



National Aeronautics and  
Space Administration

Hold for Release Until  
Presented by Witness

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# **Subcommittee on Government Operations Committee on Oversight and Government**

## **U.S. House of Representatives**

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Statement by:  
Lauren Leo  
Assistant Administrator  
Office of Human Capital Management  
National Aeronautics and Space Administration



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**Statement of  
Lauren Leo  
Assistant Administrator  
Office of Human Capital Management  
National Aeronautics and Space Administration**

**before the**

**Subcommittee on Government Operations  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform**

Chairman Meadows, Ranking Member Connolly and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the topic of the 2015 Best Places to Work in the Federal Government.

In my role as Assistant Administrator for NASA's Office of Human Capital Management, I'm regularly approached with questions about why NASA is ranked as the Best Place to Work in the Federal Government. Today, I'd like to share with you what makes NASA such a great place to work, as well as what we have learned along the way about employee engagement, leadership development and incentivizing innovation.

First, I have to admit that I have one of the best jobs in the world. NASA is the world leader in space exploration and cutting-edge science missions, and our work contributes directly to the economic vitality of our great Nation. My job is to care for and support the Agency's most valuable asset – currently a community of about 17,100 civil servants and 40,000 contractors located at nine NASA Centers and one Federally Funded Research Center who make up the NASA workforce. This includes brilliant rocket scientists, innovative engineers, dedicated support and administrative personnel and every employee and contractor that makes up a community that is often referred to as “the NASA family.” I work for an Agency that inspires, challenges and empowers our employees daily to carry out missions that benefit humankind here on Earth. What job could be better than that?

Simply put, NASA has an awesome mission!

Last year, for example, the entire world watched as New Horizons sent back the first close-up images of Pluto, and we continued to make new discoveries about Mars that will help inform human missions there. This year, the world watched as American Astronaut Scott Kelly returned home from the International Space Station after 12 months of working off the Earth for the Earth. Additionally, this year in space will pay scientific and medical dividends for years to come, helping pave the way for future astronauts to travel to Mars and beyond. The Orion spacecraft and the Space Launch System rocket that will carry us again to deep space continued to reach new milestones. In cooperation with our industry partners, Boeing and SpaceX, we moved closer to commercial launches of astronauts from American soil. We are formulating missions to study dark energy, perform galactic and extragalactic surveys and to explore

exoplanets. We learned more about our home planet and our challenging climate as newer Earth science missions began to return their data. Technology continues to drive exploration – in space and in the air – and we made advances toward a future in which we make air travel safer, cleaner and more efficient. All of this work begins and ends with the hard work and innovation of NASA's employees.

### **NASA Culture**

Given that NASA is strongly mission and project focused, our employees believe in the importance of the mission and are heavily engaged in their work. They come to work at NASA because they want to be part of something bigger, not just because it's a job. This applies to every employee – from the scientists and engineers to the support personnel and contractor community. Every NASA employee impacts the Agency's mission daily, no matter their pay grade or area of expertise.

NASA employees consistently cite shared values, shared commitment to the mission, and loyalty to the Agency as reasons why they feel positively engaged in their jobs. This sense of belonging fuels a deep sense of community at NASA and this begins at the top. NASA Administrator Charlie Bolden fundamentally believes that communication is his cornerstone to connecting employees to NASA's mission, and he encourages every NASA employee to use his or her voice. NASA senior leaders visit employees in their labs and other worksites to hear from them directly about their work and their work life.

Because our employees feel connected to the mission and to each other, we have a very positive work culture with a high level of employee engagement. But we are not satisfied with the status quo, and are constantly searching for better ways to work. When NASA failed to achieve the rating of Best Place to Work in the Federal Government in 2011, we went back to the drawing boards, analyzed our results, and took action on items that were important to employees. I am now proud to say that NASA has been named the Best Place to Work in Government (Large Agency) by the Partnership for Public Service for four straight years.

While NASA's astronauts are understandably our most recognized employees from a public viewpoint, NASA recognizes that our mission would not be accomplished without the tireless work of all our employees. NASA is fortunate to attract and employ the Nation's top scientists and engineers – not just in human spaceflight, but also in robotics and life sciences, aeronautics and much more. In truth, NASA would not be able to accomplish the amazing things we do without the dedication of our professional and administrative personnel, information technology and human resource specialists, accountants, writers, technicians and many other kinds of people who make up the NASA family. Their passion for NASA is just as contagious as that of our astronauts, scientists and engineers – and it's that passion which is exemplified by our employees that makes NASA such a great place to work. We see this in our unusually low attrition rates – rarely higher than 5.5 percent – because our employees love what they do. Some of them come to us right after college and then stay until retirement. Our oldest NASA employee right now is an 89-year-old engineer who has served with us for 49 years. Ultimately, there are so many stories like this and we are constantly looking for new ways to share those stories.

We also take pride in highlighting our employees and their diversity. For example, we recently launched Women@NASA ([women.nasa.gov](http://women.nasa.gov)) as a platform for the women of NASA to share their experiences. This website includes a stunning collection of 64 videos and essays from women across the agency who contribute to NASA's mission in many different ways. It is a small glimpse of the talent that we have at the Agency today. We hope that these stories will inspire girls everywhere to reach for the stars and explore the myriad of opportunities available to them through pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Beyond NASA's normal public messaging channels such as our website, our social media channels, and NASA TV, our Agency utilizes innovative storytelling and new media communication mechanisms to ensure employee viewpoints are heard and to let them know what is happening across the Agency. We are continually experimenting with new technology and approaches to help our employees communicate. These channels allow our Administrator to communicate through video, blogs and emails. We have "Ask Me Anything" sessions to engage employees directly on any question they have and we make great use of virtual technologies to facilitate employees connecting with each other no matter where they work.

### **Measuring Employee Satisfaction**

NASA has learned that measuring the health of our workforce is critical to understanding employee engagement and satisfaction. The annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) is a valuable tool that we use to continuously improve by understanding long-term trends

NASA recently completed analysis of our 2015 FEVS and results tell us we're on the right track in terms of employee morale. Our Agency-wide response rate was just under 60 percent – an increase of about 5 percent over 2014. We also saw an increase in favorable response across 93 percent of survey questions. The survey results reveal that our employees believe they are valued and recognized; that performance is managed and measured; and that quality training and development opportunities are available to employees.

Overall, the FEVS is like a barometer that helps us understand where to focus our attention. Rather than focusing on a single number for any question or index, we use the results of the survey as an invitation to be curious about the "why" behind the number. During 2015 we created *The NASA Leader's Handbook*, which was developed as a direct result of FEVS feedback. It guides supervisors and leaders through identifying and assessing the many factors that affect organizational health – with practical solutions for improvement. The handbook is posted to NASA's online HR Portal and is accessible to all employees to provide them with actionable ideas that can be implemented at any level in the organization. At NASA, we pay particular attention to the areas on Innovation, Engagement, and Inclusion. Based on these indicators, the NASA leadership team has introduced new initiatives related to leadership and supervisory development; diversity and inclusion; and innovation and performance management over the past several years.

While our 2015 survey results were extremely positive, we observed a few areas where we can continue to improve. In particular, we are currently working to improve the experience across our geographically dispersed Centers so that we can close the gap in how employees feel they are valued and recognized. We also want to continue to focus on improving in areas where we've made progress such as innovation and performance management.

Additionally, as part of the broader Federal Government community, NASA believes that we need to work together to leverage what's working well across all Federal agencies. To that end, we are working to find new and innovative ways to share promising practices across Federal agencies and to develop solutions that demonstrate how agencies can take action on those promising practices. For example, we just recently hosted a collaborative workshop with leaders from 10 agencies called "RE:THINK." The event was a forum for agencies to share promising practices in employee engagement and to find ways to embed those practices across agencies.

### **Investing in Leadership Development**

The health of our workforce is a top priority for NASA leadership. Our leadership pays attention to FEVS data and other indicators to monitor the state of the Agency and to develop strategies for



continually improving employee engagement, connection and effectiveness. NASA continues to invest in a number of leadership development programs and activities across the Agency -- from early career to executive -- that are designed to better equip current and future Agency leaders to carry out our mission. While development opportunities exist for a broad spectrum of employees, NASA has recently placed an intentional focus on first-line supervisory development. Supervisors are the touch point with every employee, and they play a unique role in creating a positive work environment that supports employee connection, satisfaction, and engagement, ultimately yielding increased productivity, delivery on the mission, and general employee happiness. For example, the LASER (Leveraging Agency Supervisory Excellence and Resilience) program aims to develop a community of current supervisors who have a full understanding of the Agency's vision and mission areas. This program looks at supervision as something that can be learned and done well, like other technical or professional disciplines. Built and designed by model NASA supervisors, the program is geared toward helping individual supervisors address their unique growth and development needs within the complex discipline of supervision through face-to-face week-long development sessions, mentoring sessions with senior leaders, coaching, hands-on experiences, and peer teaching.

### **Recognizing and Rewarding Performance**

As we continue to build a workforce that is deeply connected to our mission, NASA is constantly exploring new incentive models to recognize and reward our employees for their achievements. This process starts simply by asking our employees to tell us what kinds of rewards they find most meaningful. While monetary awards are always nice to receive, we have found that recognizing an employee's creativity and allowing that creativity to be incorporated into one of our exciting missions is an amazing incentive for employees. There is no greater pride than being able to describe one's contributions to the public for friends and family, whether someone is a security officer providing perimeter patrol at a Science mission payload launch, or a procurement official ensuring that NASA's dollars are spent legally and wisely on a necessary purchase order, or whether that person is an astrophysicist studying how our universe originated. Each of these employees takes great pride in talking about what they do at NASA when asked by friends and family, and often members of the public. NASA encourages our employees to share their NASA stories through a variety of means, including social media, inviting the public into NASA's exploration adventure.

### **Leveraging Technology**

As a generation of digital natives enter the workforce, expectations about how we use technology and innovation to make our employees' work environments more productive and more enjoyable is becoming increasingly important. NASA is on the forefront of introducing new ways to work, and has championed a successful "work from anywhere" initiative that provides work-life balance for our employees. With the appropriate policies in place to ensure productivity while away from their NASA facility, NASA empowers its employees to telework whenever possible, letting the work drive where the job gets accomplished and moving away from the mindset that you must be "in the office" to get work done. NASA has also introduced a series of Virtual Collaboration Tools to give employees a more seamless experience working in a distributed work environment and to provide access to development resources wherever they are. These tools include the Virtual Executive Summit, Mobile Access to Resources in our Learning Management System (SATERN), Science Communications, and Supervisory Development Curriculum. Additionally, to recognize and reinforce our innovation agenda, we have introduced new programs such as annual Innovation Awards and we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with our unions through the Labor Management Forum on defined styles of innovation. For example, we developed two innovation awards, the Lean Forward; Fail Smart Award and the Champion of Innovation Award. These awards recognize, encourage, and celebrate the spirit of innovative behavior that 1) propels individuals to lean forward, in spite of risk, and consequently learn from the experience, and 2) is

demonstrated by supervisors/managers who build a culture of appropriate risk taking and who support and encourage creative and innovative behaviors from their employees. One very unique feature of the award selection process is that the NASA workforce ultimately selects the winner in each category.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, NASA employees raise the bar of human achievement every day. They are passionate and dedicated men and women who overcome the huge challenges of exploring space and improving life on Earth. This is a workforce that is dedicated to ushering in the future of our Nation, including developing new technologies with the goal of one day landing on Mars. They are building a brighter future for us all and are extremely proud to be part of the NASA family.

As the Assistant Administrator for NASA's Office of Human Capital Management, I have regular conversations with the many men and women who support and enable NASA's missions – we talk about what inspires them to show up to work, what commits them to stay engaged throughout their career, and what new challenges they are up against. These people are NASA's most valuable asset and are my number one priority. That is why I am proud of NASA's robust strategy to engage our workforce and create a culture of innovation. When I'm asked why NASA is consistently ranked one of the Best Places to Work in the Government, I respond by emphasizing our people. Without them, nothing would be achieved.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share the story of NASA's workforce. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.





**Lauren Leo**  
**Assistant Administrator**  
**Office of Human Capital Management**  
**NASA**

Lauren Leo became NASA's Chief Human Capital Officer and Assistant Administrator for the Office of Human Capital Management (OHCM) in August 2015.

In those positions, Lauren has stewardship responsibility for NASA's workforce. She advises and assists the administrator by carrying out responsibilities in accordance with the Chief Human Capital Officers Act of 2002. Her responsibilities include setting the Agency's workforce development strategy; assessing workforce characteristics and future needs based on the Agency's mission and strategic plan; aligning the Agency's human resources policies and programs with organizational mission, strategic goals and performance outcomes; and serving as a member of the Office of Personnel Management-led Chief Human Capital Officers Council.



Before serving as the Assistant Administrator, Lauren was the director of the Workforce Culture Division in OHCM, responsible for implementing Agency training and leadership development, agency honor awards, workforce collaboration, executive personnel management and succession planning. She was at the forefront of developing and implementing innovative workforce engagement strategies, including embedding virtual collaboration mechanisms within the full range of human capital programs. Similarly, she was instrumental in developing and executing an Agency-wide Virtual Executive Summit to enhance communication and collaboration among agency leaders. Lauren also served as a strategic advisor to the NASA Associate Administrator for implementing change strategies and leadership development within the senior team to support the new Capability Leadership Model.

Before coming to NASA, Lauren earned a Master of Arts in International Relations with a certificate in International Conflict Resolution from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in International Relations at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

She has received numerous awards, including the NASA Medal for Exceptional Service, the Creative Management Award, the NASA Headquarters Exceptional Performance Award and the Space Flight Awareness Return to Flight Award.

