LAI Leading Authorities, Inc.

Joan Higginbotham

Retired NASA Astronaut, Rocket Scientist, Electrical Engineer, & Third African American Woman in Space

Breaking Barriers: An Astronaut's Inspiring Journey to Space. Joan Higginbotham didn't grow up dreaming of becoming an astronaut; her sights were set on a different frontier—pursuing a rewarding career as a successful electrical engineer. But when NASA came calling (literally), she answered. After spending nine years as a NASA rocket scientist, Higginbotham was among 6,000 applicants and 122 interviewees for the astronaut candidate program. Initially, she wasn't selected. Refusing to take "no" for an answer, she doubled down on her determination, earning another graduate degree and ultimately being accepted into NASA's astronaut corps in 1996. In this inspiring talk, Higginbotham shares her incredible journey to becoming the third African American woman in space. Taking audiences aboard her STS-116 mission to the International Space Station, she highlights the pivotal role of preparation, passion, and perseverance in overcoming challenges. Through her story, she illustrates the power of embracing opportunities and breaking barriers, leaving audiences with lessons that transcend the boundaries between Earth and space.

Managing Stress in High-Stakes Environments. Retired NASA astronaut Joan Higginbotham knows what it takes to thrive under pressure. From working through critical moments in space to contributing to 53 space shuttle launches where the stakes couldn't be higher, Higginbotham draws from her extraordinary career to share strategies for staying composed and effective in high-pressure situations. She reveals how preparation, resilience, teamwork, and a solution-oriented mindset can transform challenges into opportunities. Through her engaging insights, audiences will learn how to navigate their own high-stakes moments with the confidence and focus of a seasoned astronaut.

Down to Earth: Elevating Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Impact. Since transitioning from her role as a NASA astronaut, Joan Higginbotham has become a leader in advancing corporate social responsibility (CSR). Drawing from her extensive experience—managing the Bioko Island Malaria Control Project at Marathon Oil, fostering community initiatives across the U.S., Canada, and Mexico at Lowe's, and spearheading CSR efforts at Collins Aerospace—Higginbotham offers actionable insights on building a compelling CSR identity. Using real-world examples, she highlights the importance of driving social impact within organizations, inspiring them to create meaningful change across industries and communities.

Unity, Collaboration, and Acceptance from an Astronaut's Perspective. Joan Higginbotham, the third African American woman to travel into space, draws on her experiences as part of the integrated crew (she refers to as the "mini–United Nations" crew) of Space Shuttle Discovery's STS-116 mission and her time aboard the International Space Station. In this transformative session, she shares how collaboration across differences can drive exceptional results, using her journey in space

as a backdrop for exploring the strength of unified teams working toward shared goals. Joan also delves into the profound insights gained through the “overview effect”—a cognitive shift in awareness from seeing Earth as one interconnected entity—which inspired her to embrace one of the most fundamental human challenges: accepting people as they are.