

STENNIS SPACE CENTER

Profiles in Leadership



Gary Benton always was interested in space exploration. His high school chemistry and physics teacher was a big fan of NASA and its work, even bringing a television to school so his classes could watch space shuttle launches. As a Mississippi State University student, Benton subsequently applied to work as a NASA Pathways intern. He served three terms as an intern at Kennedy Space Center in Florida before being selected for a full-time NASA position in 1991. Benton joined the Stennis team in 1997 and served in a number of roles in ensuing years, including as a test operations engineer, a systems engineer, a project manager, and a test project supervisor. In 2016, Benton completed the Senior Executive Services Career Development Program, designed to identify and train future senior leaders. He then completed stints as Stennis Project Division chief and Stennis Engineering and Test Directorate deputy director. In 2019, the Carriere, Mississippi, resident assumed his current role as director of the Stennis Safety and Mission Assurance Directorate, a Senior Executive Services post.

How would you describe the Stennis workforce?

The workforce at Stennis is very mission-focused, motivated, and talented. It also is very diverse, and that diversity has continued to increase over the 24 years I have been here. As a small center, it feels like we are a tight-knit family.

What advice can you offer for finding a good work-life balance?

Work-life balance is key. If you are in a job that does not provide the proper balance, then both work and outside life could suffer. You need to understand what your outside work needs are and work with your supervisor to find a job that will support that balance.

What leadership traits do you think are important?

Do what you say you are going to do. Be honest and transparent, and treat everyone equally. Trust people and treat them with respect. Solicit feedback from the people that work for you and their peers. The best ideas usually come from the people closest to the work.

What are some important lessons you have learned?

Early in my career processing space flight hardware, the lessons learned were to pay attention to detail and to be patient. Later in my career, I learned that taking care of the people you lead comes first.

What is the biggest challenge you have faced in your NASA career?

My greatest challenge was recognizing that I had to start preparing for my next job before the announcement even came out. However, do not try to do it by yourself. Get advice from your supervisor and other leaders or mentors to help with your career. Most leaders are glad to help.

What is your advice to young people considering a NASA career?

I encourage students interested in NASA to stay in school and make good grades (especially in math and science), then apply for internships. Try to connect with someone who works for NASA.

What are you most excited about for the future of NASA and Stennis?

The return to human lunar exploration and establishing a sustained presence on the Moon with the Artemis missions gets me most excited. I am also very curious to see what we will learn when we start getting data from the James Webb Space Telescope.



Gary Benton Director Safety and Mission Assurance Directorate

What are you most proud of regarding your work with NASA and Stennis?

Early in my career, I supported the Space Shuttle Program and was proud of the success we had in getting data to the scientists on several experiments we helped process and test. During my last 24 years at Stennis, I am proud of the success we have had in diversifying the capabilities of the facilities and personnel to successfully test propulsion hardware from a multitude of companies, NASA programs, and other federal agencies.

What will you look back on most fondly about your NASA career?

I have been fortunate to support several missions over my 33-year career, and I will fondly remember the science and exploration discoveries that were achieved and the great people I got to work with along the way.

What advice do you have for an aspiring leader?

Get training, communicate to your supervisor you want the opportunity to lead, and find a mentor.