

Director's Perspective: Judging Ourselves

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One of the less appealing aspects of managing an organization is dealing with complaints. Few of us enjoy listening to other people complain, and we are exceedingly clever at devising strategies for putting distance between ourselves and the complaint: countering incorrect assertions, penning witty replies, and avoiding them altogether through judicious delegation. Rarely do we admit the virtue of using complaints as a window into our organizations and their impacts on the world around us. Yet precisely this revelation that is most useful about listening to people's disaffection with our work, and the process sometimes provides insight into larger forces at work in the culture of science.

The vast majority of the complaints I receive are related to failed proposals for time on the Hubble Space Telescope, a commodity that I – at least in principle – have sole authority to grant. My sympathies usually lie with the authors of such letters, since a large fraction of the proposals we turn down are truly excellent (see my column of March 2002). There is really little I can do to increase the amount of time available, and this kind of complaint just goes with the job. But increasingly there is a trend about these complaints best highlighted by one particular letter that made two assertions about our process: first, that the peer review panel consisted of intellects far inferior to the author's and therefore incapable of appreciating the proposal (this was actually a plausible if arrogant assertion, since the author is an accomplished scientist), and, second, that the author would never agree to participate in one of our peer reviews. The juxtaposition of these two statements looked like excellent grist for a Director's Perspective.

Our peer review systems depend on the good will of eminent scientists to sit on our peer panels and judge the work of their colleagues. Most are incredibly busy and might have better things to do. If the above-cited author expressed feelings widespread among our colleagues, we would be unable to recruit people for the hard job of peer review, and that would cause a crisis. We would have to devise compulsory mechanisms for service, just as we have for jury duty, or we would revert to the system whereby directors made the decisions with inadequate input. I for one would hate to be in that position.

Indeed, we began to have real problems recruiting people to participate in the Cycle 13 time allocation panels. Normally, the majority of people we ask to serve respond positively. This year, the majority turned us down. We work hard to recruit good people, and I am confident that our panels will be excellent, but I worry that we will have an increasingly difficult time in future cycles. In addition to the review of Hubble proposals, the community now has to review Chandra proposals and, shortly, SIRTf proposals as well. Add these to the large number of new ground-based facilities that demand reviewers' time—the ESO VLTs, the Gemini telescopes, the public part of the Keck telescopes, and eventually new radio facilities such as ALMA—and it becomes clear that astronomers will spend half their time writing proposals and the other half judging the proposals of their colleagues. Only the first task serves their self-interest.

In the case of Hubble, this worry is currently confined to a few people at the Institute with the responsibility to fill the Hubble panels with experts over the whole range of astrophysics. It will soon become your worry, too. We must preserve our system of peer review to keep our observatories healthy, to ensure that we filter ideas in the best way we can, given the vagaries of human judgment in the first place. It is important that we make the task of serving on peer panels desirable enough to make sure that the author I cited earlier is simply wrong in the assertion that our panels cannot judge the best ideas.

I would welcome your ideas on how we can avoid a crisis in our peer system. We have been talking about creative ways to improve the acceptance rate, many of them obvious and most controversial. I would like to know what you think.

Please take the time to send me an e-mail with your thoughts about peer review and how we can ensure it continues to function well. I promise to extract some of the better ideas and publish them in this column to stimulate open discussion; perhaps we'll mount a debate using the internet.

Of course, I reserve the right not to respond to the overly witty, cynical, or even outrageous comments, although I hope you send them to me anyway. Those may provide material for my next after-hours get together with fellow managers as we hone our public relations skills and practice using complaints as a window to the world.