

Lynn Cline Video Interview

Lessons from a Career in NASA International Relations

So let me tell you about my career at NASA, which was a great career that lasted 36 years, but it certainly is not what I trained for or what I expected to do. So my degree is in French language and Culture. I joined NASA while I was still a student doing my undergraduate work at university. I came in as a co-op student and I worked first in the international relations office. I decided to change all my career plans because everywhere I went at NASA people loved what they were doing and furthermore they loved to tell you about all the programs that they were working with. And frankly I just got so fascinated with space activities I wanted to stay and be a part of it. So when I graduated from college I converted from student to full-time and I worked in the international relations office. In that office I started out working on US-Soviet activities. French language major, well it didn't quite fit but they needed somebody and in that area. And then I moved and I worked mostly with Europe. But over the years I had a chance to work a lot of different programs and I will tell you that that International office is a great place to be at NASA to get a complete overview of everything we do. Because when I was responsible for US-German relations for many years, with Germany we were cooperating on virtually every NASA field: aeronautics, human spaceflight, microgravity research, space science. So I had to know a little bit about every one of those programs in order to explain them to them and represent it and negotiate agreements. So it was a perfect training ground to get a broad exposure to all NASA activities. Key skills for doing these things, or communication skills certainly, you had to be able to write well, communicate well, you needed especially to be able to translate all the engineering E's and acronyms and technical terms into language that people at maybe a policy level or a political level would not be able to understand because they weren't familiar with all of the technical aspects or lingo. So I kind of grew up in that international office over the years. One of the agreements I negotiated was with the European Space Agency for the Cassini program, which is a mission at Saturn. Later I was asked to lead the negotiations to bring Russia into the International Space Station program. That was the most complex negotiation I had ever done because it was both multilateral with Canada, Europe, Japan, and Russia and also intensely bilateral from many aspects of the program. There were a lot of interesting negotiating dynamics because some of the things that partners felt they would only tell you in a bilateral forum, they liked to let the United States be the bad guy to deliver any bad news or difficult messages and then they can just sit back and let me take the heat and deliver the message. So I learned a lot about trust and human dynamics and how to work all of these different activities that were going on. And over the years as I advanced in that office once I completed the negotiations for the space station agreement I was asked to become deputy of the international office and there my portfolio became our representative to the United Nations. That was a completely different environment. All the agreements I worked on before we and a partner or multiple partners had a common goal. We had a program we wanted to do together and the negotiations were all about just how we divide up our respective roles. The United Nations committee on peaceful uses of outer space is full of countries, some of whom have no space program, but all of whom have very strong political views, and the hardest part is finding a common denominator for anything for you to agree on. And so that was a very interesting and challenging environment and because there was a large emphasis on developing countries and the United States was generally viewed as the superpower. we were the ones to be skeptical of, in order to get any proposal through, I learned I had to really work behind-the-scenes and some of my proudest moments were getting the Canadians or Germans or Brazilians or somebody else to make the proposal that I wanted

Lynn Cline Video Interview

made and it'd be accepted because it came from one of those countries. Even though it was my idea we couldn't admit it had come to the US. That was a whole different level of negotiation. And when I finished in that area I was actually invited to move to the office of space operations at NASA. Now for me, who had grown up in this international office, had a policy background, had good communication skills, but I had never managed a technical program, I'm not an engineer, I'm not a scientist, the idea of moving to the space operations office was kind of scary. I thought well will I really fit in? What can I do here? How would I work in this office? And accepting that job was the smartest thing that I ever did for a couple of reasons: one is that in the international office because I'd started as a student and grown-up in that office I could do almost any job in that office. I knew all of the procedures, all the answers, all the details, and as I went higher in the organization and I was supposed to be the executive and the leader I really had to learn to let go of doing the action myself and be training other folks. And sometimes I was a little too tempted to jump in and just do it because it was faster. When I got to the space operations office I couldn't possibly do that because I didn't have that level of understanding. It helped me become an executive at a more strategic level by not being able to rely on those things. The person I worked at the time when I started was Bill Readdy. And I will never forget the analogy he gave me. He said, "Lynn, I don't want you to write the papers, I want you to grade the papers," and that lesson really stuck with me. But another lesson and that it has given me as advice to all the folks I've mentored over the years is don't sell yourself short, don't pigeonhole yourself. If someone sees something in you and gives you an opportunity, don't be afraid to go for it. I spent eight years in that office and at one point I was actually overseeing the launch services division because the person who had been doing it had left the agency and it took us a year or so to hire someone to take their place. And I swear I earned an honorary engineering degree during that time because I was dealing with battery issues, flight termination systems, engine problems, welds on tanks, all kinds of things that I learned so much doing that job. And it was fun. I am a lifelong learner and that is one of the best things about NASA. There's new programs, there's new issues, there's new things coming all the time. So if you want to really exciting career with lots of fun things you can sink your teeth into this a good place to be.