



HIGHLIGHTS OF A GAO ROUNDTABLE

The Chief Operating Officer Concept: A Potential Strategy to Address Federal Governance Challenges

Highlights of GAO-03-192SP

Why GAO Convened This Roundtable

The federal government is in a period of profound transition that requires a comprehensive review, reassessment, reprioritization, and reengineering of what the government does, how it does business, and, in some cases, who does the government's business. Agencies will need to transform their cultures so that they are more results oriented, customer focused, and collaborative in nature. At the same time, GAO's work over the years has amply documented that agencies are suffering from a range of long-standing management problems that are undermining their abilities to efficiently, economically, and effectively accomplish their missions and achieve results.

On September 9, 2002, GAO convened a roundtable to discuss the application and the related advantages and disadvantages of the Chief Operating Officer (COO) concept and how it might apply within selected federal departments and agencies as one strategy to address certain systemic federal governance and management challenges. The invited participants have current or recent executive branch leadership responsibilities, significant executive management experience, or both.

What Participants Said

At the roundtable, participants generated ideas and engaged in an open dialogue on the possible application of the COO concept. There was general agreement that the following three themes provide a course for action.

Elevate attention on management issues and transformational change. The nature and scope of the changes needed in many agencies require the sustained and inspired commitment of the top political and career leadership.

Integrate various key management and transformation efforts. While officials with management responsibilities often have successfully worked together, there needs to be a single point within agencies with the perspective and responsibility—as well as authority—to ensure the successful implementation of functional management and, if appropriate, transformational change efforts.

Institutionalize accountability for addressing management issues and leading transformational change. The management weaknesses in some agencies are deeply entrenched and long standing and will take years of sustained attention and continuity to resolve. In addition, making fundamental changes in agencies' cultures will require a long-term effort. In the federal government, the frequent turnover of the political leadership has often made it difficult to obtain the sustained and inspired attention required to make needed changes.

Within the context of these generally agreed-upon themes, the participants offered a number of ideas to help address management weaknesses and drive transformational change.