

Take Care of Your People & They Will Take Care of the Work

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A new year has begun and with it many hopes, such as broad distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine and relief from the pandemic. When 2020 started, there were also many hopes and plans at NASA, just like any other year. The year 2020 held such promise with the first crewed from US soil by Space X as part of NASA's Commercial Crew program and the US would send another rover with a helicopter to Mars, Perseverance, and Ingenuity, respectively. Great promise and excitement ahead.

By the beginning of February, NASA's attention turned to the spread of COVID-19 and protecting NASA employees, including astronauts, contractors, and everyone's families. Agency-wide executive meetings were held regularly and we got to work on preparing for massive telework and conducting historical launches during a pandemic. In the end, NASA's 2020 plans would proceed with extra precautions and on April 17, Chris Cassidy launched from Russia to the International Space Station; Space X demonstrated to the world May 30 and November 15, astronauts could and would be launched from US soil and on July 30, Perseverance with Ingenuity were launched to Mars. These are just a few NASA highlights that demonstrate the human spirit is capable of so much even during a global pandemic.

Don't Stop, Proceed Differently

What I learned during my waning days with the federal government as the NASA

CIO, is that a global pandemic is not about stopping but proceeding differently and to be called a leader, you will have to rise to the challenge and care for your people, above all else.

The abrupt shift to massive telework, provided little time to think, we had to make sure we were prepared — was the network ready, how would we know without an outage, could we fix computers with little to no human contact, what equipment will people need to work from home, how

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long will this be, and what were the increased cyber risks with this paradigm shift? Some of the questions that needed answers fast. The NASA CIO team got busier than I've ever experienced, and my job was to keep it all moving forward and monitor my team's well-being.

Constant Communications Essential

The NASA CIO team includes all the Center CIOs plus JPL, a geographically dispersed team. We convened daily until late March. Constant communication and one meeting per week were dedicated for a mental and physical check-in with each member of the team. These check-ins provided us the ability to connect as a team, care for one another and adjust how we were working to better support each other.

A small but important change we made quickly was to end meetings 10 minutes before the next hour. This would give each of us a 10-minute break each hour. This

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was key to our mental and physical health. For me, it meant I could prevent back pain from sitting in a bad chair. (I quickly purchased a new chair and it helped alleviate the back pain!)

Beyond the weekly check-ins, all of us worked with our teams to ensure they were getting wellness checks. Some even added social meetings to the schedule to continue to stay connected in a less formal manner. There was also a lot more texting amongst each other throughout the week — how is the family? Need a break? Do you have toilet paper?

This was a productive and appropriate use of our time as demonstrated by the feedback I received and the myriad of COVID specific IT projects that were completed ahead of schedule, even the ones that were not even planned for 2020! Our ability to deliver was a testament how to take care of your people and the work will take care of itself. NASA leadership also acknowledged the team's work.

As an aside and to alleviate the pent-up energy to help within NASA, NASA launched multiple innovation challenges. Many of the products produced went on to help hospitals, communities, and others. This effort also gets added to the pandemic lessons, people want to help so give them a way to channel their ingenuity and energy.

In the end, NASA launched, and I retired. I left a better person and leader because of what I learned as the NASA CIO — care for your people and the work will take care of itself.

Ad Astra! ■