



Jorge Diaz,
Vice President,
Space Transportation Systems Division,
Rockwell International

By Carmela Mellado

In every pioneering effort, there are key positions that must be occupied by people who have the expertise and ability to lead, as well as the courage to accept responsibility for making decisions. In the pioneering manned space flight program, Jorge Diaz has risen to the challenge of several such positions and today is the vice president, engineering for Rockwell

International's Space Transportation Systems Division in Downey, Calif....

Diaz has earned the reputation of being a thorough professional, capable of dedicating himself to solving the most difficult problems that engineers have faced in their quest to conquer space. He has been a part of Rockwell's history of significant contribution to the advancement of space technology, including such milestones as the creation and manufacture of the Navaho and Apollo command spacecraft, as well as the Space Shuttle Orbiter vehicle. Diaz is recognized as one of the key people responsible for resolving the problems with the thermal protection system of the Space Shuttle.

Born and educated in Mexico, Diaz earned his degree in chemical engineering from Mexico City University, where he also earned a degree in metallurgy. He came to the United States with his wife Alma and young family to enroll in a master's program at the University of Southern California and to improve his English skills. At the same time, he began working at a consulting laboratory. Diaz explained that he found it tough to work, study, and spend time with his wife and young family. He never completed the master's program, although he did attend school for about five years. After saying that, Diaz laughed at himself, and dismissed his explanation with the comment, "You know, those are just excuses."

With more time on his hands, Diaz did study for and received his American citizenship. He also had more time to invest in his work at the laboratory. He developed expertise in the investigation of technical failures embroiled in litigation. Diaz remembers that within six months of receiving his American citizenship, he received a letter from North American Aviation, now Rockwell International. Although he had applied to several other companies, this one had not been on his list. After an interview, North American offered him a position running a section of its engineering laboratory....

It wasn't long before Diaz was called upon to enlist all his skills toward finding answers for major technical disasters. One was the 1967 fire aboard Apollo 13 during a pre-flight simulated launch, which took the lives of three astronauts following an explosion in the spacecraft's oxygen system. Diaz was named project manager for all the testing representing the engineering development laboratories.

Diaz explained that although these kinds of assignments can be very stressful for even the most seasoned professional, there are ways to cope with that stress. As head of an engineering organization currently numbering 3,500 engineers, Diaz deals with varying degrees of stress daily.

"You can imagine the amount of problems, and complaints, and stressful situations, both technical and administrative, we run into," he chuckled as he shook his head knowingly. "We have technical differences with our customers, who are also very qualified people. Engineers are very stubborn and when they believe in something, they often take the attitude, 'My way is the right way!' So, we can get into some impasses which we somehow always manage to resolve. Either we agree to disagree and it officially goes on record, or we come to an agreement by convincing each other," he explained.

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Professional Profile:

Source: [People \(hispanicengineer.com\)](http://People.hispanicengineer.com)

A Personal Perspective on Jorge Diaz:

By Gerald Blackburn

“ Make more right decisions than wrong ones! “ - Jorge Diaz , 1982

There are some people who come into your life that you just realize are going to be very special. I first met Jorge at a job interview in Downey Ca. at the Space and Information Systems Division of North American Aviation. He immediately struck an impression with me as someone who was your friend. There was a suave aristocratic persona about him that was almost elegant. And yet he was as easy to talk to as your grandfather. Jorge impressed me on so many different levels and instantly became my mentor. We shared a background and interest in metallurgy but I would discover later it was his management and leadership skill that attracted me. His greatest counsel and gift to me was during a trip to the KSC in Florida. We were involved in the critical task of resolving the TPS problems of the Space Shuttle Columbia and after a long stressful day on site were returning to Cape Canaveral. I asked Jorge if in his career experience as a manager there was one particular lesson learned he could share with me. He reflected for just a few seconds then said, “ Yes, the most important thing you can do is remember to make more right decisions than wrong ones. “ At that moment I realized just how deep and complex his leadership skill really was and that he was the right choice for my mentorship.

If you are a true leader you will be making decisions constantly and not all of them will be the right ones or successful. Being human means being fallible. There is no one who has never made a mistake or failed. Mistakes and failures are a critical part of our learning experience, it is the way we learn to move forward and achieve success by discovering the productive pathways.