Literacy — Agencies: NASA

The space agency is the purest example in the federal market of one evaluation philosophy: technical merit dominates, almost to the exclusion of everything else. NASA's Source Evaluation Boards are famous for weighing the science and engineering so heavily that price and past performance become supporting cast. If you want to understand what "technical evaluation heavily weighted" really means, you study NASA. This profile maps the SEB process, the evaluation factors, and NASA's distinctive acquisition-innovation lane.

Culture: mission is the driver

NASA's mission is exploration and discovery — science, aeronautics, human spaceflight, and the technology that enables them. Everything the agency buys or funds traces to that mission, and the culture rewards **technical excellence, risk-tolerance for innovation, and mission passion**. Three durable facts:

1. **The mission comes first, always.** Evaluation language returns constantly to mission success, scientific return, and technical feasibility. Proposals that demonstrate deep technical command and a genuine plan for the mission read as credible; marketing-flavored proposals do not.
2. **It is a federation of centers.** NASA is the National Aeronautics and Space Administration of many centers — Ames, Armstrong, Glenn, Goddard, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Johnson, Kennedy, Langley, Marshall, Stennis — each with its own technical community and its own buying. As with DHS components, you pursue a *center* as often as the agency.
3. **It funds and it buys.** NASA runs a major SBIR/STTR program, a large science-research portfolio (grants and cooperative agreements for space and Earth science), and a substantial procurement of spacecraft, engineering services, and IT.

Source Evaluation Boards

The centerpiece of NASA's source selection is the **Source Evaluation Board (SEB)** — the formal body that evaluates proposals and reports to the decision-maker. The SEB is the NASA-flavored version of the evaluation team from doctrine/02, and it has a precise shape:

- The SEB is assembled for major source selections and evaluates each offeror against the published factors.
- The SEB **does not make the award decision**. It prepares findings — the **SEB report** — and presents them to the **Source Selection Authority (SSA)**, the official who actually decides. That two-layer separation (evaluators recommend; the authority decides) is a governance design worth understanding: the evaluation is documented and defensible, and the decision is a deliberate act, not a committee outcome.

- The SEB's work is anchored to the evaluation factors and subfactors published in the RFP — which is why, at NASA more than almost anywhere, **reading the evaluation factors is reading the whole game**.

Evaluation emphasis: technical weight

NASA's evaluation factors follow a distinctive and revealing pattern:

1. **Mission Suitability — the technical factor — is the only factor that is numerically weighted and scored**, typically on a 1,000-point scale, with subfactors (usually limited to a handful: technical approach, management approach, and sometimes small-business participation and safety). This is the factor that decides the selection.
2. **Cost/Price** is evaluated — for reasonableness and cost realism — but is **not numerically scored**. The agency is not choosing the cheapest credible proposal; it is choosing the best mission solution at a reasonable price.
3. **Relevant Experience and Past Performance** is assigned an adjectival rating but is **not numerically scored**. It informs the decision; it does not drive the arithmetic.

The lesson could not be clearer: **at NASA, win the technical evaluation.** The proposal's technical volume is where the points are, and the discriminators (doctrine/09) are technical differentiators, not price advantages. The "significant discriminators" framing matters too — the SEB culture rewards proposals that make a few strong, defensible technical cases rather than a diffuse list of everything-you-can-do.

The SEB reports

Because the SEB is a formal body, its work product is a **formal, documented report**: the SEB's analysis of each offeror against each factor and subfactor, with strengths, weaknesses, and findings, delivered to the SSA. The report is the record of why the selection happened the way it did — which is why NASA source selections are so heavily documented and why, on a loss, the debrief (from doctrine/10) can be so informative. For the pursuer, the practical meaning is: **your proposal is read against a written, factor-by-factor rubric by technical experts who will justify their scores in writing.** Mirror the factors exactly; give the SEB an easy job finding your strengths under each one.

Acquisition innovation

NASA has a well-earned reputation as the federal government's most innovative buyer — the "**acquisition innovation**" current that reshaped how government buys space services. The flagship instrument is the **Space Act Agreement** and the broader family of **Other Transactions**: instead of FAR-based procurement, NASA negotiates flexible, faster agreements with commercial partners — the

mechanism behind the commercial cargo and crew programs, commercial lunar landers, and the rise of commercial space. Three lessons:

1. **The innovation lane is real.** For new space and technology work, NASA will often use an OTA/announcement-based approach rather than a traditional RFP. The solicitation shape matters — know which lane you are in.
2. **The innovation philosophy transfers.** NASA's procurement has pushed the whole market toward outcomes and commercial partnership. A proposal that treats NASA as a *partner in a mission* fits the culture better than one that treats it as a buyer of hours.
3. **SBIR/STTR sits alongside.** NASA's small-business R&D program is a major one, run through NASA Research Announcements and a published SBIR/STTR cadence — and, notably, the standard SEB source-selection procedures do **not** apply to SBIR/STTR, which run on their own research-announcement procedures. Different lane, same mission culture.

Solicitation shapes and vehicles

- **RFP** for major systems and services, run through the SEB process.
- **NRA / Research Announcements and BAAs** for research and SBIR/STTR.
- **Cooperative agreements and grants** for the science portfolio.
- **OTAs / Space Act Agreements** for the innovation lane.
- **Vehicles**: NASA runs **SEWP** (Solutions for Enterprise-Wide Procurement), one of the government's most-used IT GWACs, used across agencies (see the GSA profile for GWAC context), plus center-level engineering-services IDIQs and the GSA schedules.

Set-aside landscape

NASA carries the standard federal set-aside pool (small business, 8(a), HUBZone, SDVOSB/VOSB, WOSB), with a notable share of its procurement going to small business and a strong SBIR/STTR set-aside lane. For a small technical firm, NASA's SBIR/STTR program — with its space-and-aeronautics topics and its research-announcement cadence — is the most accessible front door, and the center-level subcontract market is the second.

Learning pointers

Learning pointers. The NASA profile is the course's study of a technically-dominated, innovation-driven buyer. - **Doctrine** — doctrine/02 (evaluation factors; mirroring Section M), doctrine/04 (the SEB/SSA separation as a governance design), doctrine/09 (technical discriminators), doctrine/10 (the debrief). - **Literacy** — industry-standard-canon (the canon's vocabulary), how-to-read-an-rfp. - **Case study** — Ravonics' physics and AI bench, its `541715` R&D NAICS,

and its INSTAR Lab STTR partnership map naturally onto NASA SBIR/STTR topics in modeling and space technology. - **Course** — the graduate strategy elective (graduate-competitive-strategy-game-theory) can exercise a NASA SEB-style selection; the capstone works well on a NASA RFP or NRA. - **Verify** — center organizations, vehicle names, and SBIR/STTR topics and cadence change; confirm the live RFP/NRA and the current SBIR status before committing.