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Coming Up Aces

by Todd Post

Coming Up Aces

If you're like me, you find the science on NASA missions fascinating. The scientists themselves are almost as interesting to me as the worlds they study. Allan Frandsen's story, "A Gentle Touch," addresses the sometimes thorny relationship between scientists and the people who have to manage a project. How did Frandsen, science payloads manager on the Advanced Composition Explorer (ACE), engender trust in a science team whose initial impression of him was "requirements enforcer"? For starters, he developed a gentle touch.

Most of this issue is about ACE. We've collected stories by four members of the ACE management team: Don Margolies, the mission manager from Goddard Space Flight Center; Frandsen, science payloads manager from the Caltech Jet Propulsion Laboratory; Mary Chiu, project manager in charge of spacecraft development at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory; and Frank Snow, operations and ground systems manager at Goddard.

How many perspectives does it take to understand a whole project? Certainly more than we've got room for in one issue. While we don't believe we can provide you with a complete picture of the ACE project in one issue, we think you can get a pretty good idea of what it's like for several people to work together towards achieving a common goal.

Frank Snow does double duty for us this issue with a Story and a Practice. In the latter, "The Tried and True," he talks about his team's fondness for a Chinese restaurant. Although it's only a couple of stoplights down the road from work, the restaurant may as well be in Shanghai given how far it feels from the demands of the project. It's where the team goes to celebrate milestones, birthdays and anniversaries, and also to settle differences that come up between team members. This is the situation Snow describes in "The Tried and True."

The stories by Don Margolies and Mary Chiu look at the same episode of the ACE project, but present two very different points of view. Chiu (APL) was the project manager for the contractor, Margolies (NASA) the customer. As you may suspect, the two parties sometimes disagree on what's best for the project. These stories demonstrate how customer and contractor can disagree on an important issue, and yet not let that poison an otherwise good working relationship.

The ACE stories here are part of a larger project that Drs. Edward Hoffman (APPL Director) and Alexander Laufer (ASK Editor-in Chief) and I are working



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ASK Magazine

By practitioners for practitioners

Issue 9

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on with members of the ACE team. Together, we're developing a case study on ACE with some 20 to 30 stories. We think this is a unique approach to a case study about project management. Decision-making in project management doesn't always translate into lists of Do's and Don'ts. Only stories are sufficiently nuanced to convey the complexity of project management decision-making. This is why we use stories as our medium in ASK.

In addition to the ACE stories in this issue, Drs. Hoffman and Laufer are here as per usual; so are feature writers Scott Cameron and Terry Little. This month's interview is with Judy Stokley, a maverick of a program manager in the Air Force. It's a full hand, alright. Aces turn up everywhere.