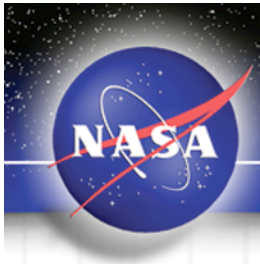
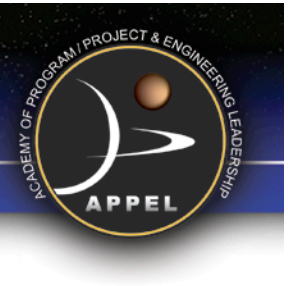




The Power of Stories: Building a Shared Sense of Organizational Purpose

Dr. Ed Hoffman
Director, Academy of Program/Project & Engineering Leadership
April 28, 2009

A Skeptic Asks the Question:

What do *stories…*

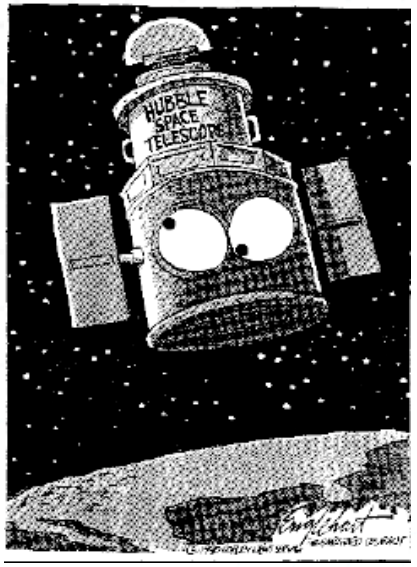
Sextus Empiricus

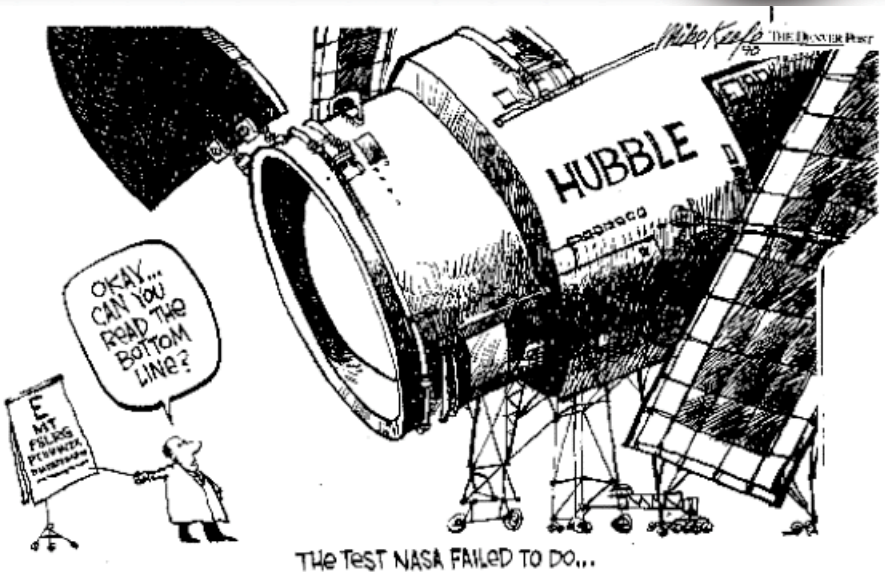
…have to do with *knowledge*?

The Story about Government: 1981

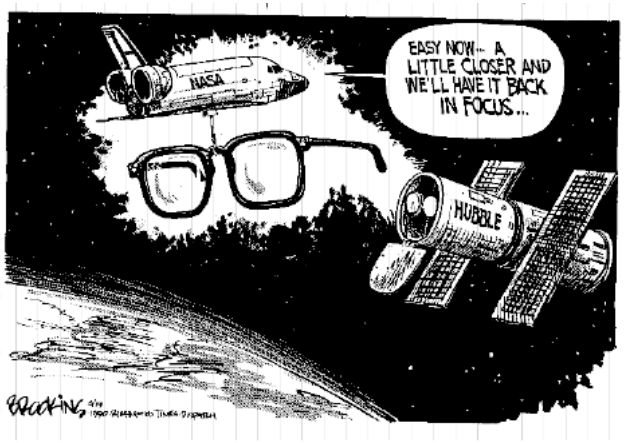
“In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”

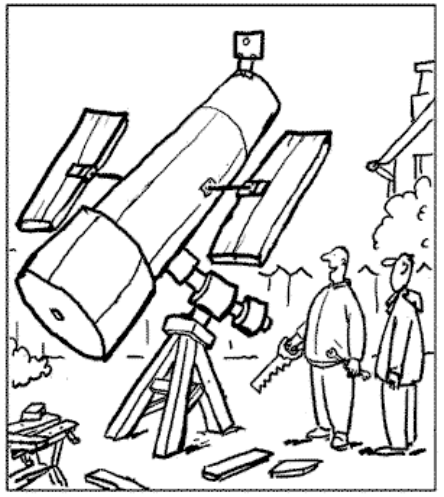
The Story about Government: 1990





THE TEST NASA FAILED TO DO...





'It's based on the Hubble Space Telescope.'

The Story about Government: 2005

“I've been in New Orleans a number of times since Katrina. It's a tragedy, and it is largely a tragedy of government. The federal government failed, the state government failed, the city government failed…

The Story about Government: 2009

The perils and the promise of the new era of big government

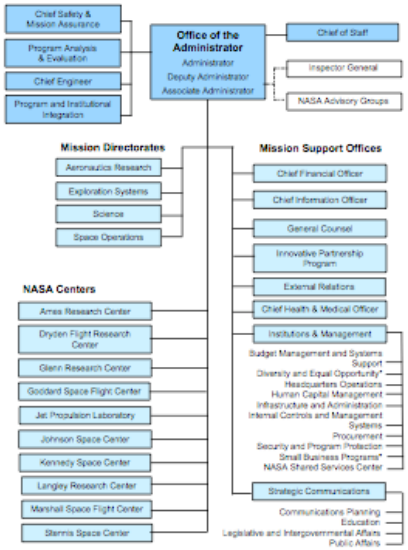
A Project-Based World: Critical Questions

- Do you focus extensively on **cost**?
- Are people asking about your **schedule**?
- Is **performance** a critical variable?
- Do you rely on a mix of **talent** from **multiple disciplines**?
- Does your work have **global impact**?

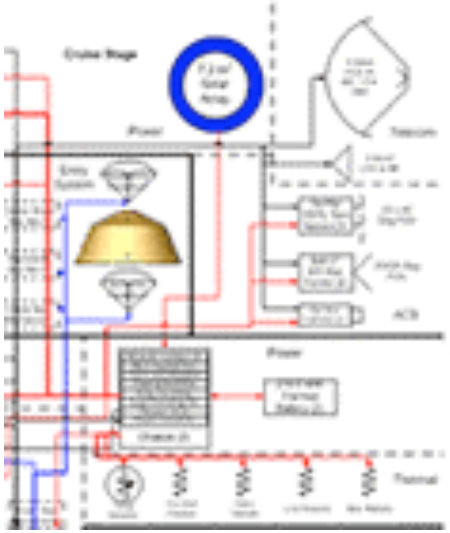
What Drives Project Complexity?

3 Dimensions of Complexity

Organizational



System Design



Uncertainty

Increased Complexity **leads to** **Increased Risk** **which demands** **Adaptive Leadership**

Mission and Goals

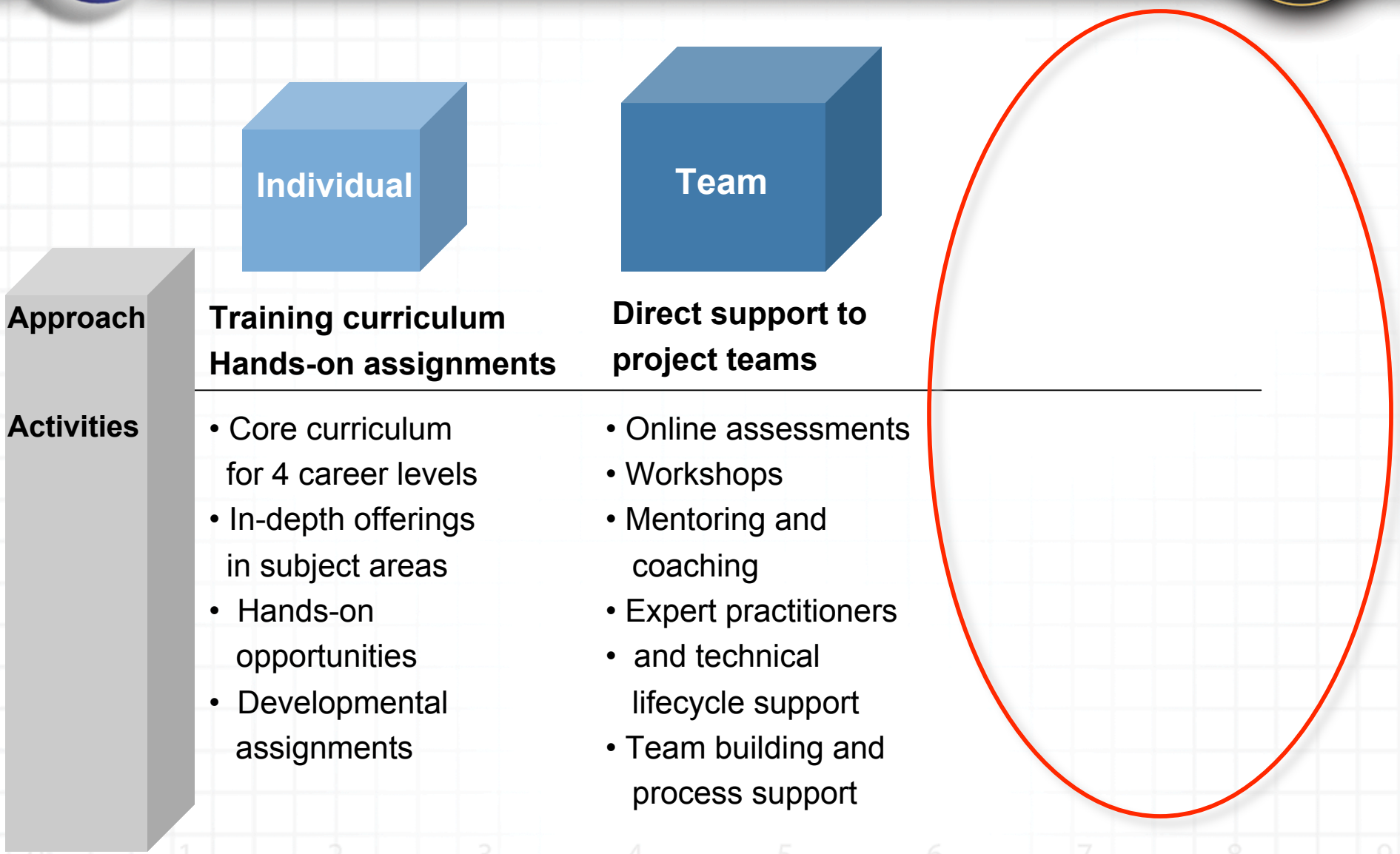
MISSION

To support NASA's mission by promoting individual, team, and organizational excellence in program/project management and engineering through the application of learning strategies, methods, models, and tools.

GOALS

- Provide a common frame of reference for NASA's technical workforce.
- Provide and enhance critical job skills.
- Support engineering, program and project teams.
- Promote organizational learning across the agency.
- Supplement formal educational programs.

Complexity Demands Continuous Learning



Organizational Learning: Knowledge Sharing

Objectives:

- Capture and transfer knowledge from seasoned program/project managers and engineers across NASA.
- Build a learning community of reflective practitioners.
- Facilitate open communication and dialogue.

Knowledge sharing addresses GAO and external report recommendations

The Power of Stories

Knowledge sharing activities emphasize the vital
in the effective exchange of knowledge.

Telling Stories: Conferences and Forums

PM Challenge

NASA-wide annual event
1200 attendance in 2009

Masters Forum

Invitational semiannual event
60 - 80 participants

Telling Stories: Publications

ASK Magazine

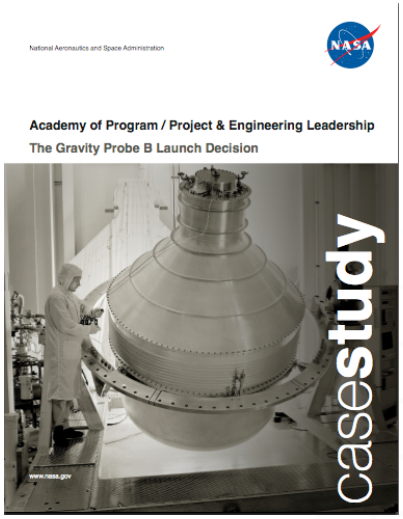
- Award-winning quarterly publication
- First-person practitioner stories

ASK the Academy

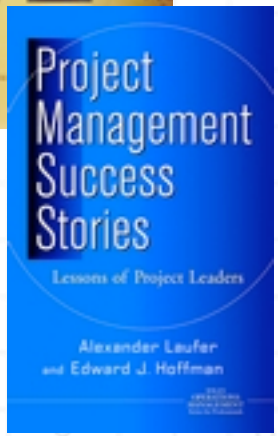
- Monthly e-newsletter
- Academy news, updates, features

Case Studies

In-depth studies of NASA missions



Books



http://www.nasa.gov/offices/oce/appel/knowledge/publications/206.html

A Good Story

- Starts with a problem/conflict/challenge/etc.
- Describes a unique experience.
- Describes concrete actions by people.
- Makes a point — arrives at some basic truth.

Stories Can Be a Matter of Life or Death

"A single death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic."

- Joseph Stalin

Stories: Value and Dignity

Whatever has a **value** can be replaced by something else which is equivalent; whatever, on the other hand, is **above all value**, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a **dignity**.

- Immanuel Kant

Storytelling helps us construct a sense of dignity, meaning, and purpose for our work.

The Need for a Network

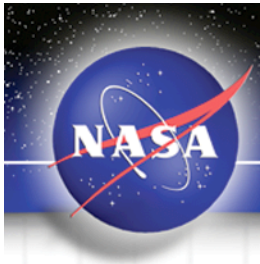
If you agree that:

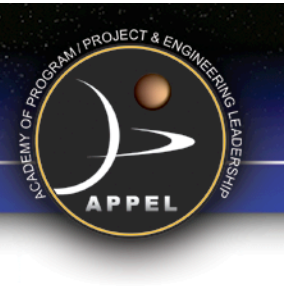
- we are living in a project-based world;
- knowledge is social; and
- stories are a powerful tool for communication/engagement

how do we attract others who share this understanding?

- There is a need for a network of like-minded practitioners across government

Tell your story—if you don't, someone else will.





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