

NASA Procedural Requirements (NPR) 7120.5E
Governance and the Role of Center Directors
2015-03-01 (Council-01)

Recommendation:

The Council recommends that NASA examine the current Agency governance approach with the objective of more clearly defining the role of NASA Center Directors.

Major Reasons for Proposing the Recommendation:

NASA's traditional governance structure has changed several times in the last two decades, significantly altering the authority and accountability of the Center Directors. Traditionally, the Associate Administrators controlled major milestones in approved programs, and then delegated responsibility and accountability for executing those programs to the relevant Center Director. The current NASA governance structure, in contrast, sometimes results in complex and even conflicting roles and responsibilities, with unanticipated consequences.

After the Space Shuttle Columbia accident, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) made numerous safety culture recommendations directed specifically at the Shuttle Program. The CAIB recommended establishing a Technical Authority (TA) to provide safety input to the Shuttle Program Manager, and separating program and TA budgets in assessing safety matters. The NASA Administrator at that time decided to extend the CAIB recommendations and implement that governance model across the Agency. At that point, Center Director accountability for program success became less clear. Center Directors retained responsibility for institutional management, but program authority resided at NASA Headquarters with the Associate Administrator, who has direct project authority over the program/project managers at the NASA Centers. This is despite the fact that NPR 7120.5E clearly states: "*Center Directors are responsible and accountable for all activities assigned to their Center. They are responsible for the institutional activities and for ensuring the proper planning for and assuring the proper execution of programs and projects assigned to the Center.*" As a consequence, project formulation/execution authority and accountability was separated from Center oversight and leadership. This change also divorced program execution from the institutional capability to formulate and execute projects (e.g., engineering, quality assurance, project control, etc.). The implementation of the CAIB recommendation, intended to enhance safety for the Shuttle Program, when applied across the Agency contributed to lapses in the formulation and execution of some robotic science missions, e.g., the James Webb Space Telescope.

Consequences of No Action on the Proposed Recommendation:

Confusion over the roles and responsibilities of Center Directors could lead to delays and/or cost overruns in important flight projects.

NASA Response:

NASA concurs that Center Directors should have clearly defined roles. We continually look at ways to ensure the authority and accountability of our Center AND Mission Directors to ensure ownership of key Agency Missions and Capabilities. In the past, the Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel (ASAP) expressed similar concerns and NASA updated the wording in NASA Procedural Requirements (NPR) 7120.5E to address those concerns. However, if the NASA Advisory Council (NAC) still sees this as a potential concern, NASA looks forward to further discussions and examples from the NAC on where the potential confusion is manifesting itself so, if necessary, we can clarify these roles and responsibilities.

Enclosure

In addition, as part of NASA's overall effort to move to a more efficient operating model, streamlining independent assessment of NASA's programs and projects has been identified. The functional responsibilities for independent review will become the responsibility of the Mission Directorates and Centers, strengthening the Center Director role in program/project accountability on performance. Specifically, Mission Directorates will establish Independent Review Teams (IRTs) utilizing Center resources independent of a program or project to provide independent, value added assessment into the program/project performance. Independent reviews are critical to ensuring that the most accurate and informed program/project risks, cost and schedule assessments, and overall performance projections are presented to decision makers at Key Decision Points. Assigning the independent review responsibility to the Mission Directorate, utilizing Center expertise and resources, provides an additional measure of responsibility and accountability to the Mission Directorate and Center Directors for overall mission success.