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New training helps Marshall's Instrument and Payload Systems Department define its destiny

By Lori Meggs

To foster dialogue among its stakeholders, the Marshall Center Engineering Directorate's Instrument and Payload Systems Department recently explored how to become an ideal organization through a method known as appreciative inquiry.

Appreciative inquiry helps stakeholders structure their future by reflecting on what has worked best in the past. The approach is a radical departure from traditional problem-solving models, which don't fully explore prior events.

"This experience has been tremendous in pulling ideas out of us and helping us clearly define our destiny as an organization," said Steve Pearson, manager of the department. "Appreciative inquiry has unleashed passion in us as individuals that has energized us and will have a great impact on our organization."

Pearson's department provides design-to-finished products for instruments and payloads used throughout NASA. These instruments and payloads are used for human space flight programs, science investigations and exploration initiatives.

Since early last year, Pearson has been in executive coaching with a consulting firm. He decided that many of the coaching methods he learned would be an excellent way to integrate new team members into the department.

For three days in January, managers, engineers, business professionals, staff



Kathy Jones, right, an engineer in the Instrument and Payload Systems Department, discusses her team's results with Gayle Lantz during an activity for the appreciative inquiry training.

employees and representatives from other Marshall organizations, along with internal and external customers, discussed positive ways to build on their strengths. They are developing action plans to make the Engineering Directorate's Instrument and Payload Systems Department function in the most efficient way possible.

"This approach is ideal for organizations wanting to create cultural change," said Gayle Lantz, owner of the Birmingham-based organizational development consulting firm that conducted the training

at Marshall. "It builds positive energy, encourages innovation and increases individual accountability for results."

This first use of the appreciative inquiry method at Marshall coincides with NASA's renewed emphasis on partnerships. As a result of the experience, participants have opportunities to build new relationships, strengthen their own partnerships and initiate change to move the department forward.

The writer, an ASRI employee, supports the Public and Employee Communications Office.