



Life in the Fast Lane

Stream-of-consciousness commentary on the hectic life of a NASA manager

I HAVE HATED WRITING THE COLUMN FOR THIS ISSUE. This is unusual since I tend to look forward to writing for *ASK*. At this time, however, I resent its intrusion as another requirement in a whirlwind of short actions, constant travel, and little chance to reflect or contemplate. I hate knowing that I am way past deadline, and if I don't get this in tomorrow I slow down the issue. Can't let that happen; sit down and write. Now.

This is the problem, I feel too busy, with no end in sight.

There is so much going on at NASA. More tasks, more changes, more deadlines, more reviews, more phones ringing, more meetings—more, more, more. (Wasn't that a disco song in the '70s? Is it obvious my mind is starting to turn to mush? Was it only yesterday that I was young? Someone did call me "old NASA" the other day. Hmmm.)

The number of project assignments is incredible. Lengthy preparation for a major program review, organizational assessment interviews and reports, on-going budget preparations, the list goes on.

Then there is the travel. Over the last two months alone I have visited Houston three times, Los Angeles twice, Denver once, Albuquerque once, Hampton once (let's not consider that travel since it's only 250 miles from home.) On two of my trips, flight crews of United and Southwest Airlines greeted me by my first name. The only travel I would really appreciate at this time is a trip to Australia—24 hours of uninterrupted, no cell phone flying.

Surrounding all of my chaos is NASA 2004. Perhaps it is me, but it seems as though the organization is flying faster than the speed of light. The rumor mill is buzzing with change. My phone is ringing with questions of, "What have you heard, what do you know?" It is embarrassing to admit, but I usually know nothing. I usually hear about what happened when I walk down to breakfast, and my wife reads from the *Post*.

She'll ask, "Did you know about that?" and I'll say, "No, I just work there."

So things are crazy. People ask, "Ed, when will you get a minute to talk?" I'm thinking, "*Talk*, are you kidding? When will I have a chance to sleep through a night?"

This doesn't seem like the way it should be. Have I missed something? Is my leadership style the cause of my problems? I wonder how does this affect the team?

It is now midnight, which is becoming common. My writing assignments are increasingly being done at 11 p.m. or 4 a.m.. Everyone else is comfortably asleep, and I am not taking time away from anyone or anything else. Another bonus of such hours is that in a strange way I feel I have stolen time. During these hours I get to catch up, or at least get closer to the moving target. Of course sleep deprivation is probably not a good thing, but let's assume this is a short-term fix. Tomorrow, order will settle in, and balance will return. Keep thinking those thoughts.

So what can be concluded from organizational life in the fast lane? Is it appropriate to have more questions than answers? Ronald Heifetz of Harvard University has a whole book entitled *Leadership Without Easy Answers*—so maybe it's not just me.

At any rate, I just seem to keep piling up the questions. Have I flunked the balanced life test? Is the world moving that much faster, or am I falling behind? When will the chaos become order? Can this be the new steady state? Is confusion and ignorance a good thing? (Definitely don't want to seem complacent or comfortable these days.) Maybe this state represents a readiness for new challenges, changes and exciting work? Whatever it is, how come no one ever mentioned this stuff in my Organizational Behavior or Leadership textbooks?

Certainly no coverage on this in any Project Management writings or courses I have come across. Heifetz's book will have to be my guide, because this is where my column ends, a lot of questions and no clear answers. At least no easy ones. •