

## ASSUMED POSITIVE INTENT:

# How NASA Remains the “Best Place to Work in the Federal Government”

By Karen E.T. Garrett

*For more than 50 years, NASA has been breaking barriers to achieve the seemingly impossible—from walking on the moon to pushing the boundaries of human spaceflight farther than ever before. We are passionate professionals united by a common purpose: To pioneer the future in space exploration, scientific discovery and aeronautics research. Today, we continue NASA’s legacy of excellence and innovation through an unprecedented array of missions. Join us as we reach for new heights and reveal the unknown for the benefit of humankind.*

Thus begins your job search on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) website. Already, you know these are not your typical government positions.

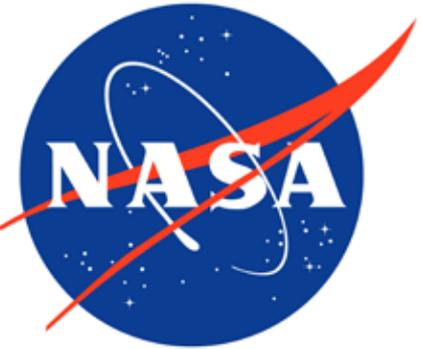
This introductory paragraph also may give you a hint as to why, for the sixth year in a row, NASA has topped the list of the Partnership for Public Service and Deloitte’s Best Places to Work in the Federal Government. ASPA spoke with Elizabeth Kolmstetter, NASA’s workforce engagement division director, to find out exactly why NASA has held this distinction year after year.

“Everybody I ask has a different answer,” Kolmstetter said when we began our interview. “That’s what’s exciting. People feel they can bring out their best talent, whether it’s in science, engineering or one of the business professional groups. NASA gets the best talent because we truly believe in the people.”

The Best Places to Work rankings provide a comprehensive assessment of how federal public servants view their jobs and workplaces. According to the Partnership, it includes employee perspectives on leadership, pay, innovation and work-life balance. In NASA’s case, Kolmstetter said leadership excellence, employee involvement and superior communication are the most important aspects of employees’ experiences. Some of the keys to success have been examples set by leadership from the top down, employee engagement and respect.

“We all respect each other and treat one another with a sense of appreciative inquiry and assumed positive intent, even when we disagree,” Kolmstetter

said. “We also are all committed to the mission of the agency. That transcends; it’s the genetic DNA. People matter, you can have diverse dialogue and still feel respected at the end of the day.”



That said, employee satisfaction, positive intent and respect do not tell the whole story. NASA faces the same churn and turmoil as other agencies, as congressional and administration priorities change from one Congress or president to the next. How does it overcome the anxieties and ambiguities that accompany those changes?

“People think NASA has a singular focus and we don’t,” Kolmstetter said. “We have many component missions, strategic priorities and multiple programs, all of which evolve, change and are required to flex. We need a workforce that is adaptable based on priorities laid out by Congress and each presidential administration. The difference is we’re committed to the fact that it’s all great work; we just have to figure out how to make it happen. That’s how we get through change: by focusing on the right thing. By getting our people together, assessing how we are going to get the work done, training as needed, communicating, giving people new opportunities, taking action and solving problems effectively. We stay in pursuit of the next step.”

Despite its top ranking and positive intent, NASA is not immune to the workforce management challenges that other agencies face. Take commercialization of space, which has been good for the agency as it has explored and implemented several high profile public-private partnerships. Yet it also presents NASA its first real test: Competing for and recruiting new talent.

“Up until recently, NASA has been the only game in town for certain jobs like world-class astrophysicists,” Kolmstetter observed. “But, with

our partnerships with commercial aerospace companies, we're now entering a highly competitive market for talent."

How does it compete? Training and talent development, to start. More than just offering training courses for those interested, NASA leadership demands its people stay on top of their game.

"We expect our people to be world-class in their field and we make sure they're viable and current in their profession. We also expect our leaders to develop their people, be strong mentors and create a positive, inclusive work environment. Our workforce members are partners in this investment. It's an active role, not a passive one."

NASA also has worked to offer benefits that come easier to it than other agencies, including telework, flexible work time and even remote work options. Many employees now take advantage of NASA's Work from Anywhere program.

"Work from Anywhere means many in our knowledge-based workforce can work from anywhere, not just one telework location. Employees juggle many demands and technology now makes it possible to video or call into meetings, briefings, learning opportunities and more," Kolmstetter said. "The future of work demands maximum flexibility while maintaining maximum productivity; our workforce is clearly interested in flexible locations, alternate work schedules and global collaboration."

There are no rose-colored glasses at NASA. Despite occupying the top spot year-after-year, Kolmstetter

was quick to note that not all employees are happy all the time and the agency does not rest on laurels that accompany a top ranking.

"This takes a concentrated effort every day. If we're going to walk the talk and really make this about the people, we have to remain aware that not all employee experiences are the same. Acting Administrator Robert Lightfoot is our champion when it comes to caring about our people. He holds us all, especially leadership, accountable for continuous improvement, inclusion and making NASA a better place to work every day.

"Engagement isn't one size fits all. People don't come to public service for fame or fortune. The people I've worked with are happy to see their mission succeed without any front page story associated with it. We're here because we want to support the American people and all humankind. If our mission is successful, we're successful."

It was impossible for Kolmstetter to hide the pride she thinks employees feel for the work they do, even in the Workforce Engagement Division, where more work always lies ahead. "There's a sense at NASA that we all look up and wonder what is possible," she noted. "How awesome is that? To be always exploring the next great scientific and aerospace discovery—the new discoveries that are broadening man's place in space. If you're exploring and seeking to understand things, no matter how small or large, that's a mission that brings out the best in people."

*For more information on the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government rankings, go to [www.bestplacestowork.org](http://www.bestplacestowork.org).*