

Meeting the Moment: Tips for Building Bold Strategic Plans and Turning Them into Results

To help agencies develop bold and useful strategic plans for fiscal years 2022–2026, the Partnership for Public Service and Grant Thornton Public Sector hosted three workshops with strategic planners from across the federal government between April and June 2021. The sessions offered participants an opportunity to share best practices for creating plans agencies find useful; learn how to incorporate into the plans evidence about what works; and devise ways to implement plans successfully once completed. This report presents the findings from those workshops and supplemental interviews we conducted with federal strategic planning teams. It highlights practical steps strategic planners can take to create plans that:

- Provide clear direction to agency leadership and staff members.
- Generate buy-in by reflecting the input of a wide range of diverse stakeholders.
- Remain up to date, changing when necessary to reflect the environment.
- Are informed by evidence about what works and what does not.

The report also provides tips for turning those plans into results by:

- Proactively communicating the strategic plan to the workforce.
- Integrating the strategic plan into key agency processes.
- Regularly tracking and reporting progress, changing course if necessary, and demanding accountability.

In February 2022, federal agencies are expected to publish new strategic plans that lay out their goals and priorities and position them to accomplish their missions. The plans must identify how those goals and priorities will be achieved and specify how progress will be measured along the way. The strategic planning requirement grew out of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, enacted to boost the effectiveness of the federal government. Congress strengthened the law in 2010, requiring agencies to release their strategic plans one year after a presidential inauguration and conduct more robust reviews of their progress. Strategic planning is also an established best practice in other sectors. When done well, it can help federal agencies develop an ambitious vision for the future—and a roadmap to get there—that inspires and guides agency employees and delivers results for the people of this country. With so many challenges facing our country, it is a valuable opportunity for agencies to map out the major goals and objectives that will help them deliver on their missions, and plan for how tomorrow’s work will get done. At times, agencies do not take full advantage of the strategic planning process and end up dedicating resources to creating plans that go unused. “There’s an old joke that the dustiest book on any manager’s bookshelf is the strategic plan because it’s only touched twice,” said Chris Mihm, former managing director at the Government Accountability Office. “Once when it’s put on the shelf, and again when it’s taken down and replaced with the new edition.”

Contents

Vision.....	P5
Mission	P5
1. Direction	P6
1.1. Priorities	P6
1.2. Resources	P6
1.3. Tactics & Strategies.....	P6
2. Input	P7
2.1. Leaders	P7
2.1.1. Priorities	P7
2.1.1.1. Party Platforms	P8
2.1.1.2. Confirmation Testimonies.....	P8
2.1.1.3. Opportunities & Challenges	P8
2.1.1.4. Information.....	P8
2.1.1.5. Research	P8
2.1.1.6. Goals & Priorities	P9
2.2. Employees	P9
2.2.1. Buy-In	P9

2.2.1.1. Strategies	P10
2.2.1.2. Risks	P10
2.2.1.3. KPIs	P10
2.1.1.4. Knowledge Gaps	P10
2.2.1.5. Outputs	P10
2.2.1.6. Feedback	P10
2.3. Customers	P10
2.3.1. Priorities	P11
2.4. Partners	P11
2.4.1. Complementary Missions	P12
2.4.2. Meetings	P12
2.4.2.1. Metrics	P12
2.5. Congressional Consultation	P13
2.5.1. Preliminary Dialog	P13
2.5.2. Participants	P13
3. Relevance	P14
3.1. Strategic Alignment	P14
4. Evidence	P15
4.1. Learning	P15
4.1.1. Strategic Alignment	P15
4.2. Silos	P16
5. Results	P17
5.1. Communication	P17
5.1.1. Posters	P17
5.1.2. Videos	P17
5.1.3. Strategies	P18
5.2. Processes	P18
5.2.1. Decision-Making	P18
5.2.2. Leadership	P18
5.3. Progress, Change & Accountability	P19
5.3.1. Assessments	P19
5.3.2. Priority Goals	P19
5.3.3. Monitoring & Reporting	P19
5.3.3.1. Evidence	P19
5.3.3.2. Direction	P19
5.3.4. Accountability	P19
5.3.5. Performance Reviews	P20
Administrative Information	P20

Partnership for Public Service (P4PS)

Description:

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

Loren DeJonge Schulman :

Vice President, Research, Analysis and Evaluation

Samantha Donaldson :

Vice President, Communications

David Garcia :

Senior Manager

Katie Malague :

Vice President, Government Effectiveness

Tim Markatos :

Associate Design Manager

Andrew Parco :

Digital Design Associate

Ellen Perlman :

Senior Writer and Editor

Audrey Pfund :

Senior Design and Web Manager

Jessica Reynoso :

Associate

Victoria Schaefer :

Manager

Grant Thornton Public Sector (GTPS)

Description:

Grant Thornton Public Sector helps executives and managers at all levels of government maximize their performance and efficiency in the face of ever tightening budgets and increased demand for services. We give clients creative, cost-effective solutions that enhance their acquisition, financial, human capital, information technology, data analytics, and performance management. Our commitment to public sector success is burnished by a widely recognized body of thought leadership analyzing and recommending solutions to government's greatest challenges. Based in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area and with a presence in over 35 cities around the country, Grant Thornton Public Sector serves federal, state, and local governments. For more information, visit grantthornton.com/publicsector.

Stakeholder(s):

Amanda Hejna :
Senior Associate

Amber Lucas :
Associate Director

Robert Shea :
National Managing Principal

Matthew Troy :
Manager

Vision

Our biggest challenges are tackled in the years ahead

Mission

To help agencies develop bold and useful strategic plans for fiscal years 2022–2026

1. Direction

Provide clear direction.

Strategic Plans Should Provide Clear Direction, Specifying What Is Most Important to an Agency Over the Next Four Years ~ Federal statute requires a strategic plan to cover the breadth of an agency’s mission, but it should not be so broad that it fails to provide the leadership and the staff with clear direction. An effective strategic plan identifies an agency’s top priorities, providing guidance on where to direct limited resources, rather than encompassing everything an agency does.

1.1. Priorities

Identify top priorities.

The strategic planning lead at a large Cabinet-level agency echoed Mihm’s sentiment. “To be useful, the plan must prioritize,” they said. “Including everything a department does will not tell people what to focus on and where to allocate resources. It’s about picking a set of priorities—the major things you want to accomplish over the next four years—and determining what must happen to achieve them. Creating plans that include everything is where federal strategic planning often falls short.” This agency’s fiscal 2022–2026 strategic plan will focus one goal on operational improvements the department seeks. These include improving the customer experience, making more effective use of data, hiring and retaining a diverse and inclusive workforce, and reimagining how work gets done as the COVID-19 pandemic subsides and employees return to the office. It is a good example of a plan that covers the entire agency—every component can strive to improve operational performance regardless of mission—while also being focused enough to provide helpful strategic direction.

Stakeholder(s):

Chris Mihm :

“Strategic planning is about framing the fundamental decisions an agency makes,” said Chris Mihm, formerly GAO’s managing director.

1.2. Resources

Provide guidance on where to direct limited resources.

1.3. Tactics & Strategies

Balance current tactical opportunities and challenges with strategic requirements for success in the future.

The best strategic plans address current opportunities and challenges but are also forward-looking and set agencies up to succeed over the subsequent four years.

Stakeholder(s):

Stephen Sanford :

Striking that balance can be challenging for strategic planning teams, according to Stephen Sanford, acting managing director of strategic planning at GAO. “There is always a risk of focusing too much on the tactical, chasing immediate emergencies and pri-

orities. But the planning cycle spans several years, so thinking about what the world might look like over that time and creating a plan that positions your agency to thrive is really important.”

2. Input

Reflect input from a wide range of stakeholders.

Stakeholder(s)

Agency Political Leaders

Agency Career Leaders

Agency Employees

Agency Customers

Peer Agency Staff

Members of Congress

Chris Mihm :

“Politically, the thing that kills you first and deepest is if someone can say, ‘If only you had consulted me. If only you had talked to me. No one asked for my opinion,’” Mihm warned.

Strategic Plans Should Reflect the Input of a Wide Range of Stakeholders ~ Strategic planning teams should ask a wide range of stakeholders what they believe the plan should prioritize. These stakeholders include an agency’s political and career leaders, rank-and-file employees, customers, staff members at peer agencies and members of Congress. Groups that know an agency’s work and mission well can provide valuable insights that help strategic planners create better plans. Asking stakeholders for their ideas and incorporating them into the plan can also foster buy-in and make it more likely the strategic plan will be implemented successfully—since stakeholders are also responsible for turning the plan into results.

2.1. Leaders

Engage agency leaders.

ENGAGING AGENCY LEADERSHIP ~ The goals and objectives in a strategic plan should reflect the political leadership’s vision for the agency, so it is crucial for strategic planners to consult with the incoming team.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Political Leaders :

Because it is those political leaders who set the agency’s broad direction, failure to consult with them can result in a poorly aligned plan that is less likely to be used. However, it can be challenging to get meetings with busy political leaders who are new to the agency, according to some strategic planners who attended our workshop series. Additionally, if an agency’s leadership team is slow to be nominated and confirmed, strategic planning teams risk falling behind schedule.

U.S. Department of Justice :

The strategic planning team at the Department of Justice briefs new political leaders about the planning process as soon as possible, sharing information about what must be done and how a robust strategic plan can help advance their agenda.

Tennille Nance :

While the planning team tries to schedule meetings early with political leaders to learn about their goals and objectives, they recognize that new leaders are “drinking out of a firehose” and may not always prioritize strategic planning, according to Tennille Nance, the department’s senior performance advisor. To keep strategic planning on leadership’s radar and learn about their priorities, the planning team engages leaders in creative ways. “For example, if you’re talking to leadership about the budget, find a way to bring strategic planning into the conversation,” Nance said. “There’s so much going on, but if leadership constantly hears strategic planning coming up, they are more likely to realize, ‘Okay, this is important.’”

2.1.1. Priorities

Anticipate agency political leaders’ priorities.

To get a head start on its plan, one Cabinet-level agency’s strategic planning team anticipates what the political leadership’s priorities will be long before those leaders come on board.

2.1.1.1. Party Platforms

Monitor the platforms of presidential candidates from the major parties.

In the months leading up to a presidential election, the planning team monitors the platforms of presidential candidates from the major parties, looking for clues about what priorities might be relevant to the department.

Stakeholder(s):
Political Parties

2.1.1.2. Confirmation Testimonies

Pay close attention to political appointee confirmation testimonies.

Once a winner is declared and a nominee is named to lead the department, the planning team pays close attention to that person's confirmation testimony. "We really use the confirmation hearing as our North Star before we have people in the building who we can talk to," the agency's strategic planning lead said.

Stakeholder(s):
Presidents-Elect

Political Appointees

2.1.1.3. Opportunities & Challenges

Query career leaders about their priorities as well as anticipated opportunities and challenges.

Strategic planners at the agency also meet with the department's career executives before the new political team arrives. These career leaders span administrations and oversee the department's most important programs. The planning team asks career leaders about their priorities, and the opportunities and challenges they anticipate for the department over the ensuing four years. The strategic planning team's advance work helps it hit the ground running as soon as the political leadership is in place.

Stakeholder(s):
Strategic Planners

Agency Career Executives

2.1.1.4. Information

Share with political leaders the information learned from career leaders.

Planning team members take what they learned from career leaders and convey that information to political leaders.

Stakeholder(s):
Planning Team Members

Agency Political Leaders

2.1.1.5. Research

Confirm research on what the new leadership teams' priorities might be.

Planning team members also share the research they conducted on what the new leadership team's priorities might be, to confirm that the research is correct.

2.1.1.6. Goals & Priorities

Refine the goals and priorities reflected in the departments' strategic plans.

From there, the planning team works with the political and career leadership to refine the goals and priorities that will be reflected in the department's strategic plan.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Planning Teams

Agency Career Leaders

Agency Political Leaders

2.2. Employees

Get input from agency employees.

GETTING INPUT FROM RANK-AND-FILE EMPLOYEES ~ Some people involved in the strategic planning process may favor a top-down approach, relying on a small number of voices to inform the plan. But an agency's employees know its programs, customers, opportunities and challenges, often from perspectives agency leaders do not have, so it is wise to include them in the strategic planning process.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Employees

2.2.1. Buy-In

Obtain buy-in from rank-and-file employees who will be asked to do the work spelled out in strategic plans.

And because rank-and-file employees will be asked to do the work spelled out in the plan, it is crucial to have their buy-in.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Employees

U.S. Department of Justice :

Once leaders at Justice establish their goals and objectives, the department begins a collaborative process which includes the strategic planning team convening working groups to help build out the plan.

Subject Matter Experts :

Working groups are staffed by subject matter experts from across the department, and each group focuses on a goal or objective that will appear in the strategic plan. For example, if the plan includes an objective to reduce violent crime, its working group might include staff members from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Strategic Plan Working Groups :

Members of the working groups complete tasks such as determining the best strategies to achieve the goals and objectives, pinpointing risks that might prevent success, developing key performance indicators to track progress and identifying gaps in the department's knowledge that, if filled, would help improve its policies and programs.

Tennille Nance :

Convening working groups requires the strategic planning team to do a lot of preparation, but it is an important part of the process. "It's not easy, but it's worth it," said Nance, one of Justice's strategic planning leads. "Because our department is so large, many components don't get the chance to regularly sit down and talk to each other about the opportunities and challenges that cut across the department. The working groups provide space to do that." Working group participants are experts in their fields but may not know much about strategic planning, so it is important to educate them about the purpose of the plan and how to build it so it complies with federal requirements, according to Nance.

U.S. DOJ Strategic Planning Team :

The department's strategic planning team found that providing working group members with templates to complete and examples to follow is an effective approach.

2.2.1.1. Strategies

Determine the best strategies to achieve the goals and objectives

2.2.1.2. Risks

Pinpointing risks that might prevent success.

2.2.1.3. KPIs

Develop key performance indicators to track progress.

2.1.1.4. Knowledge Gaps

Identify gaps in departments' knowledge.

2.2.1.5. Outputs

Regularly update agency leaders on the working groups' outputs to ensure they are in alignment with leadership's vision.

The planning team regularly updates agency leadership on the working groups' outputs to ensure they are in alignment with leadership's vision.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Leaders

2.2.1.6. Feedback

Share draft strategic plans with all agency employees and invite feedback.

Once a draft of the strategic plan is complete, the department shares it with all agency employees and invites their feedback.

2.3. Customers

Invite customer feedback.

ASKING FOR THE CUSTOMER'S POINT OF VIEW

Stakeholder(s):

Federal Register :

Some agencies have invited customer feedback through Federal Register notices and even Twitter campaigns.

Twitter

Organizations :

Other agencies have had better luck taking an indirect route, engaging the organizations and associ-

ations that represent their public customers, according to strategic planners we interviewed.

Associations

National Science Foundation :

At the National Science Foundation, the strategic planning team asked a host of academic and research

— continued next page

Stakeholders (continued)

organizations to weigh in on what the agency should try to accomplish over the next four years.

National Science Board :

The team also drew heavily on feedback from the National Science Board, a body that works alongside NSF's director to provide leadership and oversight for the agency. NSB members include some of the country's top researchers and senior leaders in academia and the private sector.

Department of Veterans Affairs :

As part of its strategic planning process, the Department of Veterans Affairs interviewed nine Veterans Service Organizations to learn how it could serve veterans better and used the information to shape its goals, objectives and strategies.¹

Veterans Service Organizations

Veterans Living Overseas :

One takeaway was that veterans living overseas could use more support.

Disabled Veterans :

Another was that many disabled veterans are heavily dependent on the department for adequate care. This insight convinced the planning team that high-quality care for disabled veterans should be a top priority in the strategic plan.

Agency Program Offices :

Asking program offices to gather input for the strategic plan can also be effective, as these offices often work closely with an agency's customers and know them best.

Small Business Administration :

At the Small Business Administration, program offices consult with local partners in communities throughout the country for feedback on the agency's future direction.

2.3.1. Priorities

Consider the public's priorities.

Federal agencies exist to serve the people of this country, so it is important to consider the public's priorities when developing strategic plans.

Stakeholder(s):

The Public

2.4. Partners

Learn from partner agencies.

LEARNING FROM PARTNER AGENCIES ~ Few challenges that the federal government tackles fall neatly within the jurisdiction of a single agency.

Stakeholder(s):

Unemployed People :

For example, while the Department of Labor plays a big role in combatting unemployment, the departments of Education, Health and Human Services and other agencies administer programs with the same goal.

U.S. Department of Labor

Department of Education

Department of Health and Human Services

National Security Agencies :

Similarly, the departments of Homeland Security, State, Defense and others play vital roles in the national security realm.

Department of Homeland Security

Department of State

Department of Defense

2.4.1. Complementary Missions

Consult with agencies with complementary missions to develop mutually supportive goals, objectives and strategies.

Agencies with overlapping missions should consult with one another when developing their goals, objectives and strategies for achieving them. Doing so can yield valuable new insights, but it is an underused practice, according to the experts we interviewed... The planning team at a department responsible for advancing the country's economic wellbeing engages its counterparts at agencies with overlapping goals—such as economic recovery—to make sure its strategies for achieving them are complementary.

Stakeholder(s):

Department of Veterans Affairs :

The VA's strategic planning team interviewed senior leaders at several partner agencies, including the departments of Defense, Labor, Education, Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, and others. Team members asked leaders at partner agencies about their vision for the VA and how the agencies could work together more effectively in the future to better serve veterans. To ensure that the discussions were candid, the VA team promised confidentiality. The team also spent considerable effort identifying the best people to interview, targeting senior leaders who knew the relationship between their agencies and the VA well—what it was like in the past, its current state and what it could become in the future.

Department of Defense

Department of Labor

Department of Education

Department of Agriculture

Department of Housing and Urban Development

Theresa Blackledge :

“Connecting with the right people at other agencies was a challenge,” said Theresa Blackledge, an analyst and strategic planning lead at the VA. “You really have to work your connections. We put as much thought into identifying the right people to talk to as the questions we were going to ask them.”

2.4.2. Meetings

Include program managers in strategic planning meetings.

Importantly, the department includes program managers in the meetings because they make the decisions about how programs are executed.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Program Managers

2.4.2.1. Metrics

Learn about creative ways peer agencies measure success.

Meetings also provide an opportunity for the department to learn about creative ways peer agencies measure success.

Stakeholder(s):

Peer Agencies

2.5. Congressional Consultation

Consult with Congress.

REACHING OUT TO CONGRESS ~ When drafting their strategic plans, agencies are statutorily required to consult with Congress.²

Stakeholder(s):

Congress

understanding about the resources necessary to achieve it.

Congressional Committees :

It is an opportunity for agencies, and members of the congressional committees who oversee their work, to align on a strategic vision and develop a shared

2.5.1. Preliminary Dialog

Engage in preliminary dialog to prepare for consultation.

Stakeholder(s):

GAO :

To help ensure the consultation is useful, advance work is necessary, according to a GAO report.³

you have any comments.’ That sort of thing. That’s not consultation,” he said.

Chris Mihm :

While there are many ways to solicit feedback from Congress, working with members “early and often” is key, GAO’s Mihm said. “Congress does not like when something is dumped on them, marked ‘Draft—Not for Distribution,’ that shows it is clearly a done deal and the ‘consultation’ was merely to tick a box. ‘Hey, we’re releasing this next week, let us know if

Federal Agencies :

Agencies and their congressional partners should have a preliminary conversation about what they wish to discuss and hope to achieve from the consultation, and relevant materials—such as an early draft of the strategic plan—should be shared beforehand, the report states.

2.5.2. Participants

Include the appropriate staff in the consultation.

It is also important to include the right people in the consultation, such as agency staff members who can answer questions about key programs, and congressional staffers who are highly knowledgeable about an agency’s work and understand the purpose of strategic planning.⁴

3. Relevance

Revise and update strategic plans as needed when operating environments change.

Strategic Plans Should Remain Up to Date, Changing When Necessary to Reflect the Environment ~ The world can change drastically during the four-year lifespan of a strategic plan. For plans to be most useful, strategic planners must revise and update them as needed when an agency's operating environment changes. Treating the plan as a living document and keeping it current helps ensure it remains a valuable guide for agency leaders and the staff. "If you don't update your plan when things change, people will stop looking at it. They'll stop using it," said one department's strategic planning lead. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, their department suddenly had to administer relief programs worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Even though it was the final year of the Trump administration, the department updated its strategic plan to reflect its relief and recovery work. "Had we not done so, the plan would have been irrelevant," the planning lead said. "It also gave credence to what people were working so hard on."

3.1. Strategic Alignment

Align agency goals and objectives with the administration's priorities.

Stakeholder(s):

Office of Management and Budget :

As agencies develop their strategic plans for fiscal 2022-2026, they are required by the Office of Management and Budget to align their goals and objectives with the Biden administration's top priorities, which include economic strength and revitalization, equity, climate change and recovery from the pandemic.

Biden Administration :

Since the administration has designated these as today's most important issues, embracing the requirement to align agency goals with administration priorities is another way to keep plans current and relevant—as the activities of these agencies demonstrate:

National Science Foundation :

The National Science Foundation's 2022-2026 strategic plan will promote greater diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in science and engineering. One way it will do so is by focusing on the "missing millions"—a reference to the fact that historically, some populations have been underrepresented in these fields. If successful, NSF will boost their participation, improve the STEM-capability of the country's workforce, and make the demographics of the science and engineering community better reflect the demographics of the nation.⁵

U.S. Treasury Department :

U.S. Treasury Department :

The Treasury Department's strategic plan will instruct two agency components, the Mint and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, to make their manufacturing processes green and eliminate waste.

U.S. Mint

Bureau of Engraving and Printing

Small Business Administration :

The Small Business Administration's plan will prioritize boosting the resilience of small businesses, so they can weather future economic downturns more effectively.

Small Businesses

4. Evidence

Apply evidence to inform strategic plans.

Strategic Plans Should Be Informed by Evidence ~ The federal government has taken significant strides to become more data-driven and evidence-based since agencies last developed their strategic plans in 2017. The effort hit a high-water mark in 2019 when the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act was signed into law, institutionalizing the role evidence should play in informing decision-making about policies and programs. Recent guidance from OMB reminded agencies that they must go beyond merely complying with the law and use it to build a culture that embraces learning.⁶ As agencies develop and implement their fiscal 2022-2026 strategic plans, they should answer the call and draw heavily on evidence to inform the selection of their goals, objectives and strategies. Sometimes that means seeking out evidence that has already been gathered. Other times, agencies will have to build new evidence themselves. Evidence can help agencies choose the best goals and objectives to advance their mission and develop top-notch strategies for achieving them. It can also help agencies determine whether their approach is working or needs to be revised.

4.1. Learning

Build evidence via learning agendas.

BUILDING EVIDENCE WITH A LEARNING AGENDA ~ The Evidence Act requires agencies to include a “learning agenda” in their strategic plans. An agency’s learning agenda lists its highest-priority research questions and specifies how they might be answered—for example, by analyzing data or evaluating the effectiveness of a program. The learning agenda is intended to be developed alongside the strategic plan. Answering the questions in it fills critical gaps in an agency’s knowledge and provides insight into how the agency could improve its programs and better fulfill its mission.

Stakeholder(s):

Diana Epstein :

“As agencies identify their goals and objectives, they should ask themselves what questions remain about how to achieve them, and how those questions could

be answered,” said Diana Epstein, evidence team lead at OMB and a presenter at our workshop series. “The learning agenda is your tool to get there.”

4.1.1. Strategic Alignment

Align learning agenda questions with strategic goals and objectives.

When choosing questions to include in their learning agenda, agencies should refer to the goals and objectives in their strategic plans. Alignment between the learning agenda and the plan’s goals and objectives ensures the most pressing questions are being asked and, hopefully, answered.

4.2. Silos

Break down silos so that planning teams, research and evaluation staff members, and program managers work closely together.

BREAKING DOWN SILOS TO MAKE THE MOST OF EVIDENCE ~ To fully integrate evidence into the strategic planning process, it is important for strategic planning teams, research and evaluation staff members, and program managers to work together closely. Each group has specialized knowledge and a unique perspective, and close collaboration can help ensure the best available evidence is being used to guide an agency's work.

Stakeholder(s):

Planning Teams

Research Staff

Evaluation Staff

Program Managers

Small Business Administration :

At the Small Business Administration, program managers work hand-in-hand with the planning team to identify evidence-based strategies for strengthening their programs, and to brainstorm questions that, if answered, could improve program delivery.

Marjorie Rudinsky :

"For many programs, creating learning agendas is a new exercise," said Marjorie Rudinsky, director of SBA's Performance Management Division. "I liken it to playing 'Jeopardy,' where you don't give the answer but ask the question. It requires additional forethought, but the more we incorporate evidence into the strategic planning process, the more muscle memory people will develop."

National Science Foundation :

At the National Science Foundation, strategic planners and evaluation experts collaborate to ensure the plan and the learning agenda closely complement each other.

Janis Coughlin-Piester :

"We're really trying to develop a virtuous cycle where the strategic plan's goals drive the questions in the learning agenda, and the questions in the learning agenda drive the [program] evaluations we fund, the strategic reviews we undertake, and the performance

measures we choose," said Janis Coughlin-Piester, deputy performance improvement officer at NSF.

Department of Housing and Urban Development :

At the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the strategic planning, program, and research and evaluation offices have cultivated a relationship based on strong communication and mutual respect.

Calvin Johnson :

The department's leadership set the expectation long ago that the offices collaborate closely with one another and their partners on the program teams, according to Calvin Johnson, deputy assistant secretary for the Office of Research, Evaluation and Monitoring, and Max Bing-Grant, acting director of the Strategic Planning and Performance Division. While leadership set the tone initially, collaboration has become a part of the culture over time, according to Johnson and Bing-Grant, both presenters at our workshop series. They agreed that a key to successful relationships is understanding what partners need and focusing on how to support them. It is also important to build and maintain rapport. "It's not uncommon for me to be up in their suite, walking the halls, talking to them, even talking about things unrelated to work," Johnson said. "And it's not uncommon for folks from [the Strategic Planning and Performance Division] to be down in our suite, genuinely curious about what we're working on and trying to learn from us."

Max Bing-Grant

5. Results

Turn strategic plans into results.

Tips for Turning the Strategic Plan into Results ~ Once agencies have cleared the last hurdle and published their fiscal 2022-2026 strategic plans online in February 2022, they must quickly begin to implement them. Lack of awareness about what is in the plan, inertia and resistance to change can all stand in the way. No matter how strong the plan, it will only improve the work of government if it is implemented effectively. “Writing the strategic plan is a sprint to the starting line of a marathon,” said one strategic planning team lead who participated in our workshop series.

5.1. Communication

Communicate strategic plans to the workforce.

Proactively Communicate the Plan to the Workforce ~ According to employee survey data, government needs to improve how it communicates about strategy. In 2020, 68% of Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey respondents agreed that their managers communicate the goals of the organization.⁷ In 2019, the last year the question appeared on the survey, 64% of respondents agreed that managers review and evaluate their organization’s progress toward meeting its goals and objectives.⁸ And in a 2017 survey of federal managers, just 46% agreed to a “great” or “very great” extent that employees in their agency receive positive recognition for helping the agency accomplish its strategic goals.⁹

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Leaders :

The strategic plan can inform and energize employees, but only if agency leaders publicize it throughout the workforce, according to workshop participants and the specialists we interviewed.

Agency Staff :

That includes communicating the strategy to the staff; reminding them how their work contributes to the outcomes the agency is trying to achieve, however junior they may be; and updating staff members on the agency’s progress toward meeting its goals and objectives while celebrating success along the way.

5.1.1. Posters

Hang posters about strategic plans in common areas.

To raise awareness about the strategic plan, some agencies hang posters in common areas around the office.

5.1.2. Videos

Make available short videos about strategic plans.

In a remote work environment, leaders might record short videos instead.

5.1.3. Strategies

Develop communications strategies to support strategic plans.

One workshop participant encouraged leaders to work with the public affairs team to develop a robust communications strategy around the plan's release.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Public Affairs Teams

National Science Foundation :

At the National Science Foundation, the strategic planning team tries to structure the plan in an accessible way, using one word to describe each goal, followed by a longer summary.

Janis Coughlin-Piester :

"A lot of staff told us they remembered NSF used to have a strategic plan that was about 'people, tools and ideas,' and they knew what those terms meant and understood what fit under each one. A pithy presentation can help staff glance at the plan and get the high notes," said NSF's Coughlin-Piester.

Gary Steinberg :

Gary Steinberg, a former senior executive and participant in our workshop series, required his leadership team to convene their staff quarterly and review the organization's progress toward implementing the strategic plan. He also delivered an annual "state of the agency" address, during which he talked about the strategic plan, the priorities for the year and how the organization had performed. "It was an opportunity to celebrate success and tell our staff, 'You made this happen. It was your work on the front lines. You did a great job and made a difference in the lives of the people we serve by carrying out our mission each and every day,'" Steinberg said.

5.2. Processes

Integrate strategic plans into agency processes.

Integrate the Strategic Plan into Key Agency Processes

5.2.1. Decision-Making

Use strategic plans to drive decision-making for key processes.

Agencies should use the strategic plan to drive decision-making for key processes, including budgeting, workforce management, enterprise risk management and performance management. Doing so ensures the processes are advancing the strategic plan's goals and objectives.

5.2.2. Leadership

Ensure that agency leaders are committed to the strategic plans.

It is also a good way for agency leaders to signal their commitment to the plan.

Stakeholder(s):

National Science Foundation :

At the National Science Foundation, senior executives are required to link their performance goals to the agency's strategic plan, specifying how each performance goal relates to the plan. Some executives

require their direct reports to do the same thing. At Treasury, budget requests are expected to include an explanation about how the money will advance the strategic plan's objectives.

5.3. Progress, Change & Accountability

Evaluate progress toward implementing strategic plans.

Regularly Track and Report Progress, Change Course if Necessary and Demand Accountability ~ Agencies are required to evaluate their progress toward implementing the strategic plan and share their assessment with OMB annually.

5.3.1. Assessments

Annually share performance assessments with OMB.

Stakeholder(s):

OMB

5.3.2. Priority Goals

Review progress toward achieving priority goals.

Additionally, agencies must review progress toward achieving their priority goals—a subset of goals they are expected to accomplish within two years—at least quarterly.

5.3.3. Monitoring & Reporting

Monitor and report progress continuously.

While these reviews are a good opportunity to pause and take stock, top-performing agencies do much more. They monitor and report on their progress year-round and use the best available evidence to determine if their strategies are working. If not, they change course.

Stakeholder(s):

High-Performing Agencies

5.3.3.1. Evidence

Use the best available evidence to determine if strategies are working.

5.3.3.2. Direction

Change course as necessary.

5.3.4. Accountability

Demand accountability from staff responsible for turning plans into results.

They also demand accountability from staff members who are responsible for turning the plan into results. This year, one large Cabinet-level agency's plan will assign one person to be responsible for each strategic objective. The plan will also specify who these leads should work with to accomplish the objective, which can include department bureaus and offices or stakeholders outside the agency. "And if you don't identify who the lead should work with, they might not know what resources they have at their disposal," the agency's strategic planning lead said.

5.3.5. Performance Reviews

Conduct regular performance reviews with agency leaders.

Regular performance reviews with agency leadership are another way to promote accountability for carrying out the strategic plan.

Stakeholder(s):

Agency Leaders

Department of Veterans Affairs :

At the Department of Veterans Affairs, the senior leadership team gathers routinely to update colleagues on key performance indicators related to the plan.

Gary Steinberg :

“The practice was designed to hold people accountable, but it is also an opportunity to celebrate success and have a candid discussion about problems and solutions as a leadership team,” Steinberg said. “Having that focus and that regular dialogue really kept up the pressure to make progress on the goals and objectives in the strategic plan.”

Administrative Information

Start Date:

End Date: 2022-02-28

Publication Date: 2021-09-10

Source: <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Meeting-the-Moment.pdf>

Submitter:

Given Name: Owen

Surname: Ambur

Email: Owen.Ambur@verizon.net

Phone: