

DAU Collaborates with NASA

Sharing Stories with Like-Minded Leaders in Program and Project Management

TODD POST

Terry Little has plenty of stories to tell—and well he should. During his sterling career as a civilian program manager in the Air Force, he has learned a lot about managing large missile programs; and, like any true leader, wants to share some of that with the people who can benefit from it most. That's why we publish him regularly in *ASK Magazine*, a National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) publication about program and project management.

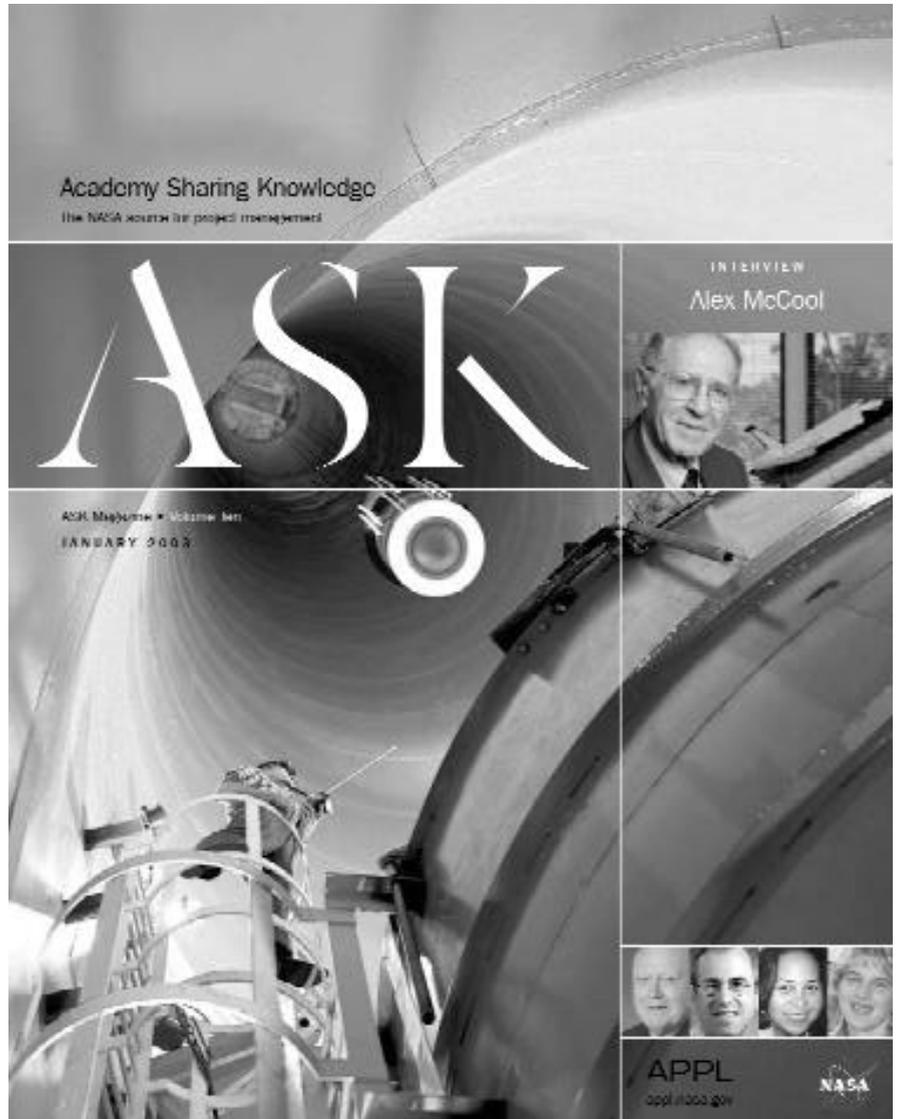
That's right, NASA, the space people—but don't think for a moment this magazine is meant for just NASA. In each issue we feature project leaders from industry and other government agencies. ASK content is mostly about managing large complex projects, usually about technology doing some amazing thing, and that general purpose objective is why we've sought out contributions from people like Terry Little.

Thanks to DAU

As the ASK editor, I feel compelled to say thank you to the Defense Acquisition University (DAU). Nowhere have we gotten as much high-quality material outside of our NASA sources as from our friends at DAU. Terry Little is just one of those with a DAU affiliation.

Many at DAU know about ASK, but not all, I suspect. So, if you are unfamiliar with ASK, or would like to understand how this relationship developed, let me tell you about it. Here is the ASK story.

Post is the Editor of ASK Magazine and works for EduTech Ltd. In Silver Spring, Md. In April 2003, he will be speaking about ASK Magazine and the NASA Knowledge Sharing Initiative at an E-Gov Conference in Washington, D.C.



The Roots of ASK

ASK is published bimonthly by NASA's Academy of Program and Project Leadership (APPL) as part of its Knowledge Sharing Initiative (KSI). I'm involved in other parts of KSI—more on KSI later—although my primary responsibility is to edit *ASK Magazine*. I collect stories from the best program and project managers around, and from any practitioner

who has knowledge to share and an inclination to tell a story. ASK content is generally in the form of stories told by program and project managers describing their own experiences. Surely, anybody who's been managing long enough has stories to tell.

APPL Program Director Dr. Edward J. Hoffman has always believed that NASA

program and project managers are best served by knowing how projects are managed elsewhere. How do peers in other places deal with large budgets, lengthy schedules, and complicated organizations among other things?

Terry Little was an obvious choice when we were looking for contributors outside of NASA. Besides his remarkable accomplishments as a manager, Little is known for his plain-spoken candor, and this fit the tone Hoffman and ASK Editor-in-Chief Dr. Alexander Laufer wanted to set with ASK. Little accepted their invitation to provide a story for the first issue of ASK in January 2001. Since then, he has had a story in every issue.

Little was hardly an unknown quantity when he was invited to write for ASK. Hoffman and Laufer had worked with him before. *ASK Magazine* is an offshoot of a project they had begun in the late '90s, culminating in their book, *Project Management Success Stories: Lessons of Project Leadership* (Wiley, 2000). Using the same model as ASK, they collected stories from a variety of project leaders in government and private industry. In all, they collected 70 stories by 36 different project managers, including Little.

Stories as Teaching Tools

Why a story? To put it bluntly, the best project managers manage from the gut; they know what to do to drive a project toward success not because of what they've read in a management text, but what they know works based on years of experience, nurtured over a career of ups and downs, successes and failures, trial and error.

How does one convey this kind of knowledge to a peer or junior colleague? Reach for formulas or the latest theories and the words seem incompatible with the meaning of the experience. But start telling a story—let me tell you about what happened to me—and if the listeners have been anywhere near that kind of experience before, they will recognize the terrain and identify with the meaning on a tacit level.

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In *Project Management Success Stories*, Hoffman and Laufer began with one basic premise. Practitioners themselves are generally the most qualified teachers of other practitioners, and the best way for practitioners to learn from one another is by listening to them describe shared types of experiences.

A significant body of scholarship supports the use of stories as a way to convey lessons learned. Using stories in this way was not new when Hoffman and Laufer began in *Project Management Success Stories*, but no management book before this had used storytelling so deliberately to examine the nuances of project management.

Laufer, in particular, has been challenging the status quo of what makes a successful project manager for many years before he began work on *Project Management Success Stories*. In his book, *Simultaneous Management* (Wiley, 1997), he began collecting stories to support his findings that the best project managers know more than they can tell using the formal vocabulary of scholarship. In many cases, the best way for them to make manifest their knowledge is to simply start describing their experiences.

The NASA Knowledge Sharing Initiative

What is unique about the NASA Knowledge Sharing Initiative is that it has “prod-

ucts” that give structure and create an impetus for a project management storytelling community to grow up around. KSI combines three main products: Masters Forums, *ASK Magazine*, and Transfer of Wisdom Workshops.

Masters Forums, held semi-annually, bring together between 40 and 50 of the best project managers from NASA, private industry, and other government agencies for three days of knowledge sharing, mostly in the form of stories. The idea of getting leaders together to talk about lessons learned in the form of stories is a novel approach, and it sure beats a PowerPoint presentation—just ask anyone who's been to a Masters Forum.

In NASA, the popularity of the Masters Forums is due in large part to how they bridge the knowledge gap between NASA Centers. NASA has nine centers around the United States. Although there is much collaboration and teaming among the centers, it is not inconceivable that project managers at Goddard Space Flight Center, for example, might know little more about Ames Research Center in California than where it is located on the map. In that way, the Masters Forums—and the Knowledge Sharing Initiative in general—are advancing the NASA Administrator's mission of a “One NASA.”

ASK Magazine, short for Academy Sharing Knowledge, captures and crafts the stories from the Masters Forums. Because ASK is published online and in print, it can share the stories with a much larger audience than 40 or 50 who attend the Masters Forums. Not all the stories appearing in ASK derive from the Masters Forums, but once a story is shared at the Forum and discussed by participants it has already begun being readied for publication.

All federal agencies face the grim prospects of a knowledge drain. In the last several years, many agencies have attempted multiple initiatives to capture the knowledge of their senior leaders. ASK is one such solution that seems to be striking a chord with people at NASA.

In January 2001, ASK was launched, and has repeatedly been hailed as one of the most innovative initiatives in the government to capture the knowledge of senior practitioners before they retire. The print version of *ASK Magazine* now reaches an audience of nearly 5,000.

Transfer of Wisdom Workshops, conducted at NASA Centers, use stories published in *ASK Magazine* as starting points for the workshop participants to share knowledge and discuss project issues, culminating with their telling stories of their own.

How Knowledge is Transferred

In an upcoming issue of *ASK Magazine*, Roy Malone, a NASA project manager from Marshall Space Flight Center, tells a story about attending a Masters Forum and getting ideas from Air Force Program Director Judy Stokley, who was invited as the keynote speaker. The point of the story that Malone fixed on was how Stokley addressed a painful government-mandated drawdown plan in the mid '90s and devised some ingenious ways of minimizing the impact on the people she had to let go. Facing a mandated drawdown of his own at Marshall, Malone reflected on what he heard and adapted Stokley's ideas to his situation at Marshall.

"What inspired me about this was that she took a 'humanitarian' approach. She partnered with the contractor to figure out how to minimize the impact on people. She didn't release them all at once, for example, but gave them time to find other jobs. She talked about how she met with all the employees in an open forum and answered questions about why this was happening and what was going on. The thing that struck me was she got personally involved... In Judy's case, it was apparent that the government cared about what happened to the people who would lose their jobs."

—Roy Malone, "Thank you, Judy"
ASK Magazine, Issue 11

In the same issue, we feature a story by Stokley that gives readers some context

for her own transformation as a leader. At the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC) in the early '90s, she found a course on leadership that utterly transformed the way she thought about herself as a manager.

"In the early '90s, I took some courses at the Defense Systems Management College. One teacher there taught a course in Human Relationships, or something like that, and it changed my life. The course was about leadership and how to communicate with the people on your team... Since 1992, I have read a roomful of books on psychology, people, and leadership; before 1992 I hadn't read one. I said to myself, 'My God, there's a whole reservoir of knowledge out there that I didn't know to tap'... I always tease the people down at DSMC that they really created me. I became a different person after going there, but not for the reasons they might think—not because I went to all their management classes, but because they launched me on a new path to understanding the meaning of leadership."

—Judy Stokley, "My Schooling in Leadership," *ASK Magazine*, Issue 11

"Thank you, Judy," the story by Malone that we published in ASK, demonstrates the impact of storytelling as a force multiplier in terms of knowledge sharing. At the Masters Forum, Stokley's story began a chain reaction. Since then we've published the Malone story in ASK, recycling the knowledge for 5,000 readers to ponder how or whether to use for themselves.

"Thank you, Judy" is also an important story because it shows the breadth of the APPL Knowledge Sharing Initiative. That a NASA project manager learns something from an Air Force Program Director at the Masters Forum highlights how the initiative facilitates knowledge sharing not only across NASA but across government agencies.

New Collaborations with DAU

Hoffman, Laufer, and I are now working on a book that examines four projects—two from NASA and two from

the Air Force. Once again, we have invited our friends Terry Little and Judy Stokley to participate. We know that DAU has produced two excellent case studies about Little's Joint Air to Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) and Stokley's Advanced Medium-Range Air-To-Air Missile (AMRAAM) programs, but our approach using stories is going to be entirely different.

Only stories, we believe, are sufficiently nuanced to convey the complexity of projects this size. We are collecting stories by multiple parties who were involved in the program. No case study that we know of has examined a project using stories told by several people involved.

We chose these programs because of our existing relationships with Little and Stokley, and because we knew that these programs are superb examples of two managers at the top of their game, operating "outside the box." When we asked Little and Stokley to participate, they said, "Sure, sounds like a great idea." They have helped us by setting up meetings with key personnel on the project, providing an entrée for us to interview the prime contractors and their suppliers. This typifies the kind of relationship we've developed with them.

The Knowledge Sharing Initiative truly appreciates all the support we've gotten from our friends at DAU. In addition to Little and Stokley, Owen Gadeken is on our Review Board and has contributed stories to ASK; Norman Patnode has a story appearing in an upcoming issue of ASK. We thought it was about time we said thanks, and the best place to say that publicly was in your own excellent publication, *Program Manager*.

Where else but here to share some knowledge with you?

Editor's Note: Post welcomes questions, comments, or contributions to *ASK Magazine*. Contact him at tpost@edutechltd.com.

Tough Questions

Terry Little

Driving back to my hotel, I felt exhausted. I had just spent four days at the Defense Systems Management College, meeting with 12 small groups of program management students from all Services to discuss a case study they had just completed. I was there to give the students a chance to ask questions that they felt the case study had not answered.

While I drove I found myself wondering why I had dedicated so much time and energy to this work. It wasn't as if I had no idea what I was getting into. I had been doing this three times a year for the past three years. And it sure wasn't because I had nothing else to do. I was managing one of the Air Force's largest and most important programs. That by itself was more than a full-time job.

Nor was it because I liked to hear myself talk. An introvert by nature, I don't fashion myself a professional educator. Nor did I expect some tangible reward or recognition. I knew that I was as high in the pecking order as I was ever going to get and while the school appreciated my service, I am not sure my boss would be happy if he realized how much time I was spending at this.

So why was it worth it?

I thought back on the day. Many of the questions were ones that I had heard over and over. For these I had stock answers; however, in almost every section I got a few new questions that really forced me to reflect. "What were you

thinking when you...?" "Why did you make the choice to...?" "Did you consider...?" "If you had it to do over again would you still...?"

As I thought about my answers, I soon realized that these students were teaching me to think about things I had never thought of before. They were enriching my experience in a way that I could have never anticipated. It was a richness I was convinced made me better in the job I was doing.

I also thought about the students and reflected on my experience there as a student almost 10 years ago. I had left the school with my head crammed with facts, but with none of the practical knowledge or insights to understand what the day-to-day life of a project manager was really like.

In my training there had been no opportunity to interact with real practitioners—no opportunity to hear real firsthand anecdotes or war stories that would take me beyond the theory. What are the tough decisions? What is most important when everything seems important? How do you deal with risk and adversity? What's the role of intuition, values, and judgment in the decision process? How do you deal with dysfunctional teaming relationships? How do you handle higher-ups when they demand that you do something you think is unwise? How do you recover after a mistake?

I felt like these students, partly as a result of my having shared my time with them and given candid



Terry Little, Director, Kinetic Energy Interceptor Program, Missile Defense Agency, speaking at the Defense Acquisition University, October 2001.

answers to their questions, would have a much better understanding and ability to deal with these sorts of real-world issues than I had when I left school. Hopefully, they will not have to learn as many things the hard way as I did. Hopefully, they will understand that the most difficult issues they face rarely have a pat answer.

As I continued toward the hotel, I began to feel exhilarated even. These students and their eagerness to learn, their zest to grow as professionals, had recharged my old batteries—cracked through some of my cynicism and made me feel more vital than ever. What I had done was the right thing for the students, for the Department, and for me.

Was it worth it? Absolutely!! I had struck a blow for progress.