

AAAS Group Hosts Discussion of Ethics and NASA

BECAUSE organizations vary in how they anticipate and respond to ethical problems in the work environment, the 14 October meeting of the AAAS Professional Society Ethics Group focused on how one prominent and highly visible organization—the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)—incorporates ethical considerations into its planning and decision-making. Representing NASA were John O'Brien, general counsel, and Milton Silveira, chief engineer.

As NASA's general counsel, O'Brien also is the agency's designated ethics official responsible for maintaining a high level of ethical conduct among its 21,000 employees. Toward that end, O'Brien oversees a compilation of federal regulations intended "to set the general ethical tone for conducting government business." He reviews existing federal regulations that generally apply to all government agencies and then addresses standards of conduct adopted by NASA. Of particular interest to meeting participants was the stipulation that NASA employees not place contractors in a position where objectivity may be impaired or where they may be put in a better competitive position than other contractors.

Recognizing that regulations cannot possibly take into account all situations and behaviors, O'Brien described NASA's efforts to educate its employees about their professional respon-

sibilities on the job. In addition to an advisory service operated by the general counsel's office, NASA distributes a copy of its standards of conduct to each employee and includes discussions of the standards and expected employee conduct in its various training programs. For the most part, the program focuses on conflict of interest matters rather than on the ethical dimensions of launch decisions.

Silveira opened his presentation with a review of the rules governing space shuttle launch decisions. Some of the key factors are: weather, a critical items list which includes a check of all single point failures (no backup systems available), and a hazards analysis. Information regarding these factors is transmitted to various management officials and ultimately to the mission management team, which is responsible for deciding whether to proceed with or abort the mission. If lower management levels do not give due consideration to these rules or the relevant information regarding the launch decision, the mission management team will request that they follow a formal waiver process in which they present their rationale for deviating from routine procedures.

Regarding the launch of the ill-fated Challenger 51-L flight, Silveira admitted that some crucial information apparently did not reach upper management at NASA. As a consequence, the agency is attempting to establish formal channels through which

technical personnel—both at NASA and with contractors—can readily express their concerns to management. Furthermore, some key personnel on the launch team were relatively new to their duties and were not sufficiently familiar with the complexity of their responsibilities.

The Challenger incident, according to Silveira, has had a dramatic effect on the character of NASA. In the past, NASA officials focused on the technical aspects of failure, devoting their collective energies to finding appropriate solutions. But outside pressures have forced all those involved with the space shuttle program to focus on the question of who should bear responsibility for the flight's failure. Silveira expressed concern that attributing fault to a particular individual, an essential feature of the notion of moral responsibility, may make people at NASA less willing to take risks.

At least two other matters of concern at the meeting were raised during the open discussion period. In responding to a question regarding the Challenger flight, Silveira acknowledged that NASA was concerned with the O-ring problem prior to the launch and that an effort to correct the problem was under way. But the problem was not thought to be serious enough to warrant aborting the flight. There was also discussion of whether the Challenger launch decision was a technical or ethical matter. Silveira expressed his belief that the launch decision clearly exposed technical and managerial failures, but involved no serious breach of ethics. But while the decision obviously had a strong technical component, any decision which rests in large part on safety concerns, as do all the launch decisions involving human passengers, is essentially an ethical one and should be explicitly recognized as such by NASA.

The AAAS Professional Society Ethics Group will next meet on 13 January 1987 in Washington, D.C., to discuss possible future projects and activities. In-

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Proposed Amendment to AAAS Constitution

Two proposals suggesting a constitutional change in the selection of Section Secretaries were submitted to the AAAS Council last May for a first reading and discussion. They will be considered again at the Council's meeting during the 1987 Annual Meeting in Chicago in February.

Present Wording of AAAS Constitution. Article VI, Section 2, Administrative Officers, reads as follows: "... Each Section Secretary shall be elected by his or her Section Committee for a term of four years." (A change is being considered for the italicized portions of the statement.)

The Retiring Section Chairperson, Section Chairperson, Section Chairperson-Elect, Section Secretary, four members-at-large of the Section Committee, Council Delegate(s), and one representative appointed by each Affiliate enrolled in the Section comprise the Section Committee (as defined by Bylaw Article III, Section 2(c)).

Initial Proposed Amendment. On behalf of Section A (Mathematics) officers, Council Delegate Leon Henkin and Section A Chairperson Daniel Zelinsky proposed that Article VI, Section 2, be amended as follows: "... Each Section Secretary shall be elected by the Elected Section Officials of his or her Section Committee for a term of four years."

The term, Elected Section Officials, refers to those officers elected by the Electorate: Retiring Section Chairperson, Section Chairperson, Section Chairperson-Elect, four members-at-large of the Section