

A COMMON DENOMINATOR

BY PHILLIP E. MYERS AND GAY HELEN PERKINS

SUZAN KIESEL SOUNDS EXCITED WHEN SHE TALKS ABOUT HER GRADUATE RESEARCH AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY. HER THESIS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION IS ON THE EFFECTS OF CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT ON RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN AMERICAN ASTRONAUTS AND RUSSIAN COSMONAUTS, AS THEY PREPARE FOR AN INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION THAT WILL INVOLVE MANY DIFFERENT CULTURES.

The interactions of the astronauts and cosmonauts preparing for this endeavor stimulated Kiesel to create an innovative thesis project that may influence training at NASA. To accomplish her path-breaking research, she interviewed Terry Wilcutt, NASA astronaut and WKU alumnus; and through him, interviewed other astronauts and cosmonauts at the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Her findings revealed some distinct differences in workplace communication between Americans and Russians. One difference, for example, is the role the task or mission leader assumes during a mission. Teamwork and shared responsibilities are expected among the American astronauts. As one American commander stated:

"You may have to pick up a little more of the load yourself, to cover all the bases. The object is for you to function as a team with no holes, and...if you can't cover everything that the last guy did then one of you will fill in there."

According to several interviewees, American commanders in international space projects continuously seek crew input into all aspects of training and mission tasks.

However, Kiesel's research indicates that Russian cosmonauts may be more accustomed to hierarchy during a mission, where a Russian commander has significant control over the actions of all participants. In one instance, an American astronaut recounted how frustrated he and his colleagues were when Russian aerospace trainers tried to teach them detailed information about things that the Americans believed they already knew. The astronauts were also routinely tested on material covered during the training, something that did not often occur at NASA. According to

Kiesel, this "boss-oriented" instruction is indicative of countries with large power distances where teachers appear as "gurus who transfer personal wisdom." This was verified by other astronauts who defined Russian commanders as "the absolute boss." Another interviewee perceived those same management differences:

"There is much less empowerment from management [in Russia]. It's more of a micro-managed environment...pecking order. You would never say anything outside of what...your boss feels or, there'd be serious repercussions, whereas here

you know, it's a little different."

One American astronaut who lived in Russia for some time encountered this acceptance of power distance quite frequently:

"[Many Russians] didn't think they could change any-



The Expedition One crew members are about to eat fresh oranges onboard the Zvezda Service Module of the Earth-orbiting International Space Station. Pictured, from the left, are cosmonaut Yuri P. Gidzenko, Soyuz commander; astronaut William M. Shepherd, mission commander; and cosmonaut Sergei K. Krikalev, flight engineer.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NASA — DECEMBER 4, 2000



ILLUSTRATION BY TOM MEACHAM

thing in their government...they would just shrug their shoulders and say, eh, you know...it'll never change... what's the point of talking about it cause it'll never change. It'll always be this way. I don't have any control really over who's gonna be in positions of power, so...just go on with my life."

Yet possibly the most important discovery in Kiesel's thesis was the willingness of astronauts and cosmonauts to get along in their training and on their missions. She discovered that their ultimate successes have stemmed from a common love for flying and mutual respect. Both know what the other has been through to rise to the top of their professions; and they see their collaboration as a chance to climb higher for the good of discovery. One Russian cosmonaut, recounted time spent with NASA commanders:

"My opinion is that...[the] American astronaut corps [has a] very good...way to resolve some differences between crew members...main role in this process is commander...he is responsible for...good communication...good spirit...between crew members."

Ms. Kiesel found a strong mutually supporting learning environment. Astronauts and cosmonauts who were interviewed all seemed to agree that Americans place less emphasis on relationships at work. But they all identified teamwork as important to the success of the mission. However, the Americans described teamwork in somewhat more individualistic terms. For example, one astronaut explained that in order for a mission to be successful you must work as hard as possible, then "help out other people...[after] getting your own stuff done."

Alternatively, interviewees described Russians as more interested in developing strong personal relationships. One American commander described how he had learned a lot from the Russians in this regard, particularly during one docking mission in which the crew was to unload equipment into the space station:

"Like typical Americans we opened the hatch, said where do you want all this stuff? You know, let's go to work,

and [the Russian commander], he wouldn't even talk to us about work. He just said no, no, no, no...follow me. We went into their kitchen table, sat around and had a meal, and talked and then after we had spent some time socializing, then he was willing to talk about work."

Another participant explained how problems in communication with Russian crew members were often overcome quickly because strong personal relationships existed between the crew members.

One Russian cosmonaut described his pleasure serving on missions because it was a "friendly atmosphere" and crew members became "like family." The preference for family-like ties is exhibited not just during a mission, but at the Moscow training center as well. One astronaut explained how he was accepted by the in-group when assigned as a new member of NASA's Moscow-based support staff. He attributed much of his success to an American astronaut who had been there in training for a long time, had significant relationships, and who introduced him to the Russians.

As Kiesel's thesis explains, the interviewees had much in common on a personal basis. Astronauts and cosmonauts saw themselves as "cut from the same cloth," were driven by success, and were "flying people" with a penchant for sharing airplane "war stories."

Though somewhat diverse in their preparatory backgrounds, this group all bonded because they have a strong interest in space exploration and adventure.

As if these similarities in personality were not enough to facilitate relationship development, astronauts and cosmonauts on a crew also spend an excessive amount of time together as soon as they get assigned to a mission. Most interviewees pointed to this training time as a key force that propels them toward deeper relationships.

Ms. Kiesel found that most all the astronauts and cosmonauts believe that individual personality traits had the most impact on their interactions. As one cosmonaut explained:

"When you are getting closer to people of course, one by one...the relations are different...if you have an open personality...tolerating the differences...makes it easier."

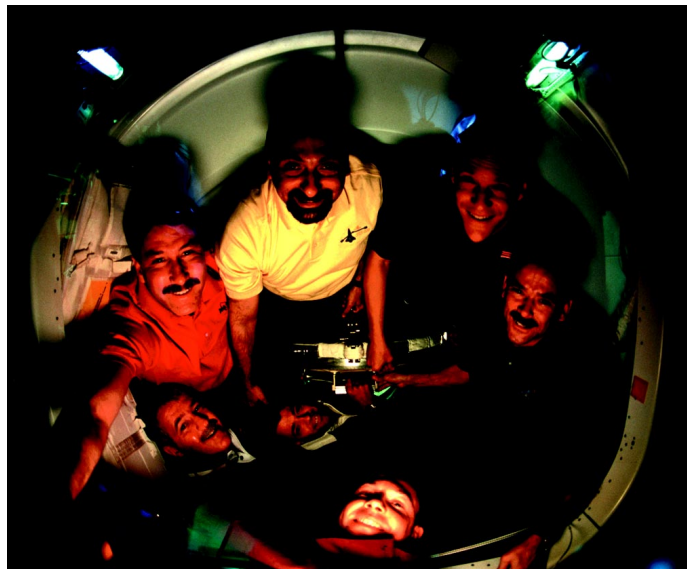


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With his arm extended to left foreground is astronaut Kent V. Rominger, STS-100 mission commander. Clockwise from Rominger are astronauts Umberto Guidoni, Scott E. Parazynski, Chris A. Hadfield, Jeffrey S. Ashby and John L. Phillips. Cosmonaut Yuri V. Lonchakov's head emerges at bottom center. Lonchakov and Usachev represent Rosaviakosmos; Hadfield is with the Canadian Space Agency (CSA) and Guidoni is associated with the European Space Agency (ESA).

A NASA astronaut endorsed the belief that personal characteristics were more important in relationship development:

"There's so much variation...from person to person that it's not clear to me that, you know, you can say well *all Russians* are like this or *all Americans* are like this and that it *means* anything...some people are certainly easier to get along with than others and I think it's more up to the person...it's more important *whom* you fly with than what the *mission* is."

Kiesel's work will no doubt have an impact, and she says "My thesis committee, Drs. Judith Hoover, Cecile Garmon, and George Musambira; Graduate Studies; Astronaut Terry Wilcutt; and all WKU departments working together have done everything they could to open up every door for my education and re-research."

Ms. Kiesel believes her open interview approach enabled her to get the most out of the research. When developing the literature review, she found few scholars used face-to-face interviews when examining intercultural issues and relationship development. She hopes to fill this gap in communication research, so that interpretive interviewing and analysis continue to gain recognition in communication study.

"Our worlds are what we make of them inside our heads," she said. "I believe the best way to learn about individuals and their experiences is to give them room and let them talk. Then I can try from a theoretical standpoint to make sense of what they told me."

Kiesel also believes that studying relationship development of space mission participants is unique because of the environment in which they are living. For example, individuals cannot "leave the room to get some fresh air" when in space. Additionally, the environment of space is a fairly distinctive place to research communication behaviors. Since Japan, Canada, and 12 countries in addition to the United States and Russia, are on the edge of participation in the international space station, such studies are very important. She notes that although individuals from different cultures and countries may exhibit behavioral differences, it is possible that the type of personality needed to be an astro-

naut—high risk-taking, success-oriented, type A—may be a stronger factor than cultural differences.

Ms. Kiesel has sent a draft of her thesis to NASA to emphasize the importance of communication research, intercultural issues and relationship development. She also hopes to highlight to them the importance of language acquisition on relationship development, an area not often studied. Since private corporations may take on future explorations, Kiesel hopes this research serves as a reminder to look at relationship and communication issues, not just the technical issues of "How will we launch?"

Kiesel's interest in communication and relationship research developed from eight years of work in the corporate world. After working in industry, Ms. Kiesel wanted to study communication in liberal arts and chose Western's Communication Department. Her thesis research enabled her to put her education at Western Kentucky University together quite meaningfully. She has an undergraduate degree in English from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and has worked in marketing and advertising.

"Communication obstacles—mergers and acquisitions, employee frustrations—create the most problems at work," she said. "I sincerely believe that as long as you can communicate well, you can do any job." She believes the importance of

effective communication is downplayed in many workplaces and would like to see more MBA programs emphasize cross-departmental communication classes.

In 2000, she presented a paper at the American Communication Association related to NASA issues and she received positive feedback. She wanted to improve understanding and peaceful collaboration between Russia and the United States.

Kiesel's plans include the potential for further research with NASA, and a doctoral program in communication at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. She is also going to be an adoptive parent and is doing research with Dr. Leigh Anne Howard, also a graduate of Western's masters program in communication, on narratives used by birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted children. Certainly, Ms. Kiesel has pointed out that communication and relationship development are universal common denominators.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NASA — APRIL 12, 2001

The Expedition Two crewmembers—astronaut Susan J. Helms (left), cosmonaut Yuri V. Usachev and astronaut James S. Voss—share a meal at the table in the Zvezda/Service Module of the International Space Station.