

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGING FEDERAL MANAGEMENT PROCESSES: IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS RELATING TO STRATEGIC PLANNING AND THE GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS ACT

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ABSTRACT. Getting the most bang for the taxpayer buck by bolstering federal agency accountability continues to be a political theme in the 21st century. The second round of strategic plan development mandated by Congress in the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) was recently completed. This article reports the results of empirical research diagnosing the implementation issues in GPRA requirements. This research reports on the efficacy of this process from the perspectives of agency representatives. Implementation issues are grouped into two broad categories; those associated with the organization's structure and those concerned with the plan development process. This research suggests that the potential for alignment of key management systems is suspect given that institutionalization has not occurred after nearly five years of reform efforts. Reporting on federal agency efforts provides insight into barriers to and opportunities for improving GPRA implementation processes.

INTRODUCTION

Getting the most bang for the taxpayer buck by bolstering federal agency accountability continues to be a political theme in the 21st century. Congressional attention to this matter can be traced back to reporting requirements included in the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act (Public Law 103-62). The stated purposes of the Results

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Act are to make the federal government improve program effectiveness and public accountability; set program goals, measure program performance against those goals, and report publicly on their progress; and improve congressional decision making by providing more objective information relating the effectiveness and efficiency of federal programs to spending. To this end, this Act requires federal agencies to develop and submit to the President and Congress a variety of documents that report past performance and detail expected future directions. When the information from these reports is combined, the data can form a basis for making decisions on the allocation of federal resources. In addition, the combination of documents has the potential to improve federal strategic management capacity for political overseers, as well as organization leaders.

Development of these reports requires consultation with agency stakeholders. This consultation requirement is viewed as a way to help break down communication and education barriers and to establish shared goals between the agency, Congress and other stakeholders. The second round of strategic plan development for the GPRA was recently completed. This article reports on how plans are developed and who is participating. As suggested by federal planning contacts, change in strategic plan development is occurring incrementally. Analysis of the impediments to greater progress indicates both structural and process concerns. This categorization suggests that efforts should be directed to overcoming some of the process concerns in the short term and focusing on the structural concerns as a more long-term project.

Through the findings, the question underlying the analysis is "What types of challenges are present when changing federal management processes?" In answering this question, the research does not evaluate agency work, rather it describes what has occurred and presents the perceptions of key agency officials regarding the benefits and challenges of GPRA implementation. Reporting on federal agency efforts provides insight into barriers to and opportunities for reforming government management processes.

The article contains six sections. In the first section, we provide an overview of the key components of the GPRA to set the stage for analyzing the implementation process and determining the likelihood of integration of management systems. The second section reviews existing literature on early reform efforts. The research methodology is described in the third section. The fourth section reviews changes in strategic plan

development and the fifth section analyzes the implementation barriers. The concluding section discusses the implications of these findings in terms of fostering strategic management.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE GPRA

One of the central tenets of the GPRA and other reforms designed to “manage for results” is the need to use strategic planning more effectively as a driver in the budget process. In the vernacular of early reform proponents Osborne and Gaebler, citing E. S. Savas (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999), high-level government officials need to do more steering and less rowing. One means to steer government agencies is to enhance the role of strategic planning and its influence on resource allocation decisions. The GPRA takes a preliminary step in this direction by requiring a combination of documents that separately provide retrospective as well as prospective performance information.

The GPRA mandates the reporting of information through several documents including the organization wide strategic plan (SP), Annual Performance Report (APR), and Annual Performance Plan (APP). The strategic plan is a five-year look into the future to establish the strategic goals for the agency. The Annual Performance Report details actual program achievement levels. The Annual Performance Plan indicates how resources will be allocated to foster achievement of strategic plan goals.

Initial submission dates of these three documents were staggered in the GPRA. In September 2000, federal agencies were required to update the strategic plan created in 1997. The first Annual Performance Plan was submitted to Congress in March 2000, as was the second Annual Performance Report (for many agencies, these two documents were submitted in one consolidated document). Information contained in these three documents is designed to be integrated so expected and actual performance levels can be compared. Using these documents to look at past and future performance can inform deliberations on the agency budget request.

The GPRA requires the submission of federal agency strategic plans every three years. To provide for increased responsiveness, the Act compels agencies to consult with stakeholders in the plan development process. The operational definitions of important aspects of the plan development process, such as consultation and stakeholders, were left to

agency discretion. Not surprisingly, differences in definitions are apparent across agencies and, as a result, the quality and usability of the documents varies (Franklin, 2001).

EARLY REVIEWS OF GPRA IMPLEMENTATION

Previous research conducted by Franklin (2001) established the different processes, stakeholders, and participation mechanisms utilized by the fifteen federal cabinet level departments in developing their strategic plans. Franklin found that strategic plan development is primarily an internal process with a draft document prepared by a small group of high level staff. After circulating this document internally to key management personnel, the draft gets limited distribution for external stakeholder review (consultation). According to the federal planners, the degree of consultation varies from little or no real external consultation to having the stakeholders themselves write the plan. Further, perceptions concerning the utility of consultation in the first round of strategic plan development differ. Some agency representatives claim that it has been essential in ranking priorities and establishing a more unified set of actions to allocate resources for goal accomplishment. Others complain that the process of plan development and the requisite performance reporting merely consume already scarce resources and offer very little in return.

A review of secondary sources analyzing initial experiences of federal agencies in implementing GPRA requirements reveals several weaknesses. A report by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University points to problems associated with “supplying cost data, assessing the reliability of data, and demonstrating that agency actions actually made a difference in the performance measures” (Ellig, 2000). Further, a General Accounting Office (GAO) report (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999) highlights concerns regarding mission fragmentation and program overlap, and notes that efforts by federal agencies to coordinate crosscutting federal programs have been insufficient. Additional Senate reports (U.S. Senate, 2000) indicate weaknesses in linking capital and management resources to strategies and results. Other sources indicate the lack of serious commitment to the “spirit” of GPRA reforms. Many federal agency employees merely satisfy the minimum requirements, and as such their actions essentially amount to window dressing (Radin, 1998).

Though much of the blame for ineffective or substandard implementation of GPRA mandates is often placed on federal personnel charged with implementation (Roberts, 2000), scholars also suggest that the problem lies in the broader context in which GPRA is being implemented (Caiden, 2000). Beryl Radin (2000) documents difficulties relating to the overall “fragmented nature of decision making in the United States, the imperatives of several decision making functions (e.g., budgeting, management, and planning), and the dynamics of politics and policy making in the American political system” (Durst & Newell, 1999; Vinzant & Vinzant, 1996). Thus, there do appear to be both internal and external factors (U.S. Senate, 2000) associated with agency difficulties in implementing GPRA requirements.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article examines federal organization experiences with the preparation of the updated strategic plan and considers development of the Annual Performance Report and Annual Performance Plan. This information forms the basis for gaining an understanding of the implementation barriers encountered by federal agencies. A multi-method approach to data collection was employed. The first data source was structured telephone interviews with the federal employees responsible for document development. Eighteen interviews were conducted with representatives from fourteen cabinet level departments. The number of interviews exceeds the number of departments because in some agencies the contact person for the strategic plan differed from the informant for the Annual Performance Report and Annual Performance Plan. Also, information on only fourteen of the fifteen federal cabinet level agencies is presented here. Scheduling conflicts between the researchers and the contact for the remaining federal agency prevented a 100% response rate.

The interview protocol contained sixteen questions. The first group of questions investigated changes in the strategic plan development process and participants. The second group of questions inquired about the sources of information used and feedback received when developing the Annual Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report. Interviewees were also invited to give their views on the utility of stakeholder participation and to describe any barriers or benefits encountered when preparing these three documents. Interview notes were qualitatively analyzed to uncover themes and patterns that form the basis

for the descriptive findings and inductive generalizations presented in this article.

The second source of information was document review. Excerpts from primary sources (the agency strategic plan, Annual Performance Report, and Annual Performance Plan) were analyzed to gain additional insight into the development process, participants, and linkage with other GPRA documents. Secondary sources, such as reports prepared by the GAO, congressional staff, and the Mercatus Center were reviewed to cross-validate the initial findings generated by the analysis of the interview data. Other secondary sources consisted of scholarly research concerning initial experiences with GPRA implementation (e.g., Radin, 1998; 2000).

CHANGES IN ROUND TWO OF STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT

In round two of strategic plan development, the process has not changed dramatically. Most departments continue to develop their strategic plans using a top-down and highly internalized approach until a draft document is produced. For one-half of the agencies, there is reported to be little or no substantive change to the strategic plan that was created in 1997. To the extent that there are changes, interviewees describe an attempt to simplify an umbrella plan by reducing the number of strategic goals and rewriting them to have more of an organization-wide perspective that emphasizes overarching or crosscutting goals that transcend the functions of individual operating units. This change is thought to make the plan more unified and comprehensive, yet still attuned to the diversity of the missions of the operating units, as this statement suggests: "We have made fundamental changes in the way we develop the plan. Originally, we were just considered a holding company and we would plan accordingly. We had a compendium of 30 plans with an overview. ... We have gone from a process-oriented focus on the day-to-day tasks to looking at the broader picture." Component agencies are expected to identify their contribution to the goals in the corporate plan and make this the foundation for their own strategic plan.

The participants in consultation in strategic plan development also showed only nominal change. Stakeholder participants continue to be "the usual suspects" with little additional outreach occurring. Typical stakeholder examples include congressional staffers, partners in other government agencies, and the policy community (including interest

group representatives, think tanks, and scholars). In terms of the policy community, some agencies report an increase in the number of single-issue interest groups that have input into plan development. The emergence of this form of input creates challenges for the organization in terms of determining how to balance diverse interests. For example in one consultation held by a department, "Homeless advocates asserted that a policy to kick drug dealers and their families out of public housing was contributing to homelessness. But some public housing advocates liked the policy because it keeps housing safe and contributes to a better quality of life. So tensions come up and you have to sit down and go through them."

The primary mechanisms for consultation remain either to: 1) send out the draft plan to a list of stakeholders the agency regularly comes into contact with and ask them to review and comment, or 2) invite the usual suspects to facilitated "one-shot" meetings ranging from a couple of hours to multi-day sessions. Similar to the process used in the first round of plan development, there continues to be a reliance on component organizations to gather input. As one planner explains, "...they [components] are closest to the stakeholder and have done the most in terms of consultation." This attitude is reflected in the comments of another planner: "Each of the bureaus develops their own plan and has their own process for including stakeholders so, their participation from stakeholders may be different than ours at the very top level." Although it is noted that, in a few agencies, stakeholders were given more opportunities to offer direct and substantive changes to the strategic plan.

Congressional stakeholders are more heavily emphasized in the second round. Consultation with this group occurs much earlier in the plan development process. Mechanisms for congressional input are structured differently from those for other stakeholders: key staffers (primarily from authorizing rather than appropriations committees) are invited to attend interactive informational or working meetings where the plan is reviewed and comments are solicited. The general consensus is that the strategic goals are mostly acceptable to congressional representatives, as this quote suggests: "We did not do a whole lot with the goals and objectives. They held up pretty well. In the congressional reviews, they seemed to like what we had and so we did not see much reason to change it."

One interesting change in the consultation mechanisms federal departments use is the nearly universal attempt by agencies to leverage

technology, such as the Internet, to make the plan available to a wider, but unspecified, group of stakeholders and to solicit their feedback. This new point of access appears promising; however, it produces mixed results. Some interviewees report that the Internet postings are very effective in identifying new groups of stakeholders that have not previously had input, as this comment reflects:

It was incredible! For several days in a row, we had about 15 hits from the bicyclists (on the strategic plan web site) every day. The bicyclists correctly observed that the word "bicycle" did not appear in the first draft of the plan. That was something we may have missed without their participation through the Internet. We now have addressed bicycle and pedestrian travel in the strategic plan within the contexts of safety, mobility and the environment because of their help. They had very valid concerns. We may not have received this feedback from other channels.

Others describe very low levels of comments. Two possible reasons are offered. First is a general level of disinterest, as reflected in this planner's statement: "We just send out reports to respective stakeholders and they don't even crack the cover." A second explanation is that there is little review of the corporate level strategic plan in favor of direct input into the plans developed by individual bureaus.

The strategic plans developed in the second round looked very similar to what was created in the first round. Most agencies describe changes in the document to improve the format or aesthetic presentation, as this interviewee explained: "What we have done in the revisions is to make the plan clearer and more concise." Other agencies worked to make the content stronger in terms of identifying outcomes. There also was a strong emphasis placed on ensuring consistency across subunits in the organization and searching for goals that would be crosscutting and reflect the activities of multiple organization units working towards a common mission. As this planner described: "In terms of the new plan, we have five new goals and they are strategic in that they are cross-cutting across components. There are still 21 objectives."

In this section, we have examined four dimensions of the strategic plan development: what process was used, who was involved, how consultation occurred, and what changes were made to the strategic plan. In each of these areas, we find that little, if any, change has occurred between the first and the second rounds of GPRA document

development. Where there is change, it is generally incremental in the sense that agencies refine previous efforts and no significant impact directly related to consultation can be detected. Reasons for the limited amount of change are presented next.

IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS: THE PARTICIPANTS REFLECT

Federal planners were invited to describe factors that encouraged or inhibited stakeholder participation in strategic plan development. In responding to this invitation, they also described other problems arising during the process of developing the three different documents. Overwhelmingly, interviewees convey many more inhibiting than encouraging factors. This is not to say that in reality there are necessarily more, just that as a group they discuss problems more frequently.

Analysis of these factors suggests two types of barriers: those concerned with structure and those concerned with process. Structural factors relate to the configuration of the organization or the nature of existing relationships and balances of power both within the department and between the department and its key external stakeholders. Process oriented factors relate directly to the way in which the process of plan development takes place, as well as the primary actors in the process. Table 1 presents typical problems in each of these two categories. These categories can be further subdivided into those that relate to the challenges of consultation with external stakeholders and those focused more on the logistics of internal operations. Each of the factors is explained below.

Structural Factors

An important structural constraint is the level of ongoing involvement of important political actors (and their staff) such as Congress and the President. For the most part, agency representatives lament the lack of congressional interest in and commitment to the GPRA requirements. Often when organizations attempt to consult with Congress, there are "no takers." As a planning director describes: "I guess one drawback that impedes more meaningful consultation is that Congress has not really been engaged in the planning process." Further, the members (or their staff) that do become active are not typically associated with the money committees, as suggested by these quotes

TABLE 1
Challenges Encountered by Federal Agencies in GPRA
Implementation¹

Structural Factors	Process Factors
<u>External Consultation</u> - Political Actor Involvement - Relationship to Other Agencies <u>Internal Logistics</u> - Linkage to Budget Request - Organizational Location of Offices with Primary Document Responsibility	<u>External Consultation</u> - Gaining and Maintaining Interest - Resolving Diverse Input <u>Internal Logistics</u> - Parallel Simultaneous Processes - Continuity of High Level Champion - Appropriate Format and Level of Detail

Note: ¹ These categories are determined by the authors based on analysis of the interviews. They are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive and the existence of overlap between categories and factors is acknowledged. Most agency representatives identified a variety of factors from this list.

from two agency representatives: “There is a difference between authorizing, oversight, and money committees. There are certain committees, like Government Affairs and Government Operations that have an interest” and “In terms of the Hill, there has been little interest from the money committees. In part this reflects the idiosyncrasies of our committees. They are not particularly interested because it has no relevance and, even when it is done well, it is still not the basis for decision making. But you will see that some individual members will have an interest in this.”

In terms of the involvement of the executive branch, there are different concerns. Chief among them is the effect of a change in administration. As this quote suggests, uncertainty fosters a wait and see attitude: “People are thinking about the 3 year [strategic plan update submission] cycle. When the plan is due, it will be less than two months before the new administration. The new administration may want a different plan. So, this makes interest in participating a little less enticing.” Delays in clear guidance from the current administration, suggesting only minimal levels of interest, are problematic. One interviewee sums up their experience: “We really have to guess about



what the OMB wants. There is a lot of uncertainty, but this is the way they work. The departments put out a few ideas and it's like throwing seeds in a field to see what grows and what we have that we can harvest. There is little guidance, so you try different things and they tell you whether they like it or not. This is probably why we do it this way--we normally start with a pilot in one or two agencies rather than these wild goose chases." Another describes their perspective: "There will be a new team and a different vision and strategic priorities. To date, no administration officials have reviewed these things."

In many substantive policy areas, multiple federal agencies have programs targeted to remediating a particular social problem. The relationships between these agencies in terms of working together to create a coordinated network of government intervention activities have received a lot of attention (U.S. Senate, 2000). Crossing organizational boundaries has been a challenge to federal agencies, as can be seen in the comments from one interviewee: "We have to work with other departments to leverage resources. They [GAO] criticized us before and said we need to work with other agencies and this is true. This is one area where we are having trouble."

An important drawback to making the GPRA documents more useful is that the SP, APR, and APP are not typically perceived as being closely tied to the budget process. Part of this stems from having different interest levels displayed by members of the enabling versus the appropriations committees, as one interviewee observes: "When Congress doesn't seem too interested in the planning process, which do you think our people deal with first? They are more interested in where the money is coming from and so they deal with budget issues first." It also stems from congressional consideration of the budget, as one interviewee notes: "Right now, the budget structure for most departments is at the program and activity or output level. It really doesn't have much to do with performance. We can not do this until the budget committees want to see the information this way."

There are big differences across departments in terms of the organizational location of offices with primary GPRA document responsibility. In most agencies, the strategic plan is developed in an office different from the one responsible for creating the APP or APR. Further, the responsibility for evaluations often falls to a third office. As one planner explains her agency's approach: "I am one director (for Strategic Planning) and there is a director of program evaluation and a

third director of management involvement. So there are three offices and we do connect and talk, we will do more of this over time--particularly in the way the strategic plan developed performance measures are used and there will be increased efficiency in the process. When this is in place, we will be set to achieve the efficiency envisioned in GPRA. But we need a few cycles to make this work.”

When this organizational-structure-caused separation occurs, an underlying culture problem can emerge--people in different organizational units often do not speak the same language or have the same view of the world and their jobs. This quote reinforces this point:

From watching inside my own organization, I have seen some movement, but it will take time. Like in our relations with our fellow employees across the hall. The budgeteers see the world different, they are dealing with budget cuts and try to meet deadlines and they constantly say we have to get this or that document up to the Hill. In our shop, they see us as the thinkers that are dealing with something that is three years out. It's a whole different mentality. But there is some progress, we had a retreat last year in late November with the planning and budgeting staff. It was so insightful. We really learned a lot about each other and then we were able to glean these issues that were important to both of us.

Process Factors

Process factors relate to the way in which the document development and participation processes are implemented by each department. Several factors can detract from a smooth process. Some departments argue that there is simply not enough money or time to devote to strategic planning in order to achieve the results expected by top-level officials. They argue that outreach programs and mechanisms for facilitating communication require a great deal of resources to implement, especially when there is geographic dispersion of departmental stakeholders creating challenges in locating and communicating with them. In the words of one departmental representative: “It's difficult to reach them. ... Their remoteness is a problem. We have special outreach efforts, but the sheer diversity, how spread out they are, and their small numbers makes it difficult.”

Gaining and maintaining stakeholder interest is a challenge in implementation. The primary challenge is reshaping the organization's culture to value the activities required by the GPRA requirements. As one planner explains the dilemma: "We are also trying to stress that this process should be viewed as year-round, whereas in the past, the mentality was of a year-to-year process that only occurs during a couple of months out of the year."

A big factor that seems to limit external stakeholder participation is a lack of stakeholder interest, as this quote suggests: "We really don't have a clue how to get their interest. ...We will try to get feedback that way (by posting documents on the Internet), but we really expect that public interest will be very low. We don't expect to get much out of it. ... [P]eople are somewhat alright with things." Complexity of agency mission as well as complexity of the planning process contributes to this problem. One planning representative relates that: "When I go home to visit my relatives during the holidays, they don't understand what it is we do in this building. Their eyes just glaze over. And, many members of Congress don't understand what we do." The challenge then is to find ways to first catch, and then hold, stakeholder interest in participation.

During document development it often becomes necessary to resolve differences in input offered by stakeholders with diverse interests. This is a challenge compounded by variation in the component units' missions. With wide ranging missions comes a heterogeneous group of stakeholders, making the chances of pleasing them all nearly impossible. As one interviewee describes this obstacle:

Most of our stakeholders are single-issue groups. So when you talk to them and show them the broad picture, and tell them that 'We look at others too, not just you,' they understand. They may not like it, but they understand.

In addition to the factors related to external consultation, there are process concerns related to the logistics of document development. Under the GPRA requirement, there are parallel processes occurring simultaneously, but the connection between them is not solidly established. One interviewee describes their experience:

These three systems [budgeting, planning and evaluating] should not be viewed as separate functions. Each one overlaps and has an influence over the other. The development of the Annual Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report required us to

present information that involved the use of these three key systems and helped to illuminate the concept that they are each part of a three-legged tripod. All of them work together to help better the agency's performance. As technology advances and views broaden, these three systems may eventually evolve into one integrated system.

The support and ongoing presence of a champion inside the agency is an important aid in the process. Secretaries of cabinet departments have, over time, become more apt to serve as champions and cheerleaders for the planning process. A champion can reinvigorate the process, as one agency experienced: "Also, four years ago with GPRA, people didn't care. But, [the new secretary] really drove it home, and now they care. That has made a big difference." Changes in the champion can also bring uncertainty into the process, as this planner explains: "We are also operating under a new Deputy Secretary whose input adds a different perspective or focus to the process." Another agency confirms this uncertainty: "The acting secretary was involved very much as the deputy secretary. Thus, we will have continuity. Then you also have to remember that it is late in this administration. After the election, there probably will be changes."

Another process related concern is determining the appropriate format and level of detail for the reports. As described previously, technical revisions to strategic plans often feature a reduction in the number of goals and overall size of the document. As one interviewee reports: "From a macro-level, we have had feedback from both Congress and the GAO over the past several months, and have made some changes. Some of the big ones are: reducing the number of measures, adding greater levels of consistency among organizations, and using better data sources and having a better understanding of data limitations." The importance of a user-friendly document is highlighted by one interviewee:

But these documents are not good for communication and are not very useful. They end up being a 75-page report. Think about a stock company, this would not be useful and who (what investor) will read all of it. I just got a report from Qwest. This was a great job. It was short and summarized and very useful. The problem is that the APR and APP have 140 indicators that are reported on a program-by-program basis. This information

has always been carried forward (without critical analysis) to give some skeleton to the strategic plan. There are 15-17 themes and 140 indicators. We could reduce this and find where they are all thematically the same.

Beyond streamlining the document to increase usability, there are problems associated with reporting valid and reliable information. The presence of multiple information systems creates a barrier to document integration. This quote reflects the perceptions of many agencies: "Wow, well it was a very wide variety of data sets. We used data from all over the department. A lot of performance measures were based on data sets maintained by the bureaus."

Data problems are multi-faceted as a planner explains: "Another barrier is the whole state/federal relationship thing. Because of decentralization we have to operate differently. In my experience it has been very hard to move states with you in trying to get outcomes. We are trying hard to get state level data, but this is very costly and there is wide variance (in the results)." The difficulty of measuring certain indicators of performance is reinforced by another: "There are a number of agencies that are further ahead than us, but [our outcome] indicators have to be measured over a number of years, you don't see outcomes in just one or two years. We are in the process of pulling the national data together. Actually, I would say personally, that this is one area that really gripes me. Our role is not clear and we do not have a clear understanding of how what we do affects the [indicators]. They need to recognize that outcomes can take years to see in this arena. We are not like GSA [General Services Administration] where they can go in daily and track things and measure their performance."

A review of the types of structural and process related factors cited by federal planners furthers understanding of why reform efforts often fail. Changing process factors that inhibit success may be more within the control of the organization than engineering changes in structural factors. According to the interviewees, modest improvements have been made in the process factors since development of the 1997 strategic plans. Agencies have been able to modify the format and level of detail in the strategic plan document and new consultation mechanisms have been used to gain and maintain stakeholder interest. However, success in overcoming structural factors is slow in coming. As described by these planners and confirmed by others, congressional interest has been uneven

at best. Perhaps the biggest area of structural improvement is joint planning between governmental "partners," although this activity has not yet resulted in tangible improvements in outcomes. However, changing any of the factors is not an easy task and does not occur overnight. What then are the lessons that can be learned to overcome barriers that have arisen in the implementation of the GPRA requirements?

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Beyond informing external stakeholders such as Congress and the President about agency operations, the GPRA documents also push agencies to link four key management functions: strategic planning, budgeting, performance monitoring, and evaluating. When combined there is an emphasis on a strategic management approach in which agency leaders attempt to align management functions in the pursuit of organizational growth and achievement (Poister & Streib, 1999).

The primary opportunity for making the planning process and the GPRA requirements more of a priority is to tie them more closely to the budget process. As one representative observes, "If the GPRA ever becomes as important as the budget process, then we would get more people interested. The budget process is where it's at." A director of planning suggests an opportunity to ensure that GPRA requirements are tied closely to obtaining resources: "Now that they know that this is how to get resources, they're out for blood. So, it becomes very important and contentious."

Another planner worries about the implications of putting these management systems in place, as seen in this statement: "Bottom line, people do not want to be losers when it comes to resource allocation. So the closer you tie planning, performance evaluation, and budgeting, the more threatened people are going to feel. This is uncertain though, because we are still making decisions based on the old rules." Another planner voiced similar concerns: "The reason we need this (OMB and congressional interest) is that we have to make major changes to our accounting systems to fully integrate our planning and budgeting systems. Right now, we cannot match resources to goals except at a macro level. Most agencies have this same problem because of the way our money is appropriated."

Much will depend on issues such as the new administration's attitude toward strategic planning and its importance as a top priority, as well as

the actions of Congress (Bingman & Pitsvada, 1998). As one planner asserts, "Unless there is strong political leadership, I don't think staff employees in the department can bring about change." He goes on to say that the plan must become "... a management tool for change, not just a daily guidepost on where we stand today." There is certainly room for improvement, but there is enthusiasm among some seasoned planners. As one repeated over and over, making sure that the researcher understood, "We still have a long road ahead, but we are heading in the right direction. Again, there are still holes big enough to drive a Mack truck through. But, all strategic plans are like that. Even the best, like [another federal agency] . . . I talk with these people all the time. I read their plans, and there are a lot of holes in them. So, we're not there yet. But, we're getting there."

Turning to the future, what can be done to preserve the momentum? Most planners agree that the process of creating the GPRA documents has the unintended benefit of providing a means for educating and communicating with agency stakeholders. They also acknowledge that accountability for results is enhanced because of the high level of emphasis it has received in the GPRA implementation and reform efforts. Further, they suggest that change is occurring inside the agency: strategic management systems are creeping toward integration and eventually there will be alignment between the planning, budgeting, performance monitoring and evaluating functions. An interviewee describes how this represents a certain challenge:

There's a saying: large systems change slowly. I think GPRA has made as much progress as can be expected, and will continue to evolve to achieve the purposes that the Act intended. It doesn't happen over night. I was in the private sector before this, and it took us five years to implement a good strategic plan, and here you're talking about government. So, you're looking at multiple decades.

Of course, one can question whether this will lead to institutionalization of a strategic management approach. The interviewees seem cautiously optimistic. However, the obvious (and perhaps more important) question is more externally focused, will this lead to improved budgetary decision making by Congress and the President? Unless there are structural modifications that force these actors to modify their behavior, it doesn't seem likely--as history

reminds us, it is extraordinarily difficult to change the politics of the budget process.

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