

## From the APPEL Director

# Of One Kind

BY ED HOFFMAN



The age of international projects has dawned. Project work is increasingly global. Determining where work happens and how the many, diverse, and widely distributed partners who make up project teams accomplish work together are increasingly part of a project leader's job. One of the benefits of this new age is the opportunity it offers to see the world of project work in innovative ways devised by varied cultures. But we are able to work together across borders because of our essential similarities.

More than 2,000 years ago, Marcus Aurelius wrote, "To see the things of the present moment is to see all that is now, all that has been since time began, and all which shall be unto the world's end, for all things are of one kind, and of one form."

I remember my social studies teacher at Midwood High School saying that in class one day. I laughed. First of all, hearing a middle-aged, Brooklyn high school teacher quoting an ancient Roman philosopher seemed like something from a Mel Brooks movie. And what did it mean? The ensuing discussion informed us that Marcus Aurelius was saying there was nothing new in the world. Things would change, but the nature of human experiences, emotions, thoughts, feelings, and ideas remained limited and constant. This was hard for me to accept. How could a generation that experienced Apollo be essentially the same as our ancestors from the Middle Ages?

Fast-forward a few decades. The idea that humans are interconnected and share the same experiences and lessons was vividly apparent on my recent trip to Japan. I was invited by my friend and colleague Hiro Tanaka to be a keynote speaker at the Project Management Japan Association conference.

It was fascinating to listen to different perspectives on project management. Yet, as the trip continued, what most made me smile was the sense that we are all in this together, facing similar problems. The issues we discuss at NASA (like talent management, complex project systems, portfolio management) are the same ones being discussed throughout the project world. Different cultures offer their unique insights about how to deal with them, but our similarities are the essential core.

In Tokyo I was privileged to visit with colleagues from the Japanese Space Exploration Agency (JAXA). During the shuttle mission where the Kibo ("Hope" in Japanese) module was configured to the International Space Station, I talked with the JAXA senior chief engineer, Toshifumi Mukai. Space exploration is now a thoroughly international collaboration.

As I listened to international perspectives on challenges and solutions for a project world, and as I visited with JAXA, I remembered Marcus Aurelius's words about the sameness at the heart of the world's great variety. The human challenges of the future will be met through global project structures. The challenges of exploring space, curing and preventing disease, battling poverty, and supplying the world's energy in environmentally sound ways will be faced through international project partnerships.

The varied perspectives of different cultures will provide a rich variety of insights and innovative concepts; our shared values and aims will unite us in common work. There is no one blueprint for how to make international projects successful, but there are many possibilities. For me, that is the hope for the future. ●