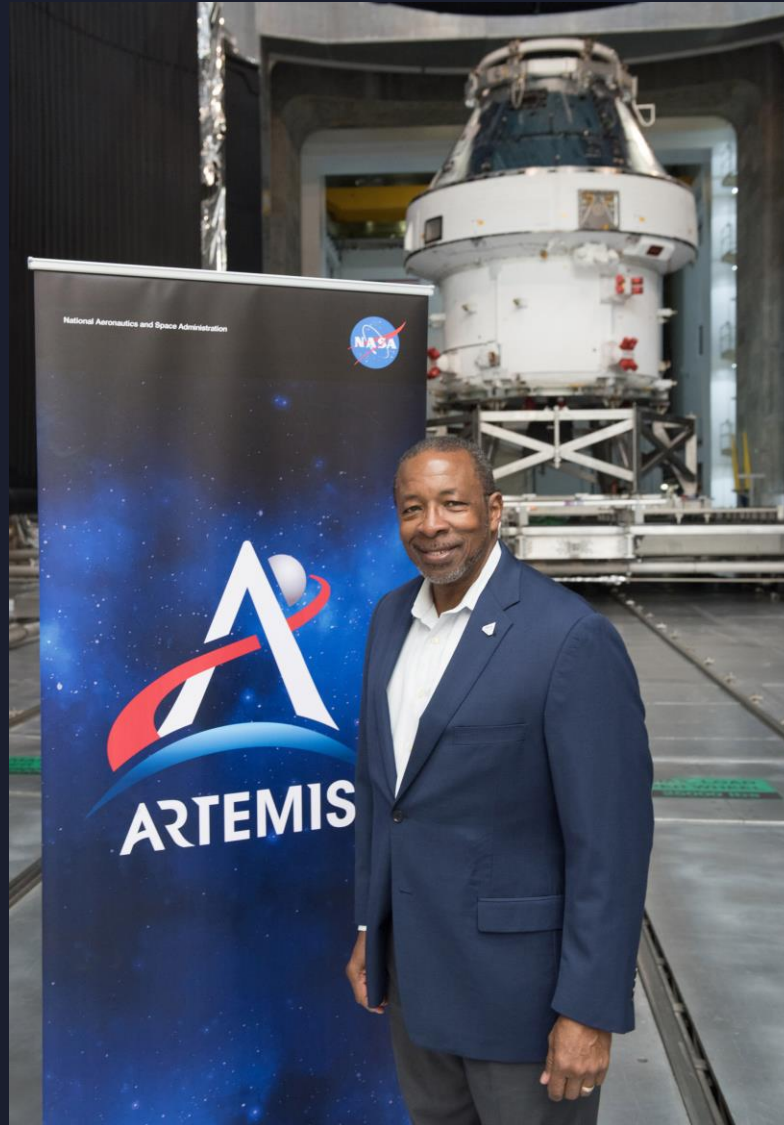
NASA Glenn Space Power Facility



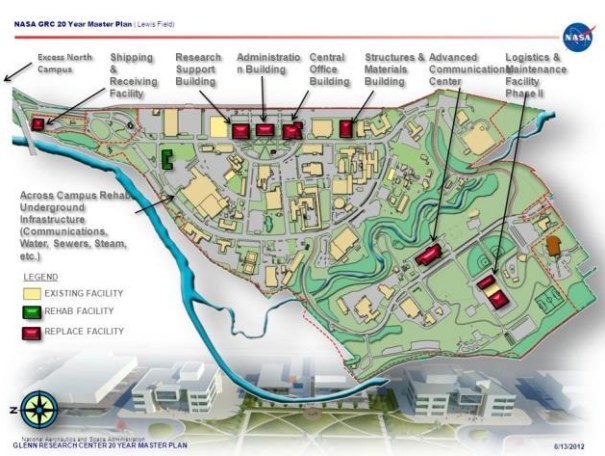
Space Environments Test Facility



We're Cleared to go to The Moon



Progress can cause conflict



Countdown begins for late 2021 opening of luxury apartments, boutique hotel at Fairview Park's former NASA buildings

Updated: Jun. 03, 2021, 1:26 p.m. Published: Jun. 03, 2021, 7:37 a.m.



Suburb Approves Adding 3rd Runway At Cleveland Airport

By the Associated Press
August 8, 2001



But, What About the Water Bill?



Celebrating Scientist-of-the-Year Award with Family



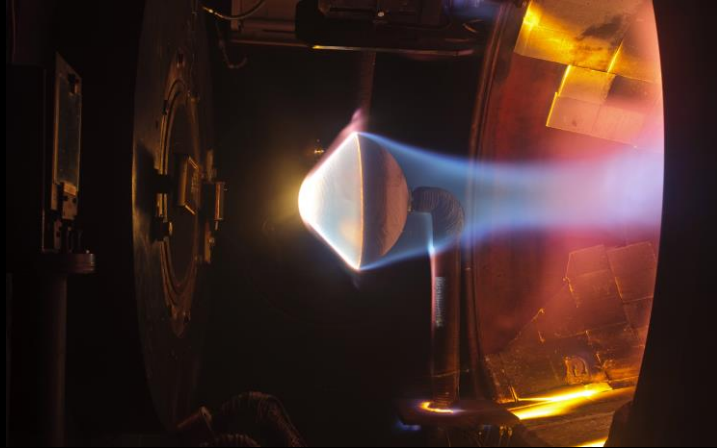
Accepting a Final Leadership Challenge



Responsible for All Enabling Capabilities



- Strategic Infrastructure
- Procurement
- Human Capital Management
- Protective Services
- Shared Services Center
- Headquarters Operations
- Partnerships



SSFL Environmental Clean-up



Now, This was a Regular Part of My Life



My Defense Shield

A New Path: The NASA Authorization Act of 2010



- The Congress approved and the President signed the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Authorization Act of 2010
 - Bipartisan support for human exploration beyond Low Earth Orbit
- The law authorizes:
 - Extension of the International Space Station until at least 2020
 - Strong support for a commercial space transportation industry
 - Development of a multi-purpose Crew Vehicle and heavy lift launch capabilities
 - A "flexible path" approach to space exploration opening up vast opportunities including near-Earth asteroids (NEA) and Mars
 - New space technology investments to increase the capabilities beyond low Earth orbit



Discovery's Last Flight



One More Conflict to Resolve

