



# PCM Under Cover

For the better part of four decades  
Dr Terrence McGuire served as NASA's lead  
psychiatrist for manned space flight. This article is a  
personal recount of his journey with NASA and how  
PCM accompanied him throughout the years.

Dr Terrence F. McGuire

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# PCM, UNDER COVER

TERENCE F. McGUIRE

The most valuable gift with which my fairy godmother endowed me was curiosity, a trait lavishly nurtured by my parents. When combined with endurance in pursuit of goals and unashamed honesty about the magnitude of one's own ignorance, for curious individuals life becomes an exciting treasure hunt, filled with child-like wonder about this world in which we live and about its inhabitants. It has been said that curiosity killed the cat. I believe instead that curiosity was framed, that it was ignorance that was responsible for the cat's demise. ...at least that was my feline about it. Our world is extravagantly supplied with magical stuff just waiting for us to become clever enough to discover them.

Curiosity led me to Taibi Kahler's door, to another adventurer animated by those things "curiouser and curiouser". I have had the pleasure of spending time with Nobel laureates and others with treasuries of specialized knowledge who either sought contact or accepted my invitation to share insights ... or to reflect on areas of obscurity. I must admit they were drawn less by my sparkling personality than by the unique problems of the research vineyard in which I labored. Again, curiosity. And they were generous in what they shared.

I needed a more effective communication mode with which to discuss behavioral issues with warriors and other skilled men of action, most of whom had a more marginal interest in matters psychologic. To offset the deficits I spent residence time with Eric Berne and Bob Goulding who taught me the extremely useful tools of Transactional Analysis. Dr. Kahler had received the Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award as a major TA contributor and had gone on to develop the separate discipline of the Process Communication Model®. Both Transactional Analysis and the Process Communication Model helped greatly in meeting the communication needs unique to my NASA duties. Though my Air Force research duties remained primary, I had been designated NASA's lead psychiatrist for manned space flight, one of the functions of which was screening astronaut candidates for evidence of any worrisome mental health issues. I felt the need to upgrade my skill set in evaluating highly-intelligent technically-skilled applicants who had a possible investment in obscuring any unattractive personal data.

I had a number of good things going for me in terms of the NASA assignment. I had been piloting aircraft since age of 15, instructed by an unconventional but extremely talented ex-barnstormer who "knew all the tricks". So I brought to the new job a life-long interest in aviation and very modest attainments as a civilian pilot. In terms of psychiatric background, I was the product of one of the finer psychiatric residences of the time and had done well enough to be invited to join their staff. Later, I became a board examiner for the American Board of Psychiatry. I was a well-grounded USAF Flight Surgeon, who had broad experience with the Air Force inventory of aircraft but had done the lion's share of his flying out of Fighter Test, whose test pilots I served as the unit's flight surgeon. My primary military assignment was an aerospace research billet, doing physiologic and psychophysiologic research on "hot" problems, including the transition to space. I had experienced the good fortune of some notable successes, including producing the first operationally practical pressure suit for combat operations at extreme altitudes, and the first operational cardiac pacemaker-defibrillator, built to protect volunteers for hazardous but necessary human research. So I had become a quiet but recognizable entity in the aerospace research community, with a low radar profile and a go-to reputation that fit NASA's need. I had combat and "black ops" experience and had actively engaged in productive

support activities with other arms of our military. I even knew a few of the astronauts from having flown with them in their test pilot halcyon days.

So I surfaced unobtrusively at NASA, having morphed over the years into a physiologist/flight surgeon/internist/psychiatrist/research wonk... and a very happy camper. I was Psychiatric Consultant to the USAF Surgeon General for Europe and the eastern half of the US and had been a participant on NASA's Scientific Advisory Board. I also had served as Deputy Surgeon for one of the air commands and knew the administrative ropes. Hey, was I prepared or what? Alas, pride cometh before the fall... often by mid-summer. My extended background did not fully prepare me for the task at hand. It takes a lot of education to realize how much you don't know, and I have learned there is great wisdom in acknowledged ignorance. It not only protects you from sustained error, it also invites you down the path of discovery.

So when I began to hear a few of those "*how's this guy going to react if the hatch seal starts to squeal when he's 150 miles straight up*" type questions, I knew I had "miles to go before I sleep". The field of resilience was yet to be so-designated, and Resilience 101 was not on anyone's transcripts. Mining the world literature did not unearth the nuggets I sought. But while on my expeditions into the behavioral science wilderness I encountered a native of unique ability and depth of knowledge ("Dr Kahler, I presume") who was to share with me a treasury of insights on personality structure and behavioral prediction... and to become a dear friend.

I invited Taibi to participate in an astronaut selection cycle (1977). It had been my habit to spend 1.5-2 hours with each of the hardy candidates who had already survived a rigorous qualification review before being invited to come to NASA-Houston for round two of this process. During the interviews Dr. Kahler sat quietly in a corner of the room and after the first ten minutes or so he would make a brief note on a pocket tablet and let it slide gently to the floor. When we compared notes after the interviewee had left, Taibi's note showed he had acquired more pertinent information in a few minutes than I had in an hour plus. I was hooked. I cheerfully became the student of a remarkable young guru. Of all the learning opportunities that have been strewn in my path, I count the time spent under Taibi's friendfluence as the most pragmatically valuable.

When you act as a consultant, the determinants of your path are multifactorial ( a word offered to comfort the perfectionists amongst us). What is the nature of the institution? Does the institutional culture differ from the norm? With what spectrum of personnel will you interact? And what are their special needs or sensitivities? How can your activity best be tailored to meet both administrative goals and the practical needs of the target group? What is the burden of the message to be carried and what authentic features of the messenger are likely to be facilitory ... or off-putting.

It is to be remembered that NASA is basically an engineering institution, and that engineers are seldom preoccupied with matters behavioral unless they gum up the engineering problem. They are more engrossed with the removal of engineering glitches than with psychodynamics. Additionally, NASA very much needed public support and they were chary about any visible blemishes or the hint of need for anything other than standard support measures. Ergo, they were not primed to publically embrace something like PCM.

Military pilots are a bit leary of physicians. Doctors have the capacity to take from them what they value most, their ability to fly. Commonly it takes time, skill at your trade (a big item), honesty

and flexibility to be accepted on a personal level. An ample slice of non-assaultive humor helps. But you need to earn your spurs.

As noted earlier, I generally maintain a relatively low radar image, but it is valuable to have enough “neutral” visibility to be accepted as a legitimate non-threatening presence on the campus. I was free to roam the local NASA terrain unfettered. From the choices available, I selected an office away from Flight Medicine and off the usual beaten paths because pilots, especially those belonging to elite groups, are reluctant to be identified as seeking psychiatric aid. But it was not a secret that I was open to informal contact outside of Flight Medicine registration. Some of the very best and least defensive chose to explore curiosities as well as personal issues even when not distressed, but that was not the usual case. It was not uncommon for me unofficially to see personnel in their homes after hours.

Administratively, the astronauts were expected to have non-controversial public images. For years marital conflicts were submerged and divorces did not occur. Jack Lousma, a much-admired “straight arrow” astronaut's astronaut, is blessed with an intelligent, warm, empathic wife, Gratia, (so appropriately named), who became a natural mother-hen mentor for younger NASA wives. She quietly organized a wife's group which I served as consultant-teacher. It was an informal group where sensitive topics were openly engaged and was held unobtrusively in secure home environments off the reservation. I used Taibi's Process Communication Model & Transactional Analysis as my primary modalities for teaching solid behavioral principles. Individual sessions apart from the group were available. The group had longevity, it proved an effective avenue for these wives to learn key PCM principles that helped them both individually and in their marriages to spouses who worked in a pressured environment.

Over the years I have become quite eclectic in both my clinical and teaching activities, tailoring the approach to the needs of the individual and to his or her character rather than using the one – size – fits – all mode to which the already troubled individual must subsequently adapt. I have found much to admire in analytic theory (*Psychoanalytic Diagnosis, Edition 2*, and *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, both by Nancy McWilliams, are real winners, not requiring a major technical background to read). The unconventional methods of Fritz Pearles, who wrote *In And Out Of The Garbage Pail*, wildly different from commonly accepted paths, can be quite successful with a subgroup inaccessible to more common approaches, but is sometimes difficult for the more inhibited therapist to employ. So I have gradually become a therapeutic carnivore, digesting and selectively applying whatever mode seemed to match the individual's need, still influenced heavily at core by the PCM personality compass. Talking Swahili to a Swede is likely to be far less rewarding than engaging him in his native tongue...ya betcha.

In evaluating astronaut candidates I constructed a single-page report geared to describing the general character of the individual (base & phase, notable strengths & vulnerabilities, prime motivators/major psychological needs), an ordering of most effective and most aversive management styles to which he would likely respond, a rank ordering of communication channel preferences, potential distress sequences along with triggers and early warning signs, perception sequence (thought/feelings/action), compatibility with other personality types, and preferred environment mileau (team vs solo, external vs internal motivation). It ended with a general suitability rating for astronaut duty (four levels, from excellent to serious reservations) and a few explanatory comments if indicated. The report was meant to be a user-friendly single-page summary of the man's character, strengths and vulnerabilities, and interpersonal style, plus suggestions to aid management in paths to maximize his

potential. The utility of these reports was intended to go beyond astronaut selection and into duty assignments.

My evaluation form had much in common with that described in the recently released book, *Parley-vous Personality* by Collignon, Legrand, and Parr. No surprise. Both forms were based on Kahler's PCM. A tip of the sombrero to the authors of this opus. It is a beautifully constructed guide to PCM, a must-have for any serious student of the craft.

Longevity at NASA also gave me the opportunity to validate anticipated phase changes in individual astronauts; I was blessed with unobtrusive observational access over the entire length of many an astronaut career... a remarkable educational opportunity. (I note that I have used the word "unobtrusive" repeatedly; it is singularly appropriate to my function within the NASA milieu.)

For the better part of four decades I served as NASA's lead psychiatrist for manned space flight, spending about twenty percent of my professional time on the turf of NASA-Houston. My interactions within NASA went far beyond the astronauts and Flight Medicine, at both a casual social and at an off-record problem resolution level. I became privy to many of the subtle undercurrents of the institution and to a number of veiled intrigues. It is disarming, as the Venus de Milo might note, what people will share unsolicited if they have a need and if they trust you... and if your past counsel has lead them to become more effective in their own personal interactions.

I have spent long periods submerged in academic settings both as student and teacher, have served as an adviser to business and industry, been at some point a consultant to hierarchy of each of our country's major religious groups, functioned in the military in both normal and covert operations... and what has this diversity taught me?

Though stated goals and occupational activity differ, they all have the same cast of characters. Even in religious groups espousing compassion and acceptance you will find the deceitful, control-oriented aspirant for a position of greater power...a wolf in sheep's clothing (sometimes misleading other sheep who remain clothed in their official sheep's apparel). Similarly, you may experience the empathic warrior who, even in the heat of battle, lends aid to a disarmed but bleeding enemy combatant. Life's a people business, and I have found PCM not only the best flashlight to illuminate dark interpersonal pathways, but also to clarify the better options for rendering support.

I used PCM in many ways in my effort to serve NASA. For example, using PCM-derived insights, on a small number of occasions I informed select personnel in charge of individual missions that there existed a potential for a significant conflict within a designated crew. Most commonly, the team member felt to be a focus of disharmony had been appointed primarily for political reasons, home-grown or as a gesture to a friendly allied nation. The response was commonly in the "that's not an engineering problem, that's in your ballpark" vein. Crewman replacement was not entertained by those with the power to do so. Having dutifully reported my concerns, I was now free both to alert the mission commander and to coach (again unobtrusively) the more vulnerable crew member I felt could use some help in thwarting the anticipated gamey activity or the friction of the discordant personality. Basically, I used PCM to improve skills at "verbati", the verbal art of self defense, and a combination of game theory, transactional analysis, and PCM to upgrade skills at avoiding enmeshment in the unhealthy games of others. Following the only flight wherein the predicted friction did not become visible, I encountered the man I had coached in a quiet corridor on his return to NASA-Houston. His response to my friendly "How'd it go?" greeting was to stop briefly and in thoughtful silence before

responding, “One more day and I'd have killed him”. (He was an over-kill Persister, unmodified, and his antagonist had strong Rebel and Promoter components.) Conflicts amongst hard-working and physically uncomfortable crew, in a confined space surrounded by major external threats, with no place else to go to avoid an antagonist...is more than an inconvenience. It's like being required to spend an uncomfortable week in itchy woolen long-johns while you need simultaneously to be highly focused on other demanding tasks.

PCM, both within NASA and in daily activity has become for me like McGyver's Swiss army knife, always with me and endlessly useful.

Now if PCM is such great shakes, why not trumpet that NASA success to encourage use of such a valuable technique by other investigators and therapists? First, and as underlined earlier, my position at NASA was that of a technically competent consultant supplying a support service that publicly verged on superfluous, like being the designated dance director for the local cemetery (“lots of people under me, but no complaints from them”). The public facade of wholesome behavioral stability in the astronaut corps was to be maintained. Institutional embarrassments were to be avoided. Discussion of the use of techniques such as PCM might imply a need the institutional posture denied. It could also catalyze further limitations on other worthy behavioral activities.

Secondly, NASA eschewed being a publicity vehicle for products. Remember the transient but rather zealous advertising campaign for Tang, a refreshing in-flight libation used early in the program...rapidly followed by cessation of use by NASA and sudden abandonment of that brief but vigorous advertising campaign.

A third, and major, element to my muted activities was that it allowed me to be more effective in dealing with the usual byzantine machinations of institutional hierarchy. It was advantageous not to attract unnecessary attention that might energize antagonists to impede even very neutral activities. The serious “unfriendlies” of which I became aware at NASA fell into two general categories. There was a small cadre who reason to view me as an impediment to their personal agendas. And there were several (one within NASA and several outside) who harbored their own aspirations to become lead psychiatrist for manned space flight.

Permit me a digression... I digress a lot. The usual shrink's eye view of manipulators contains all of the following:

- 1) A conflict of goals exists between the manipulator and his institution or significant other.
- 2) The behavior is deliberate...intentionality.
- 3) The deception is deliberate also, evolved to cover or further the deceit.
- 4) Absence of guilt
- 5) A sense of triumph over having put something over on others. Characteristically, they have contempt rather than compassion for those they've deceived or to whom they've done some form of grievous harm. They feel the one-upsmen glow.

If such people are able to lever themselves into positions of power, they frequently cultivate a chain of others who receive rewards for their services but manage to get their hands just dirty enough that they cannot later become “a witness for the prosecution” without simultaneously indicting themselves. A carefully constructed information network is commonly deployed, sometimes by bringing aboard a surfeit of others under his control, presumably being prepared for a future need, but

in the meantime farming them out to other key departments as gratuitous help (“help” who innocently keep the generous gifter aware of what’s cooking in those other departments). Sometimes the clusterings at mid-morning coffee breaks are used as office gossip listening posts, primarily as a friendly listener; rare inquiries are more likely to be about an authority figure’s management style rather than about his character, to target the type of data he seeks. This type does not limit himself to just one coffee group but casually sits in with many, gaining a broader scope of gossip while eschewing the type of group identification that might diminish returns with the alternate groups. The committed manipulator is not above bringing aboard an individual of training that duplicates that of a troublesome opponent, after careful screening of the applicant for personality traits that will allow for mutual; exploitation and guilt enmeshment. Such a person can be used to undercut the opposition and “to fool some of the people some of the time”. They are also useful as scapegoats, dirty hands and all, if some maneuver goes belly-up. Experienced behaviorists have seen all the above and more.

Be of good cheer. All is not dark. There are weeds in every garden. I remain convinced of the basic goodness of most of our peers, and their instinct to do the right thing. Personal power is seductive...but it can also be intimidating in the wrong hands. In response to attempted sabotage, after confronting the issue at hand I lean I the direction of the old Spanish motto, “Living well is the best revenge”. It helps me maintain an acceptable serf-view. Besides, it irritates the hell out of vengeful opponents who thrive on their ability to deliver a sustained negative impact. Eventually they will punish themselves.

Preemptively, I stress that what I describe here I not unique to NASA; it is not an uncommon institutional pattern. The struggle for power at high levels attracts not only the worthy but the unworthy. “Unworthy” here is not a reflection of a lack of technical expertise or business acumen, but of deficiencies in areas humanistic. Those enamored of power for power’s sake usually find it insufficient just to become the designated boss; not uncommonly, they feel the need to engage in games of domination and submission, the goal of which is to remind you they have the muscle, and at a deeper conscious or unconscious level, to compensate for feelings of inadequacy or rage generated in childhood.

In my tenure at NASA, reward or punishment for the individual astronaut depended largely on being responsive to the wishes of their prime controller, a person of unquestioned intelligence but with a rather Machiavellian view of issues ethical...”the end justifies the means and all that rot, don’t you know” (the residue of an English friend). Space mission crew assignments were the golden apple, the granting of which he controlled. Astronauts represent a highly select group of intelligent, well-trained, experienced, courageous, adventuresome individuals who would be Chiefs any place else rather than being cast in Indian Brave status at NASA. They have superior leadership abilities of their own and a strong tendency to state their views. When the golden apple of mission assignment is in the hands of a power merchant, both morale and productivity are at risk. A person of such convictions will often perform duty functions with notable skill when the work content does not impinge on their personal agenda. This, after all, helps them ascend the ladder of power, power which they can accumulate to such an extent that even their official superiors hesitate to oppose them for fear of retaliatory activity. Warren Buffett lauded the trait trio of integrity, intelligence, and energy in employees, but noted that without integrity the other two “can kill you”. Fortune 500 companies have been brought down by intelligent, ego-centric leaders.

I unobtrusively helped targets evade or off-set many unfair punitive activities generated by the

power merchant or be members of the team of enmeshed fellow travelers he had generated. I have related only a few expository examples, but the recounting of more would not serve the goals of this presentation. Though personally fascinating to me, the uses and the abuses of power will not be further addressed here except to offer two pertinent observations. Number one, PCM was a formidable tool in facilitating the effective defenses taught those who found themselves pressured inappropriately under the gun. Number two, I was told by a highly placed insider that the reason I wasn't vengefully destroyed by the powerful administrator in question was that my mission support and behavioral predictions were the most utilitarian they'd ever experienced... and that helped the wayward administrator look good. I was more valuable alive than dead.

Because of widespread unofficial contacts at all levels of NASA, top to bottom, and into various alcoves within the Washington beltway, I became privy to some remarkably dark episodes. Of these confidences I have remained largely silent unless I could meaningfully support their off-set. Manipulators of the type I have described are notoriously vengeful and have elephantine memories. They make dangerous enemies. In the process of opposition to highly arbitrary or vengeful activity, I have run some risks and sustained some notable scars, but suffer from no chronically painful or persistently suppurating wounds. I am grateful for the complex experience. No pressure, no diamonds. It was worth those risks. I have no hypertrophied need for the stimulation provided by conflict or chaos. I do admit I've always had a burr under my saddle about bullies and have not been slow to lend support to the intended victims position. Ever notice how bullies often travel in small packs, mutually covering with their numbers the denied inadequacy resident at their individual cores? Fortunately, I learned early the wisdom of rendering help rather than inappropriate rescue. I also recognize I harmonize strongly with those who place high value on personal integrity both in self and others. I need to be able to give a smiling thumbs-up to that hombre I see in the mirror every morning while shaving.

Today NASA is run by a talented ex-astronaut for whom I had much respect when he was mission-active.... one of the good guys, Charlie Bolden, who went on to become a four star Marine Corp general after taking a hiatus from NASA. Most of the major perpetrators of mischief to whom I have alluded have been quietly purged from the system.

I watched NASA's remarkable start, with solid, transparent leadership ("solid" and "transparent" each stand on their own here; "solid transparent" is not used as an oxymoron). That grammatical gaffe aside, there were honest leaders plus highly motivated young engineers tackling complex problems never before even posed. I was told Nixon viewed NASA as a Kennedy creation and, not being a Kennedy aficionado, bureaucratized the institution, to his need. It's had many a struggle, and as blame-shifters oft intone, "mistakes have been made"... but it has achieved much. I have focused here on some of the negatives within NASA because problem resolution is the grist of this presentation. That is not meant to denigrate NASA or its leadership. Manipulative followers of Machiavelli exist within all major institutions, particularly the more high powered ones, and the dangers of faulty leadership as described can sometimes go uncorrected far too long. In most human institutions, you will encounter the full spectrum of personnel from the heroic honest achiever to the self-serving manipulator. There are good men aboard in NASA... trying to maintain the course on a turbulent political and economic sea. NASA's a bit like that treasured uncle who drinks too much... he's not perfect but we still love him.

Have a good day, unless you have alternate plans. Or better yet, have whatever kind of day you want.