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 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 in 1969.

"And if it doesn't go right, that's OK," he added.

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 tighter safety training. "This kind of change is not something that happens very rapidly," says James Reilly, NASA's management chief, as response to Wetherbee and Young, by specifying that NASA isn't yet "rolling out the training or fixing the culture at Florida's Kennedy Space Center, where shuttle engines are housed and launched, and the shuttle program at Johnson. Shelters at Mississippi's historic Cape Canaveral, which tests the shuttle's engines, and two other departments at Johnson have gotten the training.

"For me, the more important point is ... when 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 Two Wilson
LAS VEGAS

HONOLULU – James Weilbecher has flown the space shuttle six times. But as he offers his thanks for a recent flight, his voice is slightly cracked with emotion.

"I don't like long rides," says Weilbecher, whose first two flights were twin-engine jet flights. Now he has taken a big leap in January. Weilbecher retired from a space shuttle at NASA's Johnson Space Center. He had no job to go to and a daughter less than two years from college.

Weilbecher says he left out of disappointment at NASA's lack of change and out of love for the institution. It became clear to me that... the greatest barrier to change, 18 months ago, was the independent agency working in the... in the civil service, who are apathetic to the situation. They are not interested in change.

Disappointed in NASA, James Weilbecher, pictured at front left's restaurant in Las Vegas, Texas, says he left NASA because of its institutional change.

In 1989, he flew aboard the independent Columbia Accident Investigation Board that shut down the space shuttle program in 1990. That was the first time Weilbecher had ever been in trouble with NASA. He was suspended for six months without pay after he wrote a letter to his former boss, James Beggs, the head of NASA's civil service.

Columbia, a military satellite, was lost in the 1988 crash of the space shuttle Challenger. Weilbecher was one of the investigators who wrote a letter to Beggs expressing his concerns about the program. The letter was never made public.

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