As we begin, let me first thank our friends from Government Executive for hosting us today. I hope that you’ve had a successful conference. The topic of “excellence in government” is something that could not be more important; especially given the big challenges we’re facing as a country, and – let’s face it – as a planet.

To me, “excellence in government” begins and ends with one word … “people.”

The very best part of my job as Administrator of NASA is the opportunity to work with people who are accomplishing some unbelievably “excellent” things every single day, in every single way.

Andrew Carnegie once said – and I quote – “take away my people, but leave my factories, and soon grass will grow on the factory floors. [But] take away my factories [and] leave my people, and soon we will have a new and better factory.”

It’s for this reason that whenever I’m asked about my top priority at NASA or what keeps me awake at night, my answer is always the same – it’s our people.

They’re who I want to talk with you about today as we discuss “excellence in government.”

NASA’S PEOPLE ARE “EXCELLENCE IN GOVERNMENT”

If you look around our country, government employees are all-to-often underappreciated.

It matters not whether you’re talking about employees of NASA, our colleagues who work in federal buildings, state houses, schoolhouses, firehouses, city halls, public works departments, and so forth. We are the people who are frequently accused of being a source of our nations problems – if we can just reduce that “government workforce”...

At NASA, our unsung heroes are the people who come to work every day – often for lower salaries than they would make in the private sector – because they believe in our mission and they want to be a part of reaching for new heights and revealing the unknown for the benefit of humankind.

To me, this is true “excellence in government.”

It’s the “excellence” of our employees – their talent, their ingenuity, their imagination – that will send American astronauts to an asteroid in the 2020s and to Mars in the 2030s.
It’s the “excellence” of our employees that’s teaching us about “Earth Right Now” – our planet, it’s climate, and how it’s changing.

It’s the “excellence” of our employees that’s pushing the outer limits of human possibility in developing the world-changing technologies that drive exploration.

At the same time, it’s our employees’ excellence that is making air travel quieter, safer and more environmentally friendly … we like to say “NASA is with you when you fly” and in fact, every aircraft and control tower in America makes use of a NASA-developed technology.

Our employees’ excellence is leading them to find new ways for government and private sector partners to work together – and this is creating jobs here at home … it’s providing vital supplies to our astronauts aboard the International Space Station (ISS). In a couple years, it’s going to allow our astronauts to take off from American soil in American built spacecraft once again.

What’s more, NASA’s employees are demonstrating true excellence and leadership when it comes to managing our “human capital” – our most important asset, our people and you don’t just have to take my word for it! NASA has earned the distinction of being the #1 rated, best place to work in the federal government for 1 … 2… 3 years in a row now.

When you’re a great place to work, people not only want to work for you – they want to keep working for you -- so it’s important to us that we continue to be a place that supports and empowers our people.

**EMPOWERING OUR PEOPLE**

All told, NASA employs about 18,000 fulltime civil servants and 35,000 contractors. They work in 149 occupations across all 50 states – most in 9 centers and one FFRDC that are located across the country.

We are very proud of the caliber of people who work for us and with us – the best of the best. In many ways, getting the most out of a team of brilliant, creative, innovative people is as great a challenge as completing the construction of a space station *in space* – which they’ve done … or sending astronauts to Mars *which they are preparing to do*.

One of the most important things that we can do – and are doing – to leverage our employees’ excellence, is to recruit and retain a workforce that is built on America’s greatest strength: our diversity.

I always tell my folks that I don’t care about their background, politics, race, gender or sexual orientation – none of that really matters. What I want from each and every one
of them of them is a commitment to strive for excellence in all they do. If they can help NASA put American boots on Mars then we’re ready to hear what they have to say.

Everyone has to be very intentional when we have opportunities for hiring – especially in areas where we have had little diversity in the past – and ensure the widest net is cast so that we are able to attract a truly diverse pool of talent.

Now, I’ll be very candid with you. This is an area where I’d still like to see us do better – particularly when it comes to recruiting and retaining women. While we’re making progress – for example half of the eight astronaut candidates we selected from thousands of applications for our most recent Astronaut Class of 013 are women – we want to do better.

As we work to recruit more women and minority candidates, we’re also working to promote STE(A)M education – science, technology, engineering, the arts and math – so that tomorrow’s workforce will be prepared to meet tomorrow’s challenges.

Once we’ve recruited the best and the brightest, it’s our job to make sure we get the most out of them and give them the best possible work experience. So we look to our managers (our mid-level leaders) – no matter on what floor they happen to work, at what center they work, or from what perspective they come. We look to them to inspire our employees and to reward them for their innovation.

At the same time, we encourage our employees to be willing to stand up and be counted.

You know what else? We also look for them to fail a little bit now and then as well. My colleague Jeri Buchholz –who is Assistant Administrator for Human Capital Management and a superstar in that field – says that “not only is failure an option, it’s a desired component of a vibrant innovation strategy.”

Last, but certainly not least, we’re believers in “Role Modeling” – we want our more senior folks to look out for their colleagues and help them grow.

WHERE WE AREヘADED

At the end of the day, I like to think that our management philosophy at NASA comes down to what I learned at my parent’s dinner table: Know your stuff. Know yourself. Do the right thing.

Now you might be saying, “all this is well and good, but what’s it all for?”

So as I close I want to leave you with just a little bit of background of what “excellent” things our employees are working toward.

You’ve heard me mention our Journey to Mars a few times … five years ago; President Obama laid out a vision for sending Americans to Mars in the 2030s. Today, we’re further along than ever before in human history.
The Orion spacecraft, which will someday carry astronauts to deep space, has now gone further into space than any spacecraft designed for human flight has gone in more than four decades. Eventually, it will be carried to deep space by a rocket we call the “Space Launch System” or SLS. This rocket has now moved from concept to development and it’s hitting critical benchmarks.

Meanwhile, we’ve extended the life of the International Space Station (ISS) for a decade. This matters because it allows us to test and improve our capabilities in space as well as to study how the human body responds to extended periods of time off our planet. American astronaut Scott Kelly recently began his unprecedented year living and working in space aboard Station.

Now, Mars isn’t our only destination. As an important stepping-stone for getting there, we’re going to send astronauts to an asteroid in the 2020s.

All told, our exploration spans the universe. Everywhere imaginable, NASA is out there. When the New Horizons spacecraft arrives in the Pluto system in July, the United States of America will have – for the first time in human history – flown by or visited every single planet and dwarf planet in the solar system.

Ultimately, the most important planet we study – in fact, the best planet that I know of – is Earth.

Show of hands, how many parents do we have in the room with us this afternoon? And how many of you are, like me, grandparents?

Anyone who’s looked into the eyes of their child or grandchild wants to make sure we leave them with a better, healthier world. Gaining a better understanding of our climate and of our planet is critically important to doing just that.

NASA technologies are saving lives as we speak. In Nepal, for example, where the Nepalese people have suffered an unthinkable tragedy, we’re providing technical assistance that’s powered by NASA Earth Science: everything from satellite data to disaster response mapping.

NASA technologies are also being used in Nepal to help find and locate survivors. You might have read the news recently about four men whose lives were saved when NASA radar detected their heartbeats under the rubble of the Nepalese Earthquake.

CONCLUSION

Advances such as these used to be science fiction. Now they’re science fact and they’re made possible by the “excellence in government” of NASA’s employees.
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us “All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.” At NASA it is. Every day and in every way.

Your challenge as you leave this conference will be to make yourselves the champions of excellence – champions of diversity and inclusion – in your respective agencies and departments.

Thank you all very much for your personal examples of “excellence in government”. Congratulations on a successful conference.