

Case Study NSF



Pam O'Neil (Deputy PIO) and JD Kundu (OMB examiner)

What did you hope to see as the outcome of the collaboration between your agency and OMB?

Pam: "I wanted NSF to become a little bit more evidence based in its decision making and saw the Strategic Review as a way to do that. One of the things JD did was to be clear that he was looking for options for action or improvement - this was really helpful to us and became a key part of the discussion at our senior management round table and within the Agency."

JD: "The core of NSF's mission is promotion of basic research where it is -by definition- difficult to see what the outcome will be. I wanted to see if NSF could nonetheless come up with meaningful ways to improve performance."

How did you effectively communicate about the Strategic Review in NSF - avoid it being seen as 'just another OMB requirement'?

Pam: "It was incredibly challenging, especially with senior leaders who were very concerned about workload. So our first conversations were about how to do this without creating more work. Our approach was to have individual meetings with all the senior leaders, and pepper our presentations with questions that we knew would intrigue them; we gave them the opportunity to choose what questions were most important for the Agency to answer. And we talked about how results would be used with OMB - for budget formulation - which was motivating in itself. We barely mentioned categorization, which was helpful. The definition of success was that we come up with action for improvement. But the prime motivator was the curiosity of our senior leaders to answer these important and interesting questions."

SR process has multiple customers - what did the OMB team find most useful in the document? What are your expectations of the next round?

JD: "Most important thing was that it identified clear next steps/follow on actions - over the next several months we will have a conversation about what we're going to do to move forward. Some things might get left behind but we will come back to them next year. NSF is organized by research

programs in specific disciplines, but the Agency Goals are cross-cutting. The Strategic Review process was an opportunity to pick up cross-cutting issues and think about what NSF could do to add collective benefit to multiple programs."

Pam: "To give some examples of the type of next steps we submitted - some were short-term and focused on the next Budget cycle, but some were also upstream (e.g. a workshop to think more about the issue). The aim was to focus on what would be useful to us to improve mission delivery."

How did NSF and OMB engage early in the process?

Pam: "We had a fairly informal phone conference with JD after we submitted our proposed process and asked him what he wanted. We took his guidance very seriously and it became part of our communication plan with the agency - 'this is what OMB wants to see'."

JD: "I always felt like NSF's Goals and objectives were very grand, but when we had the call Pam and Marty told me they were going to try to focus on what will move the ball forward. That made sense to me and told me what to expect."

What is OMB going to do with this information?

JD: "The summary of findings is a useful checkpoint. I want to hear from the agency about what is doable. The truth is there have been some issues that have been on my mind where I've been wondering how to get agency leadership to take this issue seriously. The summary of findings provides a useful touchstone document to use in talking to agency leadership and program managers about those issues."

Final thoughts - one key takeaway

Pam: "Lots of people had a lot of fun because we focused on the key analytical questions, which were interesting and important - 'water cooler questions'. The attitude in NSF was great; it was the first time that people have enjoyed working on a GPRA process and volunteered to do it next year. So my advice would be to make the Strategic Review something that works for you."

JD: "The NSF review was candid. Sending a document that makes it look like everything is great damages any Agency's credibility with OMB. No organization is without challenges. Spelling it out and putting it out there is very helpful."