

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Government Accountability Office

Congress Interagency Collaborators **Citizens**

White House Office of Management and

Budget Interest Groups and Associations **Interagency**

Councils State and Local Governments

Unions White House Policy Councils **Media**

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GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

By Judy England-Joseph

You may have heard of the Government Accountability Office, but may not understand exactly what it does and how you can leverage it to further your agency's mission. The General Accounting Office was established in 1921 and was renamed the Government Accountability Office in 2005 to better reflect its current role and responsibilities. You probably know GAO as the "watchdog" of the Congress, but during your time in government you will find out that it is more than that.

GAO is a place you can go for an independent perspective on your agency and its programs. GAO's role in government is to assess government programs, analyze key issues facing the nation, state the facts, and make recommendations for improvement. It is able to look across the federal government at similar programs, operational activities, and management approaches to identify leading practices and present lessons learned to any leaders that will listen.

Step back for a moment and ask yourself if you have all the information you need to effectively lead and manage your agency. How effective are the programs administered in your agency? Does the agency operate in an efficient and effective manner? Are there areas where the risk of fraud, waste, or abuse is high? What actions can you take to improve your agency's performance and achieve greater results? GAO may be able to help you answer these questions.

What Is GAO?

GAO is a legislative branch agency with the mission to support the Congress "in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and ensure the accountability of the federal government for the benefit of the American people." GAO's mission statement states that it aims to provide Congress with timely information that is objective, fact-based, nonpartisan, non-ideological, fair, and balanced. It performs a broad range of research and evaluation work to assist its congressional clients in their authorization, appropriation, and oversight roles. To ensure its objectivity and independence, GAO is authorized only two political appointees, including the comptroller general, who has a 15-year term of office. As a result, there is very little leadership turnover and deep institutional memory.

GAO's staff has expertise in front-office programs as well as back-office operations (budget, financial management, information technology, procurement/acquisition management, strategic and performance management, and human capital management). It can be a one-stop source of independent, objective, verified information on government management. Most importantly,

its people have an extraordinary amount of information and a desire to help you use that knowledge to your advantage.

GAO's work is primarily congressionally requested or mandated in legislation. The demand for GAO resources is so great today that it gives priority to chairs and ranking members of committees with jurisdiction over the issues to be studied. The Congress determines the topic, but GAO defines the research questions and determines how the work will be performed. To further ensure its objectivity and independence and to provide transparency to everything it does, GAO insists on making its information public even when clients might wish otherwise. However, when information must be protected for national security reasons, GAO will disclose it only to those authorized to receive it and with a need to know. GAO also conducts investigations, rules on bid protests, and assists Congress with developing legislation and oversight agendas.

During your tenure, you are likely to interact with GAO in several different ways. The most frequent interactions will involve studies it is performing within your agency and the reports that result from these studies. But there are other ways you might interact with GAO, starting with a request from you for a briefing on previous GAO studies both in your agency and government-wide.

Using GAO as a Management Resource

You may be surprised to learn that before you were nominated, confirmed, or appointed, GAO was pulling together information on its work at your agency and looking forward to sharing that information with you in a consultative, non-adversarial environment. GAO operates on the premise that the possibility of improving government far exceeds the benefit of simply criticizing it. It also develops best-practice-driven guidelines for implementing government-wide legislation and models that agencies can use to self-evaluate.

GAO can contribute to your understanding of what works and what doesn't work, as well as suggest actions needed to achieve performance improvement or program success. Knowing what GAO knows about your agency gives you an added perspective of knowing what has interested Congress in the past and where Congress might focus in the future. In the end, GAO's facts, analysis, and recommendations can provide the leverage you need to find the common ground essential to bringing about desired changes.

Interacting with GAO at the Start of a Review

At the beginning of every review, GAO requests a meeting to discuss the review's questions, scope, and methodology. Often that meeting is held with

the program officials closest to the issues planned for review. Your GAO liaison should participate in those discussions as well.

This initial meeting will provide your staff an opportunity to learn about the objectives of the review. Your staff will also have the opportunity to provide input and insights into the issues or areas being reviewed and to make suggestions that might enhance the usefulness of the review's results for your agency. GAO believes that agency leadership and organizational buy-in are crucial to meaningful performance improvement and lasting change. As a result, your understanding of the work GAO plans to perform and how you might use what is learned to enhance your agency's activities is of mutual importance.

Throughout the review, GAO is willing to brief agency officials on the status of the review. If you work closely with GAO to inform them of any actions you have taken, these efforts might be recognized in any report, testimony, or briefing product discussing the results of the review. GAO will still report the problems found, but the report title could be more in the vein of "Agency Correcting Problems" than "Problems Plague Agency."

More frequently than you may think, there will be occasions when the topic of a GAO review should be on your radar screen. Consequently, you want to be sure that you have a reliable system in place to inform you of all GAO reviews ongoing at your agency. While you are not in the driver's seat regarding what a GAO review will cover, you can make suggestions that might enhance the effectiveness of the review results. At the completion of the review, GAO will conduct an exit meeting to brief agency officials on the results of its work. Here again is an opportunity for the agency to react to GAO's findings and conclusions and provide additional information to ensure GAO's work is complete.

Interacting with GAO Once a Report Is Written

GAO work generally results in products such as written reports, testimony statements, or correspondence to its congressional clients. It frequently briefs congressional clients on the results of its work and other matters of interest. GAO will include recommendations to Congress whenever legislative actions are appropriate, and to agency heads when opportunities exist to improve agency management or program performance. Before GAO issues the final report, it will provide you with an opportunity to comment on the draft. The opportunity to comment should be taken very seriously. GAO might revise the report, where appropriate, to note changes that are based on agency feedback and include a copy of your formal response in the final report.

Recommendations

As you set your agenda and priorities, you should consider ways to leverage GAO's work.

Recommendation One: Review the recommendations GAO has made to the Congress regarding your agency's programs and activities.

It is very possible that one or more of those recommendations would actually help you accomplish your goals. If so, use GAO as a lever to convince Congress that actions on those recommendations are needed.

Recommendation Two: Review the recommendations from past GAO reports.

Unless your agency has implemented them, they are likely not to go away and can become the subject of future reports or congressional hearings. Determine whether those recommendations should be part of your strategic priorities.

Recommendation Three: Throughout your tenure, make use of GAO's knowledge about your agency's programs and their effectiveness to inform your policy and programmatic strategies.

Through GAO, you can learn about the experiences of past agency leaders across the federal government who have set similar programmatic goals and objectives. Find out what worked and didn't work and why.

If you take advantage of the opportunities to engage GAO, you will have established the foundation for leveraging GAO to improve your agency's performance in accomplishing your programmatic and operational goals.

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