

William Gerstenmaier Video Interview

Shuttle Return to Flight: Focus on What You Can Control

If we think back to the Columbia tragedy, right? There's clearly a role for the Station Program in that event and there's clearly the role for the Shuttle Program and I think you need to recognize what your responsibility is and what the other folks responsibility is and stick with what you're responsible for and do those activities, and so, again, I think back to Columbia. Our job on station was to protect the crew and keep the Space Station flying. The shuttle team was to return to flight to figure out, first of all, what occurred on Columbia, understand how they needed to fix it, what they had to repair to get back and return to flight and it would be easy to get distracted and try to influence the Shuttle Program and tell them hey you need to get back to flight faster, or you need to work on this or that, etc. I kind of chose not to do that. I let the Shuttle Program do what they had to go do to return to flight. My job was essentially to keep Station stable for an indefinite period of time while the shuttle team spent their effort off working things moving forward. We also took the shuttle tragedy on the Station Program and we said, "are there things that maybe had occurred over time in Station that we had not looked at for a while technically?" For example, in the Shuttle case, we had lost foam ever since STS-1 and we had kind of gotten comfortable with foam loss as not being a big problem to us. So the question was on Station. Was there anything that was occurring on Station? Some small degradation that didn't appear problematic that maybe we ought to be looking at? Were any of our processes or procedures not quite up to speed? So I used what occurred on the shuttle as kind of a spark, or a thing, to make us think creatively on the Station side to go look at Station systems and say, "hey is there anything remotely related to what just occurred on shuttle that we ought to be watching for on Station?" So we used that to home our own introspection of what's going on with Station. So we used that as kind of a memory jogger or a way to get creative or innovative, a spark that started us to look in a different direction than we would naturally look. So we reviewed all our stuff on Station to make sure there was nothing there, but our primary focus was just keeping the crew safe and figuring a way we could operate for an indefinite period of time. Another thing that was, in a sense, very helpful for us is that there was a lot of attention placed on the shuttle activity. So the station activity was pretty much left to be worked by ourselves. I described earlier the amount of risk we were able to take with the crew, how I was able to describe if we could return the crew in a normal situation that that was acceptable. There really wasn't anybody at

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Headquarters that was really paying enough attention and I had to go get that approved as a strategic way of flying. We just kind of made those decisions on our own. So that was, in a sense, freeing to us on the station side, but it also put a tremendous responsibility on the station side. So when we made these decisions I wasn't getting a lot of attention from Headquarters or from outside groups. Those decisions were pretty much, whatever we said we were going to go do, we were going to go do. So that carried an extra burden on our side to go back and make sure we really reviewed that ourselves because there was nobody else to review those. So if we made a decision on risk, or we made a decision on what cargo flew, we had to be very introspective and very critical within our own program to make dog on sure that what we had done was the best that we could go do because there was nobody else really double-checking, or backstopping, what we were doing. It was really up to the program to go execute. I don't see that as restrictive or a concern. It's just an awareness that, hey at this point I'm on my own, so in cockpit resource management I don't have that crew member next to me watching me. That crew member is off doing their own thing. So then that tells me I better be extremely attentive to everything I'm doing in that cockpit myself because there is not somebody else watching the switch throws, watching the decisions I'm making, watching the program management. It is solely our responsibility and that's okay. The other thing is I also didn't worry too much about the decisions. I kind of record the information we had and if we made a wrong decision, we made a wrong decision. If we had to return the crew, that wasn't failure. So I set that up to the team that our job is, if we had to return the crew and we had to de-crew Station, that was okay. The important thing was we needed to return them at a timeframe that could be just like a nominal landing and, if we didn't do that, if we missed that and we had to return them in emergency mode, then we had messed up as a program. So I set the expectations for the program to something that we could control, that we could monitor and move forward, but yet kept it at a level that they knew exactly what their bounds of operations were moving forward. So it was good in the fact that we were not constrained. We had our own job to go do. Shuttle had its job to do and we kept our separate activities moving forward.