

NASA's culture still poses danger, ex-astronauts say

Schedule, cost can overshadow safety

By Traci Watson
USA TODAY

Eight weeks before the space shuttle is due to start flying again, two prominent astronauts who left NASA recently say the agency has failed to fix cultural problems within the space program that helped cause the loss of shuttle Columbia in early 2003.

NASA officials still too often allow concerns about schedule and cost, rather than safety, to

dictate operations, according to James Wetherbee, the first astronaut to command five shuttle missions, and John Young, who commanded Columbia on the first shuttle flight in 1981.

"We're operating the same way," says Wetherbee, in his first comments about why he left the agency in January.

Wetherbee, 52, says he left his job on the safety staff at the Johnson Space Center in Houston out of frustration at the slow pace of progress. He still consults for NASA and is writing a book about his time there.

"You have to do what we did in the Apollo program. You

have to plan for the worst and hope for the best," says Young, 74, who walked on the moon. "And I don't think we're doing that." He retired as an associate director at Johnson in 2004.

After Columbia was damaged on liftoff and broke up upon re-entry, investigators found that NASA's overconfidence and bureaucracy contributed to the disaster. Shuttle Discovery is scheduled for launch May 15.

Neither former astronaut says he thinks the next flight is in danger, but Wetherbee worries that another tragedy is possible if the culture doesn't change. He expresses concern

about what he says is management's failure to treat workers' suggestions with respect. And Young says too many shuttle personnel are still too confident in the vehicle's safety.

NASA has begun better safety training. "This kind of change is not something that happens very rapidly," says James Jennings, NASA's management chief, in response to Wetherbee and Young. Jennings acknowledges that NASA hasn't yet rolled out the training to fix the culture at Florida's Kennedy

Slow change

Reforms at NASA, 6A

Space Center, where shuttles are housed and launched, and the shuttle program at Johnson. Stennis Space Center in Mississippi, which tests the shuttle's engines, and two other departments at Johnson have gotten the training.

"To me, the more important part is ... have we all agreed that we have to do a more thorough job of making sure we're safe to fly?" says Wayne Hale, deputy shuttle program manager. "We have had a very thorough and in-depth culture change in that regard."

NASA struggles to launch its cultural shifts

Space agency still working to reshape attitudes

By Traci Watson
USA TODAY

HOUSTON — James Wetherbee has flown the space shuttle six times. But as he pilots his Honda Civic through traffic, he brakes gently at the hint of a yellow light. "I don't like taking risks," says the first man to lead five shuttle flights. Now he has taken a big risk. In January, Wetherbee retired from a 20-year career at NASA's Johnson Space Center here, though he had no job to go to and a daughter less than two years from college.

Wetherbee says he left out of disappointment at NASA's lack of change and out of hope that he could do some good if he no longer worked there.

"It became clear to me ... that upper-level managers did not want to change," he says. "I realized I was ineffective on the inside, so maybe I'll be able to speak out and be more effective on the outside."

Change at NASA became an issue 18 months ago, when an independent panel released a blistering report on events leading to the disintegration of shuttle Columbia during re-entry in 2003. All seven crewmembers died.

The report, by the independent Columbia Accident Investigation Board, pinned much of the blame on NASA's "self-deception" and "overconfident" culture. It led to agonized soul-searching at the agency, especially at Johnson, the home of the shuttle program. And it triggered a massive effort to shake up the agency's values.

NASA hired a consulting firm to help it reform. Space officials have studied how to encourage candor from their subordinates. Trained observers critique managers' behavior in meetings.

Many NASA personnel say lower-level staffers challenge decisions more often and managers pay more attention to their underlings.

"People feel much more free to speak and to listen and therefore learn from each other's concerns," says Graham Babin, an adviser



Disappointed in NASA: James Wetherbee, pictured at Frenchie's Restaurant in Webster, Texas, says he left NASA because of its aversion to change.

"It's an attitude thing... A lot of people around here think that ... you don't need to do these (safety upgrades) because nothing's ever going to happen."



— Retired astronaut John Young

ing risk-averse: ... When you make a generic statement like that, it stifles communication, and that's when accidents occur."

Wayne Hale, the deputy shuttle program director, agrees that such comments are made.

"There are still some occasions where people will slip," Hale says. "We're working with them not to do that."

Astronaut John Young, who retired at the end of 2004, after 42 years at NASA, is concerned with what he sees as complacency. Many staffers, he says, see the shuttle not as a risky test vehicle to be watched carefully but as a well-understood craft.

"It's an attitude thing," he says. "A lot of people around here think that ... you don't need to do these (safety upgrades) because nothing's ever going to happen."

Hale and James Jennings, NASA's management chief, reject the idea that the agency hasn't changed. Hale says NASA has taken to heart the need for more rigor in evaluating problems, Jennings cites the improvements between the February and September survey results.

"From all I see, we're going in the right direction," Jennings says, adding that change takes time.

Wetherbee, who has been hired as a consultant by NASA to help roll out culture-change programs, says he only wants to make NASA a better place for the rank-and-file workers. They're the people who "have held this agency together for the last 45 years," he says. "Everything I see ... (is) to make their job eas-

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► But between February and September, there was no increase in the number of people who thought NASA is making better decisions on safety concerns.

► In September, many people still did not agree that NASA considers safety more important than meeting the schedule.

Wetherbee, who was asked to join Johnson's safety group after the accident, agrees that more workers are speaking their minds. But he doubts that will last, because managers are not taking those opinions seriously, he says.

"The boss says, 'You safety people, if you had your way, we'd put the shuttle in the harbor,'" he says.



Debris from the space shuttle Columbia streaks across the sky over Tyler, Texas, in this 2003 photo. After the tragedy, a review of NASA pinned much of the blame on NASA's "overconfident" culture.

► On the upside, more people felt in September that in February there are pockets of resistance to change. And overall, the mood became more positive. Photos courtesy of the NASA Mission Gallery.

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