

N. Dale Wright Distinguished Alumnus Award 2012

by **Gwen Young Holm**

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Dean Cornia; Director Hart; Steve Thacker; emeriti faculty—Dr. Wright, Dr. Buckwalter, and Dr. Wheeler; Dr. McDonald; MPA faculty and students; family and friends; I am greatly humbled by this honor and thank you very much.

I'll begin by showing a time-lapse video of the shuttle Endeavour as she slowly wended her way through the streets of Los Angeles on her final mission to her new home at the California Science Center. This was the culmination of a thirty-year program that demonstrated the engineering expertise of our great nation. The shuttle program was successful also because of the myriad of support functions across the country and even into Canada as the Canadian Space Agency provided the robotic arm in the payload bay; their arm launched many satellites as well as helped with the assembly of the International Space Station.

As I watched these events on TV and read the detailed newspaper articles, I was surprised by the impact Endeavour had as the majority on the city streets had never seen a shuttle, let alone one close enough that they could see her blemished, less than white exterior caused by her 115 million miles of space flight. I was taken aback that, for the vast majority, it was exhilarating and, for several, it was spiritual. In the *Los Angeles Times*, I read that "this was not a once in a lifetime experience, this was a 'one' experience."

Later I watched this video with co-workers and saw again the remarkable public reactions. We then somewhat sadly observed that we wished this type of effusive support occurred when the program was still alive and, especially, before the follow-on program, named Constellation, was cancelled.

How do we create this type of support for the work of the public sector—our work? Federal agencies are prohibited from marketing though NASA does a fairly good job of sharing our accomplishments with the public. This is a tough challenge, especially as not every organization's work is as visible or as cutting edge as NASA's but they are no less important as they provide critical services to the public.

Though popular response certainly motivates the workforce, there are some days when you just have to go back to the basics and remember why you chose the public sector as a career and why you chose your job.

At Dryden, we call this the "line of sight." As a business person, I work in an office that, for safety reasons, is far removed from the aircraft flight line. It's easy to get lost in the paper and bureaucracy and forget why I'm doing what I'm doing. When I was an intern at NASA headquarters in Washington, DC, I was fortunate to be able to work across the street to the Air and Space Museum to see a shuttle movie so I could recharge my batteries. Now that I'm in the field at the Dryden Flight Research Center, I simply have to walk outside to view a flyover or be rattled by a sonic boom or just to get a whiff of jet fuel to remember why I'm there. I love the mission and the interesting and far out things that we do. This connection with the mission is important for all to remember as this should guide your actions and your decisions day by day.

When I received the instructions for this luncheon address, I was asked to share my vision for public service. Well, I had never really thought about "my vision" though I knew before I chose the MPA program that I was a public sector-type as I wanted to help people. Thanks to a recent talk I heard I was able to capture my vision in one sentence: "We make bad things good and good things better."

In these tough economic times, it is very difficult to make bad things good and I get nervous when people want to make good things better—as I believe we need a balanced approach rather than optimizing one area at the expense of another. At NASA, our budget is basically flat—now I know "flat" is the new "up"—nevertheless; our buying power is decreased by inflation. Rather than be negative and feeling defeated about this situation, my team and I focus on risk to mission, which then dictates our priorities.

For example, we're at a point where our procurement and facilities functions can stop a program dead in its tracks; such as when a critical part is not purchased in time for a flight or when the facilities group is unable to fix a sewer problem, which then impairs the operations of our restrooms. We then have a major safety of health issue that requires us to send people home. Because these areas are "red" as far as risk and impact to mission, I prioritize them over the other mission support areas when it comes to hiring (they get the priority) and when it comes to budget cuts—they aren't the first areas I consider.

Early on we thought we'd balance the budget by eliminating tasks or services within a function—which works until you reach muscle and realize you're now impacting basic, required services. We're now dealing with response times, which means we communicate regularly with our customers to let them understand the impact of our shortfalls and to find out their priorities and what flexibilities they have in their requirements. We're also utilizing the Lean Six Sigma approach to identify and remove inefficiencies.

During these tough times, can we really make bad things good and good things better?

I've found that by working with partners to leverage what each has to fill in gaps or to help with the other's challenges is very helpful. Since Dryden is on the Edwards Air Force Base, we've formed an alliance where we use each other's assets such as we use their airfield and they use our radars. This past fiscal year I worked with my Air Force counterpart who I'll call "the Colonel," to resolve two major issues.

I worked very closely with "the Colonel" when the NASA parents' access to the Air Force child care facility was revoked due to severe budget reductions by the Air Force. I knew the colonel had other difficult cuts he had to make and offered to serve as the go-between with our parents who, as expected, were angry and frustrated, especially because I was unable to negotiate a delay in the start of the cut to the end of the school year. By working closely with the Colonel and his staff to ensure coordinated communications of the actual impact and what little options he could provide, I gained his trust and, likewise, felt that I could trust him.

At any military installation, there are natives and transients. At Dryden, the NASA folks are the natives and the Air Force senior leaders are the transients—changing every two to three years—which makes developing relationships tough. However, because the Colonel and I served in the trenches, so to speak, working on a very tough problem, we developed trust.

I then realized that I needed to seize the opportunity to talk to him about a dangerous intersection that I wanted him to fix before he moved to his next assignment as I wasn't sure I'd ever develop such a positive relationship with his successor.

The discussion/debate about the intersection had continued for years with the Air Force refusing to install stop signs and insisting on installing traffic lights which was the ultimate solution and very costly. Another reason the Air Force didn't want to make the change is they didn't believe there was enough reason to change. In several years, there was only one accident that didn't seem too serious as the person did walk away. However, when I'd talk to the employees who regularly used this intersection, there were many instances when collisions were just barely avoided.

I explained the hazard and the history of the intersection to the colonel and reminded him that neither of us had the \$400k to install traffic lights and turn lanes and proposed an elegant and very low cost solution of installing three-way stop signs. I also stressed to the colonel that I'd never worked so closely with my counterpart, thanked him for his support and that I needed his support now to resolve this major safety issue. To his credit, he even overruled his civil engineering organization and approved then installed the three-way stop signs before he left.

So, in very tough economic times like these, it is still possible to "make bad things good and good things better" by working with others and thinking out of the box which can sometimes mean going for the "Volkswagen or Yugo" solution rather than the "Cadillac" solution. And, developing good working relationships is always the right thing to do.

Using these relationships outside your organization, you can tap into their best practices and use them as resources when you're stuck and don't know what to do. At NASA, we have many working groups and special study teams usually consisting of the same functions across the agency. Whenever I need help, I'll often call my center counterparts to ask how they're handling a specific situation as recreating the wheel wastes time and is expensive. They are always very willing to help as we've become friends through the years. This sharing of information and best practices is perfectly legal as we're no longer in school; it's ok to copy their paper or use their ideas—always with attribution—state your source.

I'll also add to my vision our responsibility to do our jobs in an ethical manner—doing the right thing for the organization; at NASA, we say "for the mission". Sometimes, issues or decisions can get very complicated (like building a shuttle) and, worse yet, complex (like getting a budget increase) so I've found that I need to boil the information down to the basics to determine what the real issue is. I've developed an "ethics ruler", of sorts, to help me handle these challenges.

I ask myself “What is my motivation?” Am I choosing to do this because it is the best for me or am I choosing this because it is the best for the organization? Because the organization is paying me to do their work, I believe the organization should always “win”.

Lastly, I’d add that we provide opportunities to develop our workforce, which is known as diversity and inclusion. When I was a candidate for the Presidential Management Internship (or, “PMI”), Dr. Lennis Knighton was the Director of the MPA Program and wrote a recommendation for me. After I was selected and had been working for a while at NASA I was able to read his recommendation.

However, I only read the first sentence, “Gwen is Tongan”, which incensed me. Now I wasn’t offended because he got the island wrong as I’m Hawaiian, Samoan, and Korean, but I was offended because he cited something I did absolutely nothing to achieve.

It took me several months to calm down and understand that Dr. Knighton was only doing his job—to get me an interview—and the rest was up to me. I am forever grateful to be an MPA graduate and for the struggles and challenges I experienced as well as the knowledge I gained from the coursework but more importantly the sense of achievement and belief in self that I gained from these tough 2 years. I’m grateful to the faculty then and now as the MPA program has evolved and improved to offer more diverse coursework with the addition of NGOs and diverse experiences such as the Ghana trip and the recruiting trips.

In summary, public service is an honor and a great responsibility for we are stewards of taxpayer dollars. At times, our jobs may seem thankless but we should all take great pride in the knowledge that we can make bad things good and good things better.

Thank you very much.