A goal isn’t a mission

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by Eric J. McNulty January 30, 2023

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There are missions, and then there are missions. One type of mission is an achievable task with a fixed goal that is often tactical and short-term in nature. The other mission is a high-level aspiration that provides direction and motivation to an organization over a long period of time. Leaders who mix up the two can put the future of their companies at risk.

The distinction between the two types of missions is dramatically illustrated in the recording of a White House meeting held on 21 November 1962. During the meeting, President John F. Kennedy and NASA’s chief administrator, James Webb, whom Kennedy appointed, had a heated argument about NASA’s proper mission.

It had been 18 months since Kennedy had called out a piloted moon landing as one of his top priorities in a special address to Congress, declaring, “First, I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.” Now, Kennedy was considering whether he could move the target date for the first lunar landing from 1967 to 1966, and he was grilling NASA’s leaders about the feasibility and costs of doing so.

As they wrangled over the size of the special appropriation that would be needed to fund an accelerated schedule, Kennedy suddenly tacked. “Do you think this program is the top-priority program of the agency?” he asked Webb.

“No, sir, I do not,” answered Webb. “I think it is *one* of the top-priority programs….” With that, an argument began that revealed the chasm between Kennedy’s view of NASA’s mission and Webb’s view.

To Kennedy, the space race was the extraterrestrial front in the ongoing Cold War. Landing a person on the moon was the finish line in that race, and he intended to cross first. “Everything that we do ought to really be tied into getting onto the moon ahead of the Russians,” he said. In this view, NASA’s mission was what could now be called a BHAG—an acronym coined 30 years later by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, authors of *Built to Last*, for a “big, hairy, audacious goal.”

“Why can’t it be tied to preeminence in space?” replied Webb. For him, the science, the rockets and other technology, the astronauts and engineers, and the fast-emerging aerospace industry needed to reach the moon were part and parcel of a national space capability. In this view, NASA’s mission was to ensure that the US was able to play the leading role in the new space age.

Eventually, Kennedy tried to end the argument by presidential dictate. After saying that he wasn't ready to make a decision about moving up the Apollo schedule, he added, "But I do think we ought to get it, you know, really clear that the policy ought to be that [the moon landing] is *the* top-priority program of the agency, and one of the two, except for defense, the top priority of the United States government.... Otherwise, we shouldn't be spending this kind of money, because I'm not that interested in space."

That Webb continued to argue with the president after this statement—the discussion went on until Kennedy ended the stalemate and the meeting by saying that he and Webb should exchange their views in writing—suggests the importance he placed on how NASA's mission was articulated. Webb believed that the agency needed a mission with a large *M*—an organizational objective of "preeminence in space" that it could strive to fulfill over the long term. Achieving this mission required a variety of programs in addition to the lunar project. Webb also believed that for all its ambition, Kennedy's intense focus on putting a person on the moon was a mission with a small *m*—a short-term goal that, once accomplished, would not be able to sustain NASA over time.

In the end, Kennedy and Webb resolved the argument by meeting in the middle. "If you look at what Kennedy was saying subsequent to their interaction, he was saying our goal is to be first in every aspect of space," said John Logsdon, founder of the Space Policy Institute and professor emeritus at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, in an interview for this column. (Given a presidency and a life cut short, there's no way to know whether Kennedy really meant it or not.)

Meanwhile, Webb had taken Kennedy's wishes on board. "He tried very hard to maintain balance in NASA's programs, so the Agency was doing a lot in the sciences as well as human space flight," said Logsdon, who has written books on US space policy during the Kennedy, Nixon, and Reagan administrations. "But clearly, he said, 'My boss said, "Get a man on the moon before the Russians," and that's what we're going to focus on.'"

That focus was made manifest with the Apollo 11 mission on 20 July 1969, when Neil Armstrong took "one giant leap for mankind." Webb had resigned by then, and his concerns about a mission-less future for NASA were manifesting, too. President Lyndon Johnson's administration had begun cutting NASA's budget in the years before Apollo 11, and the final planned Apollo moon landings were cancelled in the Nixon administration.

"NASA during the second half of the 1960s became what James Webb had feared, a one-program agency," writes Logsdon in *John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon*. Worse, NASA was unable to reframe its mission in a compelling way. "With the White House rejection of ambitious post-Apollo space goals," Logsdon continues, "NASA entered a four-decade identity crisis from which it has yet to emerge." In this sense, and for all NASA's accomplishments, concludes Logsdon, "The impact of Apollo on the evolution of the U.S. space program has on balance been negative."

There’s a valuable lesson for company leaders in all this: don’t mistake a goal—no matter how big, hairy, and audacious—for a compelling organizational mission. You can achieve a goal and put it behind you, but a mission is always up ahead and just beyond your reach.

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