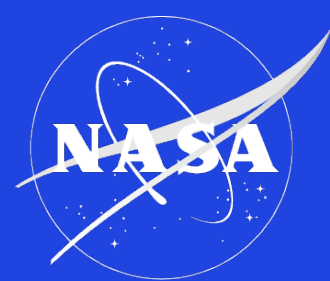


STENNIS SPACE CENTER

Profiles in Leadership



Rodney McKellip was not a youth who made big plans growing up. He wanted to escape Picayune, Mississippi, into the “bigger world.” His family owned the local Sonic Drive-In, where McKellip worked throughout his early teens. As he reached high school, McKellip had no interest in the family business. Instead, he became interested in attending college for business and finance. It was not until he reached 20 and spent eight months working on a research project in Australia that his interests focused on scientific pursuits. Despite growing up close to Stennis, McKellip never dreamed of working for NASA as a youth. It did not seem like the best way to “escape” and quench a thirst for adventure. However, he returned to Picayune in 1993 with a pregnant wife to start a family closer to his family, his thirst for adventure replaced by more familial concerns. After a few months, he had yet to finish his degree but managed to get an entry-level position with a Stennis contractor. He was assigned to a ground-truth field team to support projects for the Commercial Remote Sensing Program, spending the better part of four years traversing the country in a blue government van full of scientific gear. In 1998, upon finishing his degree, McKellip was offered a civil service project management position, a path that led to where he serves today.

How would you characterize the Stennis workforce and work?

One of the greatest benefits of working at a small center like Stennis is getting to know the people who work here. I find the workforce tremendously creative, flexible, and solutions-oriented. The

well-roundedness of the typical Stennis employee promotes a real sense of achievability at work that sets him/her apart in multicenter activities. As a Stennis employee, I find it truly rewarding when we engage in communities of practice across the agency. So often, the Stennis representatives in those communities stand out as leaders in their field. It is a true testament to the work ethic cultivated within “The Little Center that Could.”

What are some of the most important lessons you learned during your NASA career?

Some of the most important lessons I have learned is to remain flexible and do not fear change. Instead, embrace challenges and lean in to them; you will come out better on the other side. Study the past events and how those led to where you find yourself in today’s NASA. The better you understand “how we got to now,” the better prepared you will be to provide leadership into the future.

How do you define leadership and what are the most important qualities a leader can have?

I view leadership as the ability to inspire and empower others to achieve their full potential and be successful. I believe compassion, empathy, and excellent communication skills are the keys to being a successful leader. Vision is a must for organizational leadership, such as having a vision of what you want the organization’s goals to be and translating that vision into meaningful steps and actions to get there. Do not think you have to be an engineer to succeed at NASA. It takes a village to launch humans into space, and that NASA village contains all types of professions beyond the obvious.



Rodney McKellip
Associate Director
Stennis Space Center

What is the best advice you could offer someone seeking to serve in a leadership role?

It starts with self-awareness. Know who you are, and discover your strengths and weaknesses. Seek feedback from your colleagues. Hone your strengths, and be intentional about addressing your weaknesses. Seek opportunities outside of your routine duties to apply your strengths in new ways. Cultivate the advocacy you garner from stepping out of your comfort zone and demonstrating to leaders that you can do more. Seek out mentoring from those you respect, and turn those mentors into your champions. You want others to see your potential for leadership, such that they will advocate on your behalf.

What advice can you offer to individuals seeking a good work-life balance?

One of the keys to a good work-life balance is to avoid work FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). Do not be afraid to power down your work life for the time each day that you need to maintain that balance and to attend to your non-work needs.