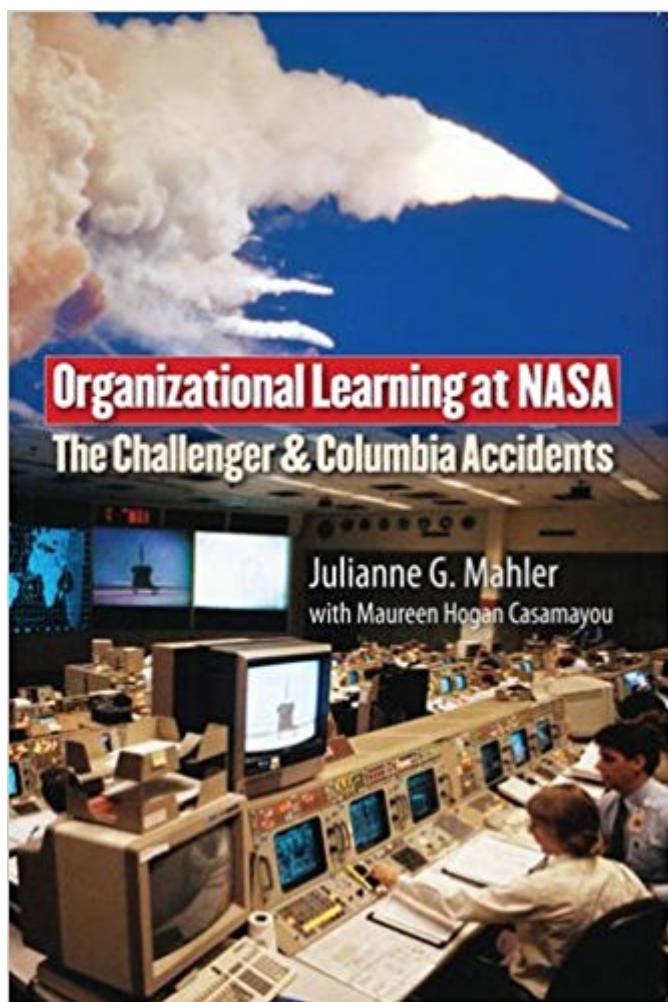


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# Organizational Learning At NASA: The Challenger And Columbia Accidents (Public Management And Change)



## **Synopsis**

Just after 9:00 a.m. on February 1, 2003, the space shuttle Columbia broke apart and was lost over Texas. This tragic event led, as the Challenger accident had 17 years earlier, to an intensive government investigation of the technological and organizational causes of the accident. The investigation found chilling similarities between the two accidents, leading the Columbia Accident Investigation Board to conclude that NASA failed to learn from its earlier tragedy. Despite the frequency with which organizations are encouraged to adopt learning practices, organizational learning—especially in public organizations—is not well understood and deserves to be studied in more detail. This book fills that gap with a thorough examination of NASA's loss of the two shuttles. After offering an account of the processes that constitute organizational learning, Julianne G. Mahler focuses on what NASA did to address problems revealed by Challenger and its uneven efforts to institutionalize its own findings. She also suggests factors overlooked by both accident commissions and proposes broadly applicable hypotheses about learning in public organizations.

## **Book Information**

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"This book deepens our understanding of the complexities of learning processes in the public service context, but it should also be useful to all scholars of organizations and organizational learning for its detailed analysis of the non-learning and unlearning that occurred between the two disasters." •Administrative Science Quarterly"[Offers] a well-organized, lucid and informative

discussion both of organizational learning theory, and of relevant case details. It provides a well-balanced and evidence-based assessment of factors facilitating or inhibiting organizational learning processes. Moreover, this book is relatively unique in its case-based effort to refine and offer hypotheses relative to existing theory, while simultaneously providing practical insights for managers. The focus on underlying processes related to organizational learning is especially helpful because it renders the framework transferable across various public sector settings or events. Given the range of ongoing public sector concerns in complex and high risk areas such as health pandemics, nuclear proliferation and testing and international relations, this book will have broad relevance and appeal."•Management Learning"Mahler and Casamayou make new and creative use of the well-studied NASA case; surface novel insights about NASA as a public organization that enhances our understanding of the subtle and complex organizational and managerial circumstances surrounding these accidents; and extend our conceptual understanding of organizational performance, reform, and change. ... This is a rich re-analysis of the organizational and managerial context of the Challenger and Columbia accidents. ... Offers a very worthwhile set of theoretical improvements and practical lessons."•Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory

"This book's approach is interesting, very clearly presented, useful for researchers and students, and makes an important contribution to the field. I can see new and established scholars buying this book for its remarkably clear and insightful discussion of the ways in which we consider organizational learning and the things that prevent such learning from happening."•Thomas A. Birkland, William T. Kretzer Distinguished Professor of Public Policy, School of Public and International Affairs, North Carolina State University"For anyone interested in organizational learning, this book deserves attention. The authors identify and dissect the myriad factors influencing the Challenger and Columbia disasters, including NASA's decision making in a political setting."•W. Henry Lambright, The Maxwell School, Syracuse University"NASA learned some important safety-related lessons after the Challenger accident. This valuable book analyzes how this happened. But the subsequent un-learning of these lessons led up to the Columbia accident 17 years later. Mahler's account of that process makes the book all the more valuable."•Eugene Bardach, professor of public policy, Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley

Tragic accidents need not be total losses. "Organizational Learning at NASA: The Challenger &

"Columbia Accidents" is a discussion of whether NASA is truly learning from its mistakes. Both accidents were blamed on organizational failures which allowed technological failures. The authors ask if that's what caused the first, why did the second occur? Tracing what NASA truly did between the accidents and what has happened since the Challenger incident in 2003, "Organizational Learning at NASA" is an informed and informative critique of modern NASA, highly recommended.

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