

People First. Mission Always: Insights from Jane Datta, Chief Human Capital Officer, National Aeronautics and Space Administration

By Michael J. Keegan



Since NASA's inception, scientific discovery has been an enduring mission of the agency. NASA conducts scientific exploration, gazing out into the galaxy and beyond, seeking to discover the secrets of the universe, searching for life in the solar system, and

protecting and improving life on Earth. It leads innovative and sustainable programs of exploration with commercial and international partners to enable human expansion across the solar system—and bring new knowledge and opportunities back to Earth. It also supports the growth of the nation's economy in space and aeronautics, increases understanding of the universe and our place in it, works with industry to improve America's aerospace technologies, and advances American leadership.

Integral to the success of NASA's mission is the people of the agency. "Our vision is *people first, mission always*," declares Jane Datta, chief human capital officer at NASA. Mission success relies upon strong workforce planning, acquiring top talent quickly, enhancing how people work, and growing employees and leaders, and creating a workplace environment that cultivates and fosters innovation and engagement.

"NASA's selection as the Best Place to Work in Government for the ninth year in a row is a testament to the dedication and determination of our world-class workforce through the most difficult circumstances our nation has faced in generations," said NASA Administrator Bill Nelson. The top ranking was bestowed upon NASA by the Partnership for Public Service.

Jane joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to share her insights into how the operations of her office support the mission of NASA. We also discuss current challenges, the response to the pandemic, the human resources (HR) transformation, and the changing nature of how and where work is done. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion, complemented with updated and additional research.

Would you tell us about the mission of your office—and its scale?




My office is an end-to-end human capital service organization, which means we're in the people business. We think about it in terms of *people first, mission always*. NASA's mission is incredibly important, and our people make mission success possible. We support about 18,000 civil servants who are spread across the country in many different lines of business. These include human spaceflight, aeronautics research, and science missions. It's an exciting time for our agency.



I have overseen this office's transformation from providing decentralized human capital services across ten centers to a centralized, functionally unified line of business. The office provides a robust portfolio of services and change management initiatives, including workforce planning and analytics, learning and development, talent acquisition, and policy and accountability. It is responsible for building the quality and depth of talent necessary for supporting the agency's mission and improving capabilities for delivering human resources services. Today we are positively shaping NASA's culture to maintain high levels of employee engagement and commitment.


What are your specific duties and responsibilities as chief human capital officer?

 My duties are the people side of the business. That includes talent acquisition, talent development, and talent mobility. I work with agency senior leadership on key administration priorities such as COVID and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA)—as well as the move to hybrid work. So, along with the transactional human resources (HR) support services, I am one of a team of senior leaders helping NASA navigate how the agency meets its critically important mission today and positions itself for the future.

We need to blend the now with the future, both for human capital services and NASA workforce strategy. So we consider—how do we go about hiring talent given changes in the labor market? How do we become more demand-driven and agile? How can we set ourselves up to have the right people for the future? It's about thinking three, five, ten years from now. Balancing the needs of today and tomorrow is an incredibly important part of what I bring to the agency.

Lastly, I am a CHCO at NASA and for the federal government. Part of my responsibility is to stay engaged with my counterparts in other agencies—to learn from them and to share what we need and what's working. We pay attention to what's happening in industry as well and identify innovations that we might want to leverage.

What are some key challenges you face in your position?


 Let me start with the internal human capital challenges. We do much with a relatively small group of people. So our goals are to identify ways to become more effective and efficient. We are looking at automation and improving

NASA's human capital information technology footprint. We have a three-year plan in the works, in line with our business plan.

I have been given an opportunity to have a voice in the biggest workforce challenges now facing the agency. The response to COVID remains a challenge. We are focused on addressing workload and employee burnout. Caring for the health and welfare of our employees is both an opportunity and a challenge right now—one we take very seriously.

NASA is not standing still. We are doing work with commercial partnerships on the human spaceflight side. As such, we are helping to reshape workforce skills. The future of work/hybrid is a great example of this. I am here to help the agency move into the future, leveraging a combination of the best of the pre-pandemic and the pandemic experiences.

What are the characteristics of an effective leader and what leadership principles guide your efforts and how you lead?

 Leaders must set a clear direction. People need to know where they're going and why. Why are we transforming human capital right now? Why is it important? Setting a direction does not mean devising a hundred-point plan. It is about describing the future; what it generally looks like and why our goals now are important.






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Leaders also need to build strong teams. I have seen organizations struggle because they lack strong, cohesive teams. I am blessed with one of the most talented teams that you could ever hope to have. I need to be connected to people enough to know what’s going on, so that I can support our teams and remove obstacles for them to do their jobs. It is about the team—delegate to them, let them learn, let them innovate.

How did NASA respond to the pandemic and keep the workforce performing?

 I’m proud of how our agency responded during this pandemic. From leadership to every employee and contractor, we all kept the agency going in the midst of a very stressful and trying period.


I was CHCO for a couple months when we moved to mandatory telework in March 2020. We quickly assembled a team focused on the health and safety of our workforce. We worked to determine what needed to be done and

how to make decisions quickly. We moved fast and worked hard, moving 90 percent of the workforce offsite in a very short period. We created order and determined how we’d operate—communication, charge time, different hours of work, contractors, etc.

For my part, I focused on the supervisor cadre, because that is the layer of our organization where the work and the workforce come together. Supervisors are in the best position to know what’s what at any given moment and to help in the caretaking of the workforce. So we setup a series for supervisors that touched on many different topics.

It was clear the series served a valuable purpose. It fostered togetherness—a shared response to a crisis. Though this may have been borne out of a crisis, the resulting engagement will continue long after the pandemic subsides. Focusing on communication across all levels of the agency continues to be critical. We are living and working differently. We can no longer pretend how what we used to do in going in the office is still the best way forward today.

How will NASA be working when the pandemic is behind us?

 We have declared, as have most agencies, that we will be moving into what we call the hybrid environment. We’re striving to take the best of our pre-pandemic experience, the best of what we learned during the pandemic—and apply it. We have people with different reactions to how we’ve been working and how they want to work. We’ve done several internal surveys—many focused on productivity, support, communications.

People have been surprised at how much they can do remotely. Seventy percent of NASA employees desire to work offsite for more than half of their work schedule. Some are mixed, with more wanting off site. We don’t have it all




figured out. There's a desire to reconnect with people in person, but when getting back together is safe and viable, we expect to see a mixture of onsite, remote work, and some more active telework. I have alerted leadership to the fact that this is an evolving situation. We didn't want to fall into the trap of deciding too early, but instead give ourselves some breathing room once restrictions have lifted.

We're in an experimental phase that will likely last for a good part of 2022. We weren't sure what level of remote work people would want. They might imagine this is something they want, but how do they behave when given a choice? Instead of reconfiguring workspace, let's see what people choose and what practices they adopt first. Let's give them that opportunity, then determine investments/divestments.

We aspire to determine real requirements first. We'll see what we learn and use that. How much space do we need, what are we doing in that space? The workforce wants to have a say—what work they do, when they do it, where they do it, how they do it. To keep an engaged workforce, we need to pay attention to this and listen to our people.


Would you tell us more about efforts to transform NASA's HR services?

 NASA used to have an HR office at every field center location and a policy program office at headquarters. We consolidated the human capital function into one organization on Oct. 1, 2018. We are one organization with a regular connection with leaders across the human capital enterprise.

A traditional HR customer model provides services through people for whatever is needed. It involves innovating on the fly. If you need a tool, then under this model we'll build it. It works in a decentralized model with all the advantages and disadvantages. At NASA, for example, if a customer has a question, they go to a person. It has been very successful in the past. Our people want to understand our customers.

We want to modernize HR to achieve the right blend of efficiency and effectiveness. We introduced the HR Business Partner (HRBP) model, which integrates the HR function—focusing on people—with the business side of things. We're now looking at more standardization to automate. And we are moving from a transactional to a consultancy model of HR management. It is very challenging, as these types of transitions don't happen overnight.

What advice would you give someone who is considering a career in public service?

 Public service careers are meaningful in ways that are wide and deep. Yes, there are aspects of work with, say, federal agencies, that feel challenging—the bureaucracy, some of the constraints we must accept in how things work. Yet, we spend our time doing good for the world. For many of us, the meaning of the work matters more than anything else.

To that end, we place a great deal of value on the employee experience—rights of employees, work/life balance, for examples. We encourage people early in their careers to take advantage of a variety of work opportunities as well. A porous border, in and out of public service, is a healthy way to understand what each type of experience within NASA can give to an employee.

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