

**Lewis Research Center**  
Cleveland, Ohio  
44135

June 14, 1994

Reply to Attn of.

6800

TO: 7250/Wendell White, Chairperson  
Multicultural Advisory Group

FROM: 6800/O. Frank Spurlock

SUBJECT: Reflections on U.S./Russian Interactions

I and others have been working with the Russians for the last two years. As result of our response to the experience, there may be some "lessons learned." I take this opportunity to share some of these with you.

Employees of Lewis Research Center have been interacting with the Russians for several years. The pace and depth of that interaction have been steadily increasing. LeRC has been working with the Russians on Space Station power for over a year. In the launch vehicle area, Joe Nieberding went to Russia in March 1992 with Arnold Aldrich (Associate Administrator for Code D at the time) to talk to the Russians about using Russian launch vehicles. Joe returned with Dan Goldin to Russia in July 1992 to continue this discussion. Subsequently, these discussions have expanded, the areas of mutual interest have widened, and Lewis Research Center is now involved in numerous ways with the Russians in both space and aeronautics. Joe Nieberding and I were both involved in the space station redesign effort, which included the investigation of Russian launch vehicles to support the station. Because of the need for an interpreter, we requested that Irene Shaland (fluent in Russian, educated in Leningrad), who is a librarian here at Lewis, go to Washington to work with us an interpreter. We found her to be outstanding. It was also soon apparent that her skills went considerably beyond simple interpreting; she also was able to facilitate the interaction between the U.S. and Russian delegations. With her help we were able to be more productive than the other groups because of her ability to explain us to the Russians and the Russians to us. She understood both cultures very well and possessed the skill to "translate culture" as well as language.

Late last fall, Michael Ciancone (org. 0153) suggested that Irene teach a Russian culture class to Lewis employees who are or will be working with the Russians. We contacted the Training Office and we organized a 20 hour course covering Russian history, politics, science, education, and psychology. A syllabus of the course was developed. The course was excellent. The class has been given twice and is planned to be given again. JPL has requested that the course be given at JPL. The response to the class was extremely positive. My and others' assessments of the class were that Irene did an outstanding job of presenting a picture of the Russian cultural and psychological

This information has allowed me to much better understand Russian reactions to our complicated interactions.

This experience prompts me to offer some reflections on what has occurred: Lewis has a deserved reputation for technical excellence. But it is clear that we fall short, even far short, in providing an atmosphere where those who do not share the majority culture can be comfortable and thrive. The Russian Culture Course provided an example of how skillfully presented information can make the experience of another culture comprehensible and valuable. It occurred to me that similar courses covering the other cultures indigenous to Lewis (African-American, Asian, Latino, etc.) offer us the possibility of understanding and valuing these cultures and improving our situation. There is often criticism here of training which is other than technical, but I believe that to be a narrow-minded view. To work well with the Russians and accomplish our objectives, it was and is demonstrably invaluable to understand them. It is clear that the same applies to cultures much closer to our Lewis home, and which are much more important. Training in these "soft" subjects can increase the overall productivity of the Center and significantly improve our working atmosphere.

The library deserves a special commendation for responding to the challenge and vision of providing services traditionally considered outside its responsibility. For Irene to serve as an interpreter and to teach the culture class required that the library staff be more flexible than would otherwise be necessary. A library is fundamentally a source of information. At LeRC, this has traditionally meant only technical information; it is commendable that the library has expanded its vision to provide other valuable information. We need and appreciate that commitment to an expanded vision.

The Office of Human Resource Development also deserves commendation. We received excellent support, again with vision and flexibility. I would especially like to recognize the efforts of Vanessa Webbs-Thurman, Kimberly Cerovac, and Kathy Clark, who rapidly made the training available to the staff to meet our needs. We need and value that commitment and appreciate and applaud the excellence demonstrated.

I believe there is a valuable lesson to be gained from the recognition and utilization of Irene Shaland's talents. She is an excellent librarian, but by recognizing her unique talents, the Center has simultaneously provided Lewis, the agency, and the country with the benefit of those talents and further, given her an opportunity to develop and grow. There are many unrecognized and underutilized talents at Lewis. To meet the demands for excellence required by the future, we need to commit the Lewis community to taking advantage of the tremendous talent here and to commit ourselves to the maximum development of the talent. The library and the Office of Human Resource Development have done us a great service by demonstrating how an innovative and flexible vision can serve the cause of excellence.

I hope these reflections are of value. The Russian Culture Course is a concrete demonstration of what is possible in presenting one culture to another. The challenge of presenting an African-American Culture course, for example, to LeRC employees may be greater, and is certainly more controversial, than was the Russian - but the reward is much greater as well. The material and resources are readily available.

It has been valuable to meet the challenge of expanding our visions represented by this experience. I hope we can learn as an organization, and as the Lewis community, from this and similar experiences.

*Frank Spurlock*

O. Frank Spurlock  
Deputy for Systems Analysis

Enclosure

cc:

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## INSTEAD OF A MISSION STATEMENT

"I'm giving you an equal opportunity to act in a way that makes me comfortable with you, so I can ignore your difference. Then I'll probably recognize your equal competence."

From the lesson I learned during my "international" experience in Washington, D.C.

None of us wants to be called racist or sexist or elitist or something like that. Yet we each begin to live egocentric and continue on, at least most of us do, ethnocentric. The truth is that we are the most comfortable when surrounded by people of the same nationality or whose ethnicity resembles our own.

We do learn to become "politically correct" and "liberal" and to avoid discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and, of course, ethnicity. As a result, we develop a tolerance for diversity. We may even become educated and sensitive enough to see similarities between ourselves and others. However, few of us move beyond this tolerance, and even fewer wouldn't use the comfort of similarity to escape the discomfort of difference.

It is so convenient to think of "others" as being very similar to us and to deny that they may see the world in an entirely different way. It is so comforting to perceive their differences as false or totally irrelevant to--say--a business situation.

However, our international colleagues do have ways and views different from ours, and these differences are both real and relevant. None of us can afford anymore to fail to recognize, understand, and utilize the diversity of others different from ourselves. (Did you notice I didn't say "foreign colleagues"? Who likes to be called a "foreigner"? Let's label it lesson number one)

We are given now an unprecedented historical opportunity--to cooperate with the Russians in space. Russia has always been an abstraction for Americans: "a riddle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma" (Churchill's famous remark). Yet the specter of Soviet Russia may well be the most stressful intrusion upon the American political consciousness since the Civil War. Never since the nineteenth century has the reaction to a single foreign country figured so deeply in America's formulation of its own alternatives and its own destiny.

Now we are given a Hope. We cannot afford to fail it. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. If history brought us together, we have to make an honest attempt to understand each other.

With or without *glasnost*, a "quick study" of the Russian people is impossible. It is like Woody Allen's claim that he once took a speed-reading course and then read War and Peace in eight minutes. "Want to know what it's about?" Allen confidently asked. "It's about Russia."

My course is not an anthropological study of the Russians. It is also not a definitive set of rules on proper behavior with the Russian partners. It is a compilation of personal experiences (mine and the people I know), research, and years of reading and thinking. I hope it will help us all to grow little invisible antennae that will sense incoming messages about cultural differences and nuances. An appreciation and understanding of these differences may prevent frustration and failure.

Irene Shaland