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MANAGING FOR RESULTS

Enhancing the Usefulness of GPRA Consultations Between the Executive Branch and Congress

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Managing for Results: Enhancing the Usefulness of GPRA Consultations Between the Executive Branch and Congress

Under the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), each agency is to develop a strategic plan to lay out its mission, long-term goals, and strategies for achieving those goals. Agencies are required to submit their plans to Congress by September 30, 1997, and the plans are to take into consideration the views of Congress and other stakeholders. To ensure that these views are considered, GPRA requires that as agencies develop their strategic plans, they consult with Congress and solicit the views of other stakeholders.

Although GPRA requires congressional consultations, it does not specify what constitutes a consultation, at what point in the development process of a strategic plan the consultations should take place, or which committees should be involved in consultations. Both committee staff and agency officials GAO interviewed recognize that the consultations on strategic planning are important to developing an agency plan that appropriately takes into account the views of Congress. However, as is to be expected during the initial stages of a new effort, all participants are struggling to define how the consultation process can work effectively.

Although the establishment of a set of best practices, or the attainment of common understandings of what consultations will entail, can help ensure that those consultations are as productive as possible, no single set of best practices has yet emerged. Instead, GAO's work on preliminary consultations suggested some general approaches that may contribute to the usefulness of future consultations. These approaches include creating shared expectations, engaging the right people, addressing differing views of what is to be discussed, and establishing a consultation process that is iterative. A recent letter to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget from the Speaker of the House, the House Majority Leader, the Senate Majority Leader, and key committee chairmen from both the House and the Senate on GPRA-required consultations should provide a good foundation for successful consultations. Ultimately, the guidelines included in the letter, the approaches GAO identified, and other practices that may emerge as agency officials and committee staff continue to learn to work together in developing strategic plans, can help create a set of practices that promote successful consultations. Successful consultations, in turn, can promote a basic understanding among the stakeholders of the competing demands that confront most agencies and congressional staff, the limited resources available to them, and how those demands and resources require careful and continuous balancing.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss ways of enhancing the usefulness of consultations between executive branch agencies and Congress, as the agencies develop their strategic plans. Under the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), each agency is to develop a strategic plan to lay out its mission, long-term goals, and strategies for achieving those goals. Agencies are required to submit their plans to Congress by September 30, 1997. The strategic plans are to take into consideration the views of Congress and other stakeholders. To ensure that these views are taken into account, GPRA requires agencies to consult with Congress and solicit the views of other stakeholders as they develop their strategic plans.

These consultations provide an important opportunity for Congress and the executive branch to work together to ensure that agency missions are focused, goals are specific and results-oriented, and strategies and funding expectations are appropriate and reasonable. In previous testimony before the full Committee on February 12, we identified examples of management-related challenges stemming from unclear agency missions; the lack of results-oriented performance goals; the absence of well-conceived strategies to meet those goals; and the failure to gather and use accurate, reliable, and timely program performance and cost information to measure progress in achieving results.¹ We also described how GPRA can assist Congress and the executive branch in addressing these challenges and improving the management of federal agencies.

Congress and the administration have both demonstrated that they recognize that successful consultations are key to the success of GPRA and therefore to sustained improvements in federal management. For example, Congress signaled its strong commitment to GPRA and the consultation process through a February 25, 1997, letter to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) from the Speaker of the House, the House Majority Leader, the Senate Majority Leader, and key committee chairmen from both the House and the Senate. The letter underscored the importance that the congressional majority places on the implementation of GPRA, noted a willingness on the part of Congress to work cooperatively with the administration, and established expectations for consultations. The administration also has shown its commitment to consulting with Congress on agency strategic plans through a letter from the Director of

¹See *Managing for Results: Using GPRA to Assist Congressional and Executive Branch Decisionmaking* (GAO/T-GGD-97-43, Feb. 12, 1997).

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OMB to executive agencies sent last November and earlier guidance to agencies on the preparation of strategic plans.

This willingness on the part of Congress and the administration to work together is a likely precondition to successful consultations. Nonetheless, the consultations may still prove difficult because they entail a different working relationship between agencies and Congress than has generally prevailed in the past. In a forthcoming report, we will compare and contrast key design elements and approaches of GPRA with those of past federal initiatives that sought to link resources to results, such as the Planning-Programming-Budgeting System (PPBS) and Zero-Base Budgeting (ZBB). One clear lesson that emerged from those prior initiatives is that constructive communication across the branches of government is difficult, but absolutely essential if management reform is to be sustained. Discussions between agencies and Congress on strategic planning are likely to underscore the competing and conflicting goals of many federal programs, as well as the sometimes different expectations of the legislative and executive branches.

Over the past few months, we have been asked to help brief a number of congressional committees on GPRA and, in some cases, directly assist them in their consultations with agencies. Building in part on that effort, and at the request of the Chairman of the House Budget Committee, we have been examining selected consultations on strategic plans that have taken place thus far. As part of related work we were doing in January looking at agencies' progress in developing strategic plans, officials at the headquarters level, from 11 of the 24 largest executive branch agencies, said that they had been in contact with congressional committees—often at the initiative of Congress—on their strategic plans. Headquarters-level officials in the remaining 13 executive branch agencies said that although they had not met with congressional staff, officials from some of their components had met with authorizing committees and appropriating subcommittees on matters related to strategic planning.

For our current review, we selected consultations to cover a range of types of interactions (from single meetings to sustained contacts), types of agencies (e.g., regulatory, direct service, and business-like), and type of congressional committee (e.g., authorizing and appropriating). Based on our selection criteria, we interviewed staff from five House committees who participated in the selected consultations with agencies. These interviews included staff from both authorizing committees and the appropriations committee. We also interviewed officials from 9 of the 11

executive agencies who participated in those consultations. All of the selected consultations took place before the congressional letter was sent in late February. Our work was aimed at identifying approaches that, in the view of congressional staff and agency officials, have the potential to enhance the usefulness of the consultations required by GPRA. As agreed with the Chairman of the House Budget Committee and this Subcommittee, I will discuss the results of that work today.

Number and Scope of Consultations, Thus Far, Provide a Limited Basis for Identifying Useful Practices

Congressional staff and agency officials expressed a widespread appreciation for the essential role that consultations can play in the development of a strategic plan that is useful to the agency and appropriately takes into account the views of Congress. Although GPRA requires congressional consultations, it does not specify what constitutes a consultation, at what point in the development process of a strategic plan the consultation or consultations should take place, or which committees should be involved in consultations. Establishing a set of best practices or reaching a common understanding of what consultations will entail can help ensure that the consultations are as productive as possible. However, congressional staff and agency officials said they believed that because of their generally limited experience with such consultations, it will take time for Congress and agencies to develop a base of common experiences from which to build a set of specific best practices for future consultations.

Most committee staff and agency officials had positive comments about the meetings that have been held thus far. However, both committee staff and agency officials—committee staff in particular—stressed the very limited nature of the meetings. The meetings varied significantly, ranging from routine base-touching sessions with congressional staff as part of an agency’s broad scan of internal and external stakeholders, to substantive and candid dialogue on an agency’s mission, strategic goals, strategies to achieve those goals, and outcome-related performance measures.

Most committee staff and some agency officials we spoke with characterized the meetings that have taken place thus far as briefings, preconsultations, or preliminary consultations. Thus, at this early point, no single set of best practices for consultations has emerged from the preliminary meetings. Instead, committee staff and agency officials suggested some general approaches that center on the creation of shared expectations between committee staff and agency officials that may contribute to the usefulness of such consultations.

Creating Shared Expectations Was Identified as an Essential Starting Point for Successful Consultations

By working together to create shared expectations, consultation participants can establish an understanding of what they want to discuss, what they do not want to enter into the discussions, and what they expect to achieve from their discussions. To avoid misunderstandings and consequent disappointment, both committee staff and agency officials identified a need to define “up front” what they expect to achieve from consultations. For example, one committee staff member said that he asked for and expected to receive background information in the initial meeting with an agency about what the agency had done to achieve the requirements of GPRA, and that his expectations were met. However, in another case, two committee staff who asked for and expected a discussion on an agency’s mission statement, its consistency with statute, and its relationship to the agency’s strategic goals, among other things, were disappointed. Instead, they received a 1-1/2 hour slide show on the requirements of GPRA, even though they had told the agency beforehand that they did not need such a presentation.

The congressional letter provided guidelines that are intended to make consultations more productive. For example, the letter described expectations for the contents of draft strategic plans and said that agencies should provide relevant materials in advance of consultations. The congressional letter also provided a list of the types of topics that the congressional majority expects to be discussed during consultations. Our work suggests that the guidelines in the congressional letter should go a long way toward assisting committees and agencies in conducting their consultations by helping to establish a shared understanding of the congressional majority’s expectations. For example, two committee staff members told us that they encouraged agencies to provide them with relevant documents, including early drafts of strategic plans, before the meetings. This enabled them to prepare questions and suggestions in advance. It also helped them focus better on the presentations and discussions taking place during the meetings by eliminating the need to read and respond to the documents at the same time. Another committee staff member stressed the importance of limiting the materials provided as part of consultations to critical documents, because congressional staff workloads severely constrain the time available to read additional paperwork.

Although the congressional letter helps to establish generic expectations that would be useful in helping to provide a good foundation for successful consultations, both committee staff and agency officials we interviewed stressed that consultations ultimately must be tailored to the

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individual experiences and needs of congressional committees and agencies. More specifically, congressional staff and agency officials noted that the historical relationships between an agency and Congress, the strategic issues confronting the agency, and the degree of policy agreement or disagreement within Congress and between Congress and the administration on those strategic issues will heavily influence the way consultations are carried out.

They also noted that these political differences will affect the probability of success of the consultations from either a the congressional or agency perspective. For example, one committee staff member said that major disagreements existed between the political parties as to the basic direction of an agency under his committee's jurisdiction. According to this staff member, when subcommittee staff met with this agency's officials, the discussion quickly became quite confrontational, and the session only served to reinforce tensions rather than resolve them. To avoid repeating this situation, the staff member has sought to focus subsequent meetings on elements of the agency's strategic plan on which the possibility for consensus exists, such as how best to manage programs, and either leave issues arising from contentious policy differences for later consideration or address them through correspondence with the agency. The staff member contrasted the consultations with this agency with those engaged in with another agency, also under the jurisdiction of his committee, where broad agreement existed between the Members of the committee and agency officials on the appropriate goals for the agency and how those goals should be met. In this case, he said the consultation process differed significantly in process and tone from the one in which strong differences existed on basic policy issues.

Our discussions with congressional staff and agency officials indicated that consultations also are more effective when they are tailored for the interests and knowledge levels of participants. An approach that committee staff and agency officials generally said helped them use time productively in initial consultations consisted of gearing agency presentations to the level of interest and understanding of the committee staff. One staff member stressed the importance of providing information on improvements that have occurred in programs where strategic planning has been used successfully. Two staff members said that when they had their initial meetings with the agencies, they were just beginning to understand what GPRA required and what the agencies were doing to fulfill its requirements. Consequently, they favored having basic overview briefings at those initial meetings. Other staff felt that they were already

well acquainted with GPRA; they therefore said that such briefings would be a waste of time. In addition, these latter staff members said that agencies should encourage follow-up questions after each meeting and feedback on what went well and what did not go well during the meeting.

Our discussions with committee staff and agency officials suggest that as committees and agencies work together to create shared expectations, some general approaches may contribute to the usefulness of the consultations. These approaches include the need for engaging the right people, addressing differing views of what is to be discussed, and establishing a consultation process that is iterative.

Engaging the Right People

Including people who are knowledgeable about the topic at hand is obviously important to any meeting. Almost everyone we talked with, both committee staff and agency officials, stressed the importance of having agency officials who can answer specific program-related questions attend the consultations, as well as officials with authority to revise the agency's strategic plans. Otherwise, as both committee staff and agency officials said, consultations run the risk of becoming purely a staff-driven exercise that lacks a real link to agency management decisions.

According to committee staff, agency officials with varying responsibilities need to be involved in consultations. For example, two committee staff members observed that, initially, agency consultations with congressional staff should include, at a minimum, officials with direct program responsibility in agencies, as well as individuals from agency staff offices with general planning responsibilities. According to the committee staff members, the direct involvement of program-level agency officials is important in order to demonstrate that decisions made as part of the strategic planning process are serving as a basis for daily operations within the agency. These staff members noted that a measure of GPRA's success is the identification of program officials who are able to (1) clearly show how their program goals are directly linked to agency strategic goals and (2) demonstrate how they are using GPRA to manage their operations. According to the committee staff members, the involvement of program officials also is more likely to ensure that consultations are informative for both Congress and the agency.

Staff from two committees underscored the importance of including in the consultations congressional staff who have knowledge of GPRA, strategic planning, and the ways Congress can use GPRA to aid its decisionmaking.

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They also noted that staff who could discuss the intricacies of agency programs and who had strong public policy and finance backgrounds also should be brought in to the consultations to analyze the plans and the supporting documentation that agencies provided.

As the consultations proceed, according to committee staff, the involvement of Members of Congress and senior management within agencies is important because Members and senior managers are ultimately responsible for making decisions about agency strategic directions and the level of program funding. In addition, staff said the involvement of senior management demonstrates their personal commitment and, in cases where that commitment may not be present, is helpful to building that commitment. For example, one committee staff member said that the higher the level of agency management involved in consultations, the better the quality of the agency testimonies at oversight hearings and the greater the importance given to GPRA and the strategic planning process within the agencies.

A staff member from another committee said that true consultation cannot take place without engaging Members of Congress. He said that committee staff should be involved in the initial briefings but that, as discussions progressed, Members needed to be directly involved. Member involvement could be obtained in a number of ways in addition to active participation in consultation sessions. For example, Members could send letters to agencies posing questions on strategic plans and formally documenting their views on key issues.

Another staff member said that hearings are important because not only do they result in Member involvement, but they also require the participation of senior agency management. In that regard, a number of House committees are considering holding hearings this spring, after at least some consultations have taken place, in order to provide oversight on agency GPRA efforts and as a way of creating a public record of agreements reached during consultations.

Congressional staff and agency officials generally agreed that consultations should be bipartisan and bicameral to ensure buy-in from all cognizant parties. In addition, both committee staff and agency officials agreed that, to the extent feasible, consultations should be held jointly with appropriate authorizing, budget, and appropriating committees. Committee staff recognized that due to the at times overlapping jurisdictions of congressional committees, obtaining the involvement of all

interested congressional committees in a coordinated approach to consultations can be challenging. The often overlapping or fragmented nature of federal program efforts—a problem that has been extensively documented in our work—underscores the importance of a coordinated consultation process.² In that regard, the effort now under way in the House to form teams of congressional staff from different committees to have a direct role in the consultation process should prove helpful.

From our discussions with committee staff and agency officials, it was not apparent that there was consistency in the meetings that have been held thus far. Some agencies have met with their authorizing committees; others with their appropriators. Of the five House committees whose staff we interviewed, four committees included minority staff in their meetings. And although some House committee staff attempted to include Senate staff and staff from other House committees, their attempts thus far have met with only limited success.

Committee staff and agency officials often favored agencies' obtaining the views of other stakeholders in developing draft strategic plans before congressional consultations took place. One committee staff member said that stakeholders could provide information that could help an agency show a link between the achievement of its programs' strategic goals and the resources required to achieve them. An agency official said that stakeholders have helped to identify the major strategic issues facing his agency. For example, he said that stakeholders helped to identify perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges that would be involved in making strategic changes and achieving his agency's goals. In addition, he said that stakeholders also helped identify future strategic issues and ways to address those issues through strategic planning.

Addressing Differing Views of What Is to Be Discussed

Committee staff and agency officials often presented differing views on what they believed the level of detail discussed during consultations should be. Congressional staff, on the whole, wanted a deeper examination of the details of agency strategic plans. Specifically, some staff wanted to know how programs support an agency's achievement of its strategic goals and how the achievement of the agency's goals would be determined. In contrast, other congressional staff noted that because some agencies lack baseline and trend data needed to establish performance goals, it is not possible to discuss program performance measures.

²See, for example, *Managing for Results: Achieving GPRA's Objectives Requires Strong Congressional Role* (GAO/T-GGD-96-79, Mar. 6, 1996).

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Therefore, the staff noted the consultations needed to focus on the process of agencies' strategic planning efforts, such as planning schedules and time frames and building capacity.

Some agency officials, however, said that it was their general impression that the consultations were to concern only their strategic plans, not issues related to specific programs. As a result, these agency officials said they wanted the discussions kept at a higher level—for example, on agency mission and strategic goals. These officials said that they did not believe that the consultation was a forum for discussing program performance goals, measures, and costs. Other agency officials, however, observed that agencies should be prepared to provide information on programmatic issues as well as missions and goals.

Most committee staff agreed with this latter view, saying that agencies need to be prepared to engage in discussions that go beyond mission and goals to the program level and the rationale for specific performance measures. For example, two committee staff members said that for agencies to provide a list of goals—whether program performance goals or strategic goals—without data to show why those goals were chosen and how progress toward achieving the goals would be measured, was meaningless. One of the two staff members said agency officials need to ensure that their officials understand the importance of having data to support their strategic planning efforts and of supplying those supporting data to Congress as part of their consultations. The other staff member explained that one reason Members and committee staff needed such information was to enable them to intelligently assist agencies in selecting appropriate performance measures.

**Establishing a
Consultation Process That
Is Iterative**

All of the committee staff and agency officials we spoke with acknowledged that they had just begun an iterative process that will take time to complete. In addition, both committee staff and agency officials recognized that GPRA-required consultations were new and would require a learning period. As a result, all staff and officials agreed that they should meet as many times as both sides feel is necessary. This point is echoed in the congressional letter to the Director of OMB, which emphasizes that agency officials and committee staff may need to continually work on updated versions of the strategic plans.

One committee staff member and one agency official said that it was unreasonable to think that this year's consultations would be all-inclusive

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and totally productive. A committee staff member added that agencies need to have a constant dialogue with congressional staff. Finally, an agency official said that all consultation participants must accept that to be useful, the strategic plan must be viewed as a dynamic document, subject to change and open to criticism by all participants.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, both committee staff and agency officials we spoke with recognized that the consultations on strategic planning are important to developing an agency plan that appropriately takes into account the views of Congress. However, as is to be expected during the initial stages of a new effort, all participants are struggling to define how the consultation process can work effectively. As I mentioned, the letter from Congress to OMB should be particularly helpful in this regard. In our discussions with committee staff and agency officials, they noted some general approaches, including engaging the right people, addressing differing views of what is to be discussed, and establishing a consultation process that is iterative, that may contribute to the usefulness of consultations. Ultimately, these approaches, along with other practices that may emerge as agency officials and committee staff continue to learn to work together in developing strategic plans, can help create a basic understanding among the stakeholders of the competing demands that confront most agencies and congressional staff, the limited resources available to them, and how those demands and resources require careful and continuous balancing. We look forward to continuing to work with you and other committees on GPRA.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you or Members of the Subcommittee may have.

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