

In This Issue



WELCOME TO THE NEW ASK. Readers of the earlier version of the magazine will find some familiar features here—most notably, stories of project management challenges and the lessons they teach. We continue to believe that stories recounting the real-life experiences of practitioners provide important practical wisdom—a kind of conversation on paper that is the next best thing to talking face to face.

Reflecting NASA APPEL's new responsibility for engineering career development (which Ed Hoffman mentions in his column), we are adding stories of engineering achievement to the magazine. In this issue, we describe a new thermal barrier used to protect the O-rings in solid rocket motors and an unmanned aerial vehicle that detects and soars on updrafts. Those articles illustrate not only the technical skill of NASA engineers but their ability to get outstanding results with modest resources.

ASK will also now publish articles that explore broader issues of organizational knowledge, learning, and collaboration. As Chris Scolese notes in this issue's interview, NASA needs to excel as a learning organization and to develop and retain critical knowledge to meet the challenges posed by its ambitious new mission. To launch our consideration of those subjects, we include here an article on learning strategies at Goddard Space Flight Center and a piece on retaining the rich, experiential knowledge that Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap call "deep smarts." Laurence Prusak's "Knowledge Notebook" reflects on the importance of understanding different kinds of knowledge that contribute to effective work. And the NASA Knowledge Map included in this issue we hope will serve as both a useful guide to basic information about the work of NASA centers and a picture of the impressive skills and accomplishments of the organization as a whole.

The stories you will read here tell about careful planning, realism, commitment, trust, and collaboration as sources to success. A theme running through many of them—from the development of the Compton Gamma-Ray Observatory to Orlando Figueroa's many projects—is the importance of communication. Most of the other success factors—certainly trust and collaboration—depend on good communication. Without it, teamwork is impossible and success unlikely.

Communication is what ASK is all about, and we believe the highest form of communication is conversation—the back-and-forth of shared ideas, questions, arguments, agreements, and explanations. Our new "ASK Interactive" page invites you into conversation with us. Your insights, questions, complaints, and stories will help make ASK a better magazine and a part of the larger conversation that is an essential part of NASA's pursuit of excellence.

Don Cohen
Managing Editor