

ICI VIEWPOINTS

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How Astronaut Jerry Linenger Found Strength, Perspective During His 132 Days in Space

Captain Jerry Linenger has been around the world more than a few times—literally. As a retired US Navy flight surgeon and NASA astronaut posted on Russian space station Mir, he's seen it all. But you don't have to go in to space to benefit from Linenger's insight—he had plenty of wisdom to share with attendees of ICI's 60th annual General Membership Meeting (GMM), held in Washington, DC, from May 22–24.

Be Prepared, Build Core Competencies

Linenger stressed how important it is to be prepared, and to build deep competencies. In addition, he told the audience, leaders must ensure that all of the individuals in an organization master the skills they need, because these individuals are the “core components” that make up that organization. To prove his point, he related several incidents in which deep knowledge saved his life, and the lives of his colleagues.

“The master alarm going off is a bad day in space—it's like the markets crashing,” he explained. Before he was stationed on Mir, Linenger said, he had never heard a master alarm of any consequence on space flights—but on Mir, there would be several each day.

In space, he said, there are so many things that can go wrong: once, for example, the computers didn't correctly line the space station up with the sun to charge the batteries. “If you want to see real blackness—we were up on the dark side of the earth, tumbling without power, untethered in space.”

While acknowledging that no one in the audience had likely experienced anything like this, he said that everyone had experienced some kind of crisis—and when it does, people tend to seek out people they trust, create a plan, and execute it together. When it works out, he said, it creates a sense of accomplishment that brings teams together and keeps them going every day, no matter the challenges.

Find Your Inner Strength

On another day, the master alarm alerted the Mir astronauts to a fire in the cabin. This would have been dangerous in and of itself, but the fire also threatened to explode some oxygen canisters, which could have pierced the hull of the ship. In the face of this catastrophe, Linenger recalled, two things happened: he thought of his pregnant wife and young child, and regretted that he might not have more time to spend with them.

But then his training kicked in. He said that when he looked at the flames and thought about seeing his boy again, he “dug deep” and found an inner strength that helped him respond. That’s something that’s inside every human being, he argued. We each can do so much more than what we might think is our hardest. When something really means so much, he said, barriers disappear. “I learned when I was on Mir how much I had within myself,” he said. “I always looked at others and wondered if I would ever have what they had. I didn’t know until I was tested just how much I could do.”

“The adaptability of a human being is unbelievable,” Linenger continued. “Our ability to change, to adapt is a blessing. It’s what sets human beings apart. If I can adapt to space, you can adapt to anything.”

Gain Some Perspective, Cherish Your Loved Ones

Another thing that Linenger learned from this near-death experience? Move on. When you go to bed at night, he said, just leave whatever happened behind, recharge your batteries, and get ready for the next day’s challenge. You can’t afford to waste energy on something that happened yesterday. All you can do is to learn from it, and keep moving forward.

Linenger told the audience about his respect for the complicated products and processes in the fund industry—but then asked attendees to imagine how hard it was to land the space shuttle. The audience laughed, and then Linenger got a little more serious. How many of you, he asked, have thought about each breath of air that you’ve taken today? His experience has given him a different perspective on things, he said. “I try to get up every day, and take a breath, and count my blessings.”

Linenger got even more personal at the end of his remarks. At work and in your personal life, he said, it’s important to know what’s important to you, and to always let others know how much they mean to you. He urged the audience to “put your arms around your kids, your grandkids, and tell them they can be anything they set their minds to. Be a role model—gain and earn their respect, and leave something behind.” He reminded the audience of his regrets during his near-death experience, and urged the crowd to learn from his mistake.