Tip Sheet 2: Best and Leading Practices in Collaboration

Step 1 of this guide includes guidance on determining whether fragmentation, overlap, or duplication exists among selected programs. Understanding how specific activities or functions are coordinated between programs or agencies can help analysts identify fragmentation, overlap, or duplication. Step 4 of this guide identifies collaboration as an option analysts can consider recommending to reduce or better manage fragmentation, overlap, and duplication. This tip sheet provides information on best practices in agency collaboration for analysts to consult during their reviews.

Achieving important national outcomes, such as food safety, local economic development, environmental restoration, and homeland security, requires the coordinated and collaborative efforts of a number of programs spread across the federal government, other levels of government, and private and non-profit sectors. However, agencies face a range of challenges and barriers when they attempt to work collaboratively. GAO has produced a number of products aimed at helping agencies to collaborate more efficiently and effectively (see the list of key GAO products at the end of this tip sheet).

Collaboration can be broadly defined as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the organizations act alone. Agencies can enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts by engaging in key practices, such as defining and articulating a common outcome and agreeing on roles and responsibilities. Running throughout these practices are a number of factors such as leadership, trust, and organizational culture that are necessary elements for a collaborative working relationship.

Agencies can enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts by engaging in the following eight practices:

- Define and articulate a common outcome.
- Establish mutually reinforcing or joint strategies.
- Identify and address needs by leveraging resources.
- Agree on roles and responsibilities.
- Establish compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries.
- Develop mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report on results.
- Reinforce agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports.
- Reinforce individual accountability for collaborative efforts through performance management systems.

Federal agencies have used a variety of mechanisms to implement interagency collaborative efforts, such as the president appointing a coordinator, agencies co-locating within one facility, or multiple agencies establishing task forces. These mechanisms can be used to address a range of purposes, including policy development; program implementation; oversight and monitoring; information sharing and communication; and building organizational capacity, such as staffing and training. Agencies frequently use more than one mechanism to address an issue. For example, climate change is a complex, crosscutting issue, which involves many collaborative mechanisms in the Executive Office of the President and interagency groups throughout government.

Although collaborative mechanisms differ in complexity and scope, they all benefit from certain key features, which raise issues to consider when implementing these mechanisms. For example:

- **Outcomes and Accountability**: Have short-term and long-term outcomes been clearly defined? Is there a way to track and monitor their progress?

- **Bridging Organizational Cultures**: What are the missions and organizational cultures of the participating agencies? Have agencies agreed on common terminology and definitions?

- **Leadership**: How will leadership be sustained over the long-term? If leadership is shared, have roles and responsibilities been clearly identified and agreed upon?

- **Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities**: Have participating agencies clarified roles and responsibilities?

- **Participants**: Have all relevant participants been included? Do they have the ability to commit resources for their agency?

- **Resources**: How will the collaborative mechanism be funded and staffed? Have online collaboration tools been developed?

- **Written Guidance and Agreements**: If appropriate, have participating agencies documented their agreement regarding how they will be collaborating? Have they developed ways to continually update and monitor these agreements?

Key Websites

Best Practices and Leading Practices in Collaboration: http://www.gao.gov/key_issues/leading_practices_collaboration/issue_summary

Collaboration Across Governments, Nonprofits, and the Private Sector: http://www.gao.gov/key_issues/collaboration_across_governments_nonprofits_private_sector/issue_summary#t=1

Key GAO Reports

Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups. GAO-14-220. Washington, D.C.: February 14, 2014.

Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms. GAO-12-1022. Washington, D.C.: September 27, 2012.

Managing for Results: GAO's Work Relating to the Interim Crosscutting Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act. GAO-12-620R. Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2012.

Government Performance: Strategies for Building a Results-Oriented and Collaborative Culture in the Federal Government. GAO-09-1011T. Washington, D.C: September 24, 2009.

Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal Agencies. GAO-06-15. Washington, D.C.: October 21, 2005.