

# Jeri Buchholz

Chief Human Capital Officer  
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By Michael J. Keegan

## Meeting the Human Capital Demands for Space Exploration, Scientific Discovery, and Aeronautics Research



NASA continues to face significant operational changes, from retiring the shuttle program, to transitioning to the next-generation space transportation system for exploration beyond low-earth orbit, to the exploration of Mars. In seizing these opportunities and meeting such challenges, NASA continues its role as the nation's pioneer in space exploration, scientific discovery, and aeronautics research. To be successful, however,

NASA relies on an effective human capital approach and workforce strategy.

"The future for NASA is quite bright," says Jeri Buchholz, NASA's chief human capital officer. "We have moved past the shuttle era; the shuttles themselves have gone to their new homes in museums and science centers across the country. We've worked really hard over the course of the last year and a half to help our employees explore the new mission, to understand where we are going next, to think forward, and to really engage in our new mission. We are currently working on the James Webb Telescope, which is a large, long-range, infrared-optimized space telescope. We are working on the new Orion Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle and Space Launch System (SLS) that will launch Orion. We also have astronauts living and working on the International Space Station 365 days a year."

As NASA's CHCO, Buchholz plays a significant role in keeping the agency's future bright—making sure it has the right people with the right skills in the right roles in order to meet its current and future missions. Her responsibilities include setting the agency's workforce development strategy;

assessing workforce characteristics and future needs based on the agency's mission and strategic plan; and aligning the agency's human resources policies and programs with organizational mission, strategic goals, and performance outcomes. "My most important contribution to the agency mission," declares Buchholz, "is the work that I do on workforce culture, ensuring that NASA has the workforce culture, that innovative culture it needs so that at some point in the future human beings can travel beyond the moon to Mars. I like to say that I have the best HR job on the planet or off; this is a classic NASA joke."

In forging an innovative workforce culture, Buchholz is focusing on three areas. "We're focused on connecting our people to each other, NASA's mission, and the public. We're focusing on building leadership, building model supervisors, those supervisors that display the attributes to lead NASA into the future; and we are focusing on recognizing and rewarding innovative performance."

She seeks to promote meaningful collaborative experiences through virtual working environments, infusing the workforce with the skills it needs to interact and collaborate within such environments. "Last fall, in the wake of Hurricane Sandy," explains Buchholz, "we thought through how we could conduct virtual meetings. We conducted a summit during the month of October composed of pre-recorded video sessions, online training, reading lists, and a couple of live sessions. We took these highly opinionated, smart people of NASA from thinking that this engagement wasn't even possible to, oh my gosh, this is how we need to do business going forward." She underscores the importance of leveraging virtual environments, collaborative platforms, and social media tools in changing the way the agency does business while realizing its human capital strategy.





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Buchholz also wants to develop NASA's future leaders. One way to do this is by building role model supervisors. “The idea,” notes Buchholz, “is there are specific attributes the ideal supervisor has that the agency will need to be successful today into the future.” The agency has identified core attributes of the model supervisor and sets a path to cultivating these attributes for the most promising NASA staff. Buchholz identifies two NASA programs that focus on developing new leaders. “The NASA First program is for high-potential employees who have yet to move into leadership positions. There is also our Midlevel Leader Program for people who are moving into supervisory positions. The point of these programs is if we can identify this cohort early, then we can help them, through self-discovery, to understand the kind of leader NASA needs [into the future].”

Whether connecting people, building the next generation of NASA leaders, or rewarding innovative performance, it all involves transforming workforce culture. “We try to approach such issues from four different [dimensions],” says Buchholz. “The first is having a well-defined value proposition that is clearly stated and understand[able]. The second is making sure that people have the skills that they need to be successful. The third is to make sure that we have systems in place to enforce new behavior. Most importantly, we want to model new behaviors [from] the senior leadership on down through the agencies, so that the actions of our leadership match their words. We want our people to see things in new ways and behave in new ways resulting in permanent and enduring change.”

NASA must be doing something right. It was rated the best place to work among large federal government agencies by the Partnership for Public Service based on the results from its annual survey of government employees. “We were going through a major transformation marking the end of a 30-year program. Many people wrote us off; many people expected our results to tank,” Buchholz admits. “The truth of the matter is we were one of a few agencies whose results actually improved [in the survey]. She notes that NASA improved because it seized an opportunity and made key decisions that

made the difference in the end. “First, we made sure that we told our people that their opinion matters, that every employee’s opinion matters. We listened and provided feedback. The second thing we did was connect the dots. When you get feedback from the workforce, you take action on that feedback. For example, as a result of employee feedback, we implemented an updated, new work-from-anywhere program in the agency. The employee feedback made a difference.” Buchholz also points out the importance of leadership tailoring its focus; don’t try to do too much or promise too much. “We actually focused on two things,” she continues, “mobile workforce, work-from-anywhere campaign; and connecting our people through virtual environments. The mistake I see other agencies make is they focus on too many initiatives.” She counsels her colleagues to focus on one or two things that really matter to their workforce. “Make sure you tell them that their opinion matters and connect the dots back to the feedback that you’ve received.”

Buchholz acknowledges that many people continue to ask her about how NASA has weathered the transition from the space shuttle to the new NASA. “I am just so very proud of the NASA workforce; it has not been an easy transition for the agency or for NASA staff. We knew we had succeeded when we were ranked the best large agency in the federal government by the Partnership for Public Service, largely based on our scores that our employees gave us on employee engagement,” declares Buchholz. ■

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To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour's* interview with Jeri Buchholz, visit the Center's website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).