

# The Top Performers

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**The Top Performer:** Gerald (Gerry) D. Griffin

**Born:** Christmas Day 1934

**Who is Griffin?** Former Director of the Johnson Space Center in Houston, 1982-1986. A former NASA Flight Controller and Flight Director. Lead Flight Director for Apollo 12, 15 and 17 lunar missions. Was part of the Mission Control team for all manned Gemini and Apollo missions.

## The Top Performers' Master Course in Minutes on Gerry Griffin:

- Found a **role model/mentor** early on in his older brother Ken. Was focused and disciplined on following in his brother's example.
- Decided early on it was necessary to **take risks** in his **career** to have the best chance for advancement. This included taking new positions about every four years.
- Realized he thrived on pressure at NASA and succeeded through attention to **detail** and challenging himself and his team to be as perfect as possible. The pursuit of **perfection**.

## Griffin's Thought Process Through Selected Quotes:

### On Managing Spaceflight Risk

*"There is an inherent risk with space flight. My primary job at NASA was **managing risk**...You're in a high-risk environment, so the problem is you can't get it to zero risk. You've got to be **as perfect as you possibly can** to keep the risk as low as you can get it."*

### On Staying Young, Active and in Business at Age 89

*"I'm still doing it best when I'm **learning new things** and expanding my knowledge base...I'm still busy, even this late in my very active career...I've just kept going and going and going, and it's kept my **mind** in the game. That's what I think has led to my **successes** and **longevity**."*

### On Being Happy and Productive in Your Work

*"If you're not happy doing what you're doing, you're in the wrong business."*

### On The Nature of Leadership

*"Leaders really do inspire people. They have to manage some people too, but they're inspirational; they inspire."*

### On Managing People

*"You hold people accountable but give them the responsibility. Then you turn them loose and let them run. And then they'll take you to the moon and beyond."*

## The Top Performers Gerry Griffin Success Formula:

Choose A Mentor+Taking Career Risks+Pursuit of Perfection+Continuous Learning =  
**Gerry Griffin**

# The Top Performers Profile:

## Gerry Griffin

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*Gerry Griffin, 1970*

### **Gerry Griffin Followed His Flight Plan and Made his Mark At NASA Griffin Joined NASA In Its Early Years and Helped It Reach the Moon and Stars**

Gerry Griffin never went to the moon, but he was instrumental in helping to put men *on* the moon.

And, just as importantly, getting them back safely to the earth.

Griffin, educated as an aeronautical engineer, began his career with NASA in 1964. After serving as a Mission Control Flight Controller and then a Flight Director, Griffin eventually became the Director of the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center in Houston in 1982.

Of all the jobs Griffin, 89, has had, his favorite was being a Flight Director in Mission Control. He thrived on being one of NASA's Mission Control leaders responsible for the astronauts' safety and lives. The job required tremendous preparation and attention to detail. With space flight, there is no margin for error.

"Being a flight director was pressure, but I loved it, Griffin said to *The Top Performers*. "I loved being in that position and the problem solving that was required, with a lot of help. It was exhilarating and so satisfying when you finally got it all to work."

It all worked very well on July 20, 1969; the day men landed on the moon for the first time. Griffin was a Flight Director on that legendary mission, Apollo 11. After Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin touched down at 4:18 p.m. EST, Griffin remembers walking out of the building with a colleague and gazing up at the moon.

*"We just stopped," Griffin recalled, "and both of us looked at it and I said, 'do you realize we got Neil and Buzz sitting up there and Mike Collins orbiting around the moon.' And we kind of looked at each other and said, 'good gosh, we've done it!' Now of course we weren't ready to celebrate quite yet because we still had to get them home."*

Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon, at 10:56 p.m. EST on July 20. On July 21 at 7:42 p.m. EST, Armstrong and Aldrin departed the moon, re-docked with the command module and the three astronauts made it home safely and to a heroes' welcome.



Gerry Griffin, left, Apollo 11 Splashdown, Mission Control

Of the six manned moon landings, Griffin was the Flight Director responsible, along with his “Gold team,” for the lunar landings of Apollo’s 14, 16 and 17. He was part of the leadership team for all of the Apollo manned missions including Apollo 13 — April 11-17, 1970.

When Apollo 13’s service module’s oxygen tank ruptured on the way to the moon, the planned lunar landing had to be aborted and a desperate survival mission ensued. (The life and death challenges of the mission and the ingenuity required after the accident to keep the astronauts alive is depicted in the acclaimed film “Apollo 13,” in which Griffin was a technical advisor.)

Apollo 13 has been called a “successful failure” since all three astronauts returned to earth safely. In addition, valuable experience was gained by NASA in overcoming the challenges of keeping the astronauts alive after the accident.

Griffin offers an interesting perspective on “unlucky” Apollo 13; it was actually very lucky the accident happened on the way to the moon. If it had happened after landing on the moon, the crew wouldn’t have been able to use the lunar module as a “life boat” and would have perished.



*Gerry Griffin, left, Apollo 13 Splashdown, Mission Control*

*"There is an inherent risk with space flight," Griffin said. "People have asked me, 'What was your primary job in NASA?' And I say, it was managing risk — trying to drive it as low as you can. You're in a high-risk environment, so the problem is you can't get it to zero risk. So, you've got to be as perfect as you possibly can to keep the risk as low as you can get it."*

Griffin credits the teams at NASA as being wired to tackle those challenges.



*Apollo 13 Flight Directors with Pres. Nixon. Griffin, third from right, Gene Kranz to fourth from right.*

## **"Retirement"**

Griffin retired from NASA in 1986 when he was still only 52 years of age. But Griffin only retired from NASA. He's never actually retired.

Griffin has held many senior level leadership positions in the private sector since 1986. Among those positions were serving as CEO of the Greater Houston Chamber of Commerce, Managing Director of Korn/Ferry International's Houston office, a Senior Consultant for Korn/Ferry and Chairman of the Board of public company.

Hollywood has also come calling for his expertise: Among the films Griffin has been a technical advisor for in addition to "Apollo 13" are "Contact," "Deep Impact" and "Fly Me to the Moon."

Even today, Griffin, at 89 years old, is a technical and management consultant. He regularly speaks all over the world about the aerospace business and was recently in London, Switzerland and Australia.

*"I'm still doing it best when I'm learning new things and expanding my knowledge base," Griffin said. "I think the tendency as you get older is to stop learning and shut down. I'm still busy, even this late in my very active career."*

And he's always still up for an adventure or challenge: *"People ask me, 'Would you go on a space mission?' I said, 'Well, of course if somebody would invite me, I'm gone.' I'd love to go to space."*

*"I've just kept going and going and going, and it has kept my mind in the game," Griffin said. "And that's what I think has led to my successes and longevity."*

## **Lifting Off**

Griffin and his twin brother Larry came into the world as 1934 Christmas Day gifts to their parents in Athens, Texas. They had an older brother by nine and a half years, Ken.

The boys lost their mother to cancer when Gerry was only 12. While their father was a rock of stability who set an example of honesty and integrity, Gerry and Larry got their drive and career inspiration from older brother Ken.

During World War II Ken became a U.S. Army air corps pilot, flying B17s. By the time Ken was fully trained in 1944, the war was winding down. Ken never saw action overseas and was stationed in the U.S. His orders were to fly B17s returned from Europe, which were initially housed at bases on the east coast, and then fly them to bases in West Texas and Arizona.

One particular time Ken had a layover in Fort Worth and went to the family home there for the evening. The next morning Ken took his eager 10-year-old brothers to the base to see a B17. Gerry and Larry watched Ken, who was the commander, go through the check list and start the plane's engines.

*"I was immediately hooked," Griffin recalled, "and so was Larry. We instantly knew this is what we wanted to do, join the military and become pilots."*

Gerry and Larry immediately focused on that goal. When they were in junior high, they joined the Junior ROTC, and then in high school, the ROTC.

The twins also became Eagle Scouts at 16, because Ken had been one. And on the day, they got their badges, Ken surprised them at the ceremony and awarded the badges to his brothers.

*"Ken was a mentor," Griffin said.*

Upon graduating from Texas A&M in 1956 with a BS degree in Aeronautical engineering, Gerry was commissioned as an officer in the Air Force, as was Larry.

### **The Flight Path To NASA**

Gerry Griffin wasn't able to become an Air Force pilot because his vision in one eye was slightly off. He was trained as a navigator and then as a radar intercept operator to be on flight crews.

After his four-year enlistment came to an end in 1960, Griffin left active duty and began his aerospace career. His first civilian position was as a systems engineer and flight controller at the USAF Satellite Test Center in Sunnyvale, California.

Griffin was especially inspired by President John F. Kennedy's famous speech to Congress in May 1961 where he called for the United States to "commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth."

And with that, the space race versus the Soviet Union was on.

*"I started knocking on NASA's door, and it took me a while to get in, but when I did, it was the best decision I ever made in my life," Griffin said. "Had I been a military pilot, I probably would've made a career in the Air Force, like Larry did (who retired as a Colonel after a 30-year career). But NASA was for me. And so that's why I jumped at it."*

Griffin joined NASA in 1964. His first position was as a flight controller in Mission Control, Houston, for Project Gemini. In 1968 Griffin, at 33 years old, was promoted to a Mission Control Flight Director.

Griffin says his progression through NASA after being a flight director was fueled by his flexibility and willingness to take career risks. Taking risks was something Griffin observed his well-meaning father didn't do career-wise, and decided not to follow suit.

He understood his father was a product of the Great Depression and valued safety and security in a job. But for Griffin, *"somehow, I got it in my DNA that you've got to take risks in your career. I remember thinking, I don't want to be like my Dad in that way."*

### **Going Boldly Where He Hadn't Before**

*"I was willing to make moves and take risks in my career," he said. "Many people at NASA were not. They didn't want to relocate."*

After spending eight years at Mission Control in Houston, Griffin was asked by the deputy administrator of NASA, George Low, to go to Washington D.C. and become

NASA's head of legislative affairs. One aspect of his mission was to get the Space shuttle funded. Griffin had some initial trepidation as the position was usually filled by an attorney, but took on the assignment and succeeded.

After four years in that position, Griffin wanted to get back to his aeronautical engineering and space roots and became the Deputy Director of the Hugh F. Dryden Flight Research Center in California, and then became the deputy director of the John F. Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

When he came back from those other positions to Houston in 1982, it was as the director of the entire Johnson Space center. He felt "all of that experience broke me out of the pack." He especially felt that about the legislative position because he learned more about the funding side and how things operated administratively.

*"I had gone off to those other positions and been willing to uproot my wife and kids, which was not easy on them," Griffin said. "I didn't think of it that way at the time. It just felt like the right thing to do career-wise."*

## **Following and Leading**

In his positions at NASA, he learned for the first time there was a difference between leaders and managers.

*"Leaders really do inspire people," Griffin said. "They have to manage some people too, but they're inspirationalists; they inspire."*

NASA and Mission Control was the ultimate team environment.

*"We seldom use the pronoun 'I,' it just didn't exist," Griffin said. "It was 'We are going to do this' and 'We did this.' Even if an astronaut did it, the guys in mission control referred to it as we did it. Or if we did something on the ground, the astronauts said we did it. That's the kind of team we had."*

Griffin said NASA in those days put great trust and faith in the team members on the front lines, regardless of age or experience.

*"All of our management decisions in those days were pushed down," Griffin explains. "We didn't elevate them up to a corporate level. We pushed decisions down to where the expertise was. We wanted the expertise to be the coming from the ones that made the decisions. And that came with a level of trust all the way down from the leaders, through the senior managers, down into the next level of managers, down to the daily troops."*

Besides the many examples shown in the movie "Apollo 13," Griffin cites one from Apollo 12. He was the Flight Director on duty during the launch and about 40 seconds into liftoff, the ship was struck by lightning and the crew's cockpit went very dim.

Twenty-four-year-old flight controller John Aaron said to Griffin to tell the crew “SCE to AUX.” That sounded Greek to Griffin, who’d never heard of the switch but he trusted Aaron. Griffin relayed the message to the Capcom, who communicates directly with the crew, and he’d never heard of the switch either. In the spacecraft Commander Peter Conrad said “what the hell is that?”

But crewman Al Bean, who would be the fourth man to walk on the moon, had. Bean flipped the switch and Apollo 12 had all its data back.

*“John Aaron’s call saved the mission,” Griffin said. “It was done by a call from a young man who I trusted, to a Capcom who trusted me, to a commander who trusted us. And that’s the way a team works. I knew John Aaron knew every bit of that system.”*

*“It was incredible how fast we could make things happen doing it that way, rather than elevating every decision up to some guru sitting at the top that wasn’t nearly as knowledgeable or smart on the subject as those guys down in the organization.”*

How fast? NASA fulfilled President Kennedy’s goal of putting a man on the moon by the end of the 1960’s—and had it done in just eight years.

*“What I learned about leadership and management that I took with me, from my early days at NASA all the way through NASA, and all the way through my time in the private sector,” Griffin said, “was this:*

*“You hold people accountable but give them the responsibility. You turn them loose and let them run. And then they’ll take you to the moon and beyond.”*



Gerry Griffin, Apollo 7, 1968

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