

Innovation Award Category: Champion of Innovation

Nominee:

Larry Leopard

Director, Space Systems Department

NASA Marshall Space Flight Center

Innovation Narrative for Larry Leopard/MSFC

Behavior Criteria for the Champion of Innovation Award –

Larry Leopard continues to challenge the status quo by taking appropriate risk to improve how Space Systems Department accomplishes its work to help enable our nation's space program and constantly exceed customers' expectations. He sets the example for creative and innovative behavior, and encourages his employees to try new innovative approaches.

Leadership – *Fosters innovation by creating conditions that enable the team to openly contribute to and achieve objectives.*

Demonstration: Larry Leopard is an outstanding leader in innovation, who has created a work environment in MSFC's Space Systems Department that is positive, upbeat, and encouraging of employee creativity, innovation and high performance. Larry is not just innovative—he has an outgoing, funny, and exuberant personality that brings out the best in his employees and sets the tone in the workplace. And not only does he foster innovation through the positive workplace conditions, he holds his organizational leaders and all employees accountable for contributing to department objectives. Employees feel empowered to bring forward their creative ideas for improving the way they do their jobs, to seek new work, and to improve the department's operations. Larry has created a workplace where employees are not afraid to take risks or fail as they try new innovative ideas and approaches. *As an example of this, he communicated clearly to all department employees that it is "ok" when some of their ideas do not work out as hoped...and he encourages them to continue bringing forward their ideas.* Further proof of Larry's leadership is provided by new small projects that have been awarded to his department and the center as a result of his efforts. Examples include thinking outside the box and driving affordability by refurbishing the Microgravity Science Glovebox ground unit to enable more rodent research on International Space Station (ISS) in 2016; getting his department's optical expertise noticed by other NASA centers and industry to build 1-meter mirrors; providing a new ISS facility for heliophysics research which is not offered by any ISS partner; launching the first ever 3-D printer for use in space; and by taking a chance on the use of green propellants for secondary payloads and the use of low cost 12U and larger Cubesats.

Visionary – *Recognizes the opportunity to make things better and formulates a new or different path forward; at every step, gathers information, input and insights from others.*

Demonstration: Larry demonstrated a visionary approach to improving his department through employee innovations at the grass roots level by creating a new and highly informal proposal opportunity. In this initiative, Larry invited employees to submit their creative ideas by simply describing the idea and plan to their supervisor....no written proposal or quad charts were required! The supervisor would assess the idea, and if approving it, would forward the request to Larry's office for consideration on a first-come, first-serve basis. *Although the amount of resources provided for each idea was small, the effect on the department workforce has been tremendous—over 17 employee projects have already been approved in the initiative, and it has been highly effective in encouraging the flow of ideas.* Further, Larry continually supports and encourages employees to find new, affordable and efficient ways of doing their work. He has

championed a new, simpler cost estimating tool to allow the department to quickly pursue new work without burdening employees who are supporting existing projects. He has also encouraged systems engineers to tailor and customize requirements for small flight projects.

Relationship Builder – *Persuades others to support and/or contribute to an idea or initiative; may involve overcoming objections by using personal credibility and prior positive relationships.*

Demonstration: Larry has demonstrated and encouraged the building of relationships in numerous ways. He is a hands-on leader, collaborating with employees and giving them opportunities to share their innovations. Larry works to place the right ideas with the best applications. For example, employees may have very creative ideas, but may be struggling with putting the full story together or finding the best uses. Larry often is able to see that there is merit in an idea, and is able to utilize his personal credibility and professional relationships to find someone who can assist the employee with putting that story together. Larry is also highly supportive of employees working together in a more collaborative work environment, including setting aside areas for small project teams to be co-located in the same room for periods of time, to enhance their creativity and effectiveness.

Role Model – *Respected and recognized by peers as someone who demonstrates creative and innovative behaviors. Actions are perceived as creative by others, often influencing and challenging them to question, observe, network, and experiment beyond the obvious.*

Demonstration: Through his leadership of the MSFC Space Systems Department's participation in the Center Innovation Fund and other opportunities, Larry Leopard has truly been a role model for creative and innovative behaviors. For example, he has influenced and challenged his employees to better develop their new ideas by telling the "why" for the idea. Larry met with employees and enthusiastically encouraged them to present a compelling story to program managers—to explain clearly why the proposal should be funded, and effectively "paint a picture" to describe its benefits. As another example of influencing employees toward innovation, Larry served as a panelist for the MSFC Creativity Panel Session, which included numerous attendees and was also broadcast through live-stream to two other center locations. Of course, Larry's enthusiasm and his outgoing personality were a big hit with attendees, as he effectively and openly discussed center culture, the improvements that have been made toward greater openness to employees' ideas, and steps that remain. He related well to employees throughout the panel session, inspiring them to persevere and help mold a more innovative center culture going forward.

Nomination Summary

Larry Leopard clearly and strongly exhibits all the behavior criteria for the Champion of Innovation Award. He has instilled a flexible, "yes we can" attitude throughout Space Systems Department by demonstrating visionary leadership; building relationships with employees, customers, and center management; and by serving as an outstanding role model. In the true test of innovative leadership, employees are inspired and empowered by Larry to take appropriate risks and develop their creative ideas—and they are not afraid to fail. Larry's efforts and behaviors clearly demonstrate that he is well deserving of the Champion of Innovation Award.