



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION



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MAY 28, 1980

B-198579

Mr. James B. King  
Chairman, National Transportation Safety Board  
AGC 00433

Dear Mr. King:

Subject: ~~The~~ Transportation Safety Board Could Improve  
Its Planning Process (CED-80-101)

We have reviewed the National Transportation Safety Board's planning process and concluded that it could establish one that is more effective and comprehensive. We believe the Board needs better planning in order to

- tie together its various functions to accomplish its mission, goals, and objectives;
- identify and justify its resource needs;
- measure its effectiveness in fulfilling its mission, goals, and objectives; and
- identify weak or ineffective programs or activities that need to be improved or eliminated.

BOARD FUNCTIONS

The Independent Safety Board Act of 1974 (49 U.S.C. 1901 note) established the National Transportation Safety Board as an independent Government agency to promote transportation safety by investigating accidents and recommending safety improvements. Under the act, the Board was to:

- Investigate and report on certain accidents in each transportation mode.
- Conduct special studies and investigations on transportation safety issues.
- Publish recommended procedures for investigating accidents.

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- Evaluate other Government agencies' awareness of transportation safety and what they were doing about it.
- Evaluate the adequacy of safeguards and procedures for transporting hazardous materials and the performance of Government agencies charged with transporting those materials safely.
- Review on appeal the suspension, amendment, modification, revocation, or denial of certain certificates, documents, or licenses issued by the Federal Aviation Administration or the Coast Guard.

The Board has five members, one of which serves as Chairman. Under the Chairman's supervision, the Managing Director coordinates and directs the Board's day-to-day operations and approves and implements plans and procedures to achieve its objectives. The Board's major functions are carried out by its Bureau of Accident Investigation, Bureau of Technology, Office of Evaluations and Safety Objectives, Office of Administrative Law Judges, and Office of General Counsel. For fiscal year 1980, the Board was authorized 388 staff positions and was appropriated about \$16.8 million.

Considering the Board's many functions and components and its limited staff and resources, planning should also be a key Board function.

PLANNING IS ESSENTIAL  
TO GOOD MANAGEMENT

Planning is vital to sound management because it can be used to communicate to all employees what an organization is doing and where it is going. It is a continuous process of making decisions, implementing those decisions, and analyzing and measuring the results. In the planning process, an organization takes initiative for organizing its work and takes responsibility for achieving certain goals.

A comprehensive planning process involves several steps:

- Defining the organization's mission. An organization needs a clear purpose that is understood by its members.

- Setting clear, specific goals and objectives. These are derived from the organization's mission. They guide overall policy and the activities of each organizational unit.
- Setting priorities for achieving goals and objectives. Without priorities, the staff will spread its attention over a broad range of activities, and much of its effort may be wasted.
- Implementing the plan. Priorities must be translated into action. To do so, standards of accomplishment and deadlines for each task must be set, and someone must be made accountable for results.
- Providing feedback. An organization must determine if it is meeting its objectives. Therefore, it should measure its performance and identify objectives that have been achieved or have proven unattainable.

The first three steps of the comprehensive planning process are called strategic planning, which generally results in a long-range plan. The last two steps require the use of several key management tools--management information systems, program evaluation, and budgeting.

THE BOARD'S STRATEGIC  
PLANNING COULD BE BETTER

Over the past several years, the Board has tried to improve its planning. However, the Board could further improve its planning by

- clearly defining its mission;
- setting clear, specific goals and objectives for accomplishing its mission; and
- setting priorities for achieving goals and objectives.

The Board has tried to  
improve planning

In response to the President's request for multiyear planning and in an effort to increase program effectiveness, the Board established a safety objectives program in fiscal

year 1979 to identify and concentrate on important safety problems and issues. This program resulted in 41 safety objectives and a multiyear plan for addressing them. Also, the program was intended to focus part of the accident investigative effort on predetermined safety issues. The Board's multiyear plan for the safety objectives program was included in its fiscal year 1980 and 1981 budget requests.

In addition, in preparing its fiscal year 1980 and 1981 budget requests, the Board used zero-based budgeting, which increases emphasis on program planning and development. In developing the fiscal year 1980 budget, the Board's budget instructions set forth the Chairman's goals so that major and short-term objectives could be established. Major objectives for the fiscal year 1980 budget were to require more than 1 budget year to accomplish, whereas short-term objectives were to be accomplished within the budget year. Long-term goals and major objectives for the fiscal year 1981 budget were established by the Office of Managing Director.

The Board needs to  
define its mission

The Board's plan, as set forth in its fiscal year 1981 budget, does not clearly define its mission. The plan recognizes that the Board is in business to improve transportation safety, yet the plan's long-term goals seem to be aimed more at promoting rather than improving safety. "Improve" connotes that the Board can act directly to correct a problem, whereas "promote" implies a more passive role. Despite the difference in terms, the Board's Managing Director attributed no special significance to either term and saw no need to better define the Board's mission. In addition, the plan misconstrues the Board's accident investigation function as its mission.

The way an agency defines its mission can affect policy, direction, priorities, resource allocation, and program implementation. For example, if the Board's mission is accident investigation, then it is understandable why the Board has used about 70 percent of its direct staff resources in fiscal year 1979 for accident investigations. On the other hand, if the Board's mission is broader than just accident investigation, then the use of such a large amount of resources for accident investigation is questionable.

The Board's objectives  
did not meet its criteria

The Board's criteria for setting objectives state that objectives must be

- specific as to what action will be taken, when it will be taken, and what results are expected;
- measurable, tangible, or verifiable;
- attainable; and
- relevant and important to the Board's goals.

Our review of the Board's plan showed that these criteria had not been met. Generally, the time period in which major objectives were to be achieved had not been specified. Also the specificity, reasonableness, achievability, and measurability of major objectives were uncertain. For example, one major objective was to achieve economies/efficiencies in overhead and support activities and in the unit cost of certain end products. However, the overhead and support activities and end products were not identified and the amount of reduction in unit cost or the economies/efficiencies to be realized were not stated.

Some of the Board's long-term goals seemed redundant, as shown by the following from the 1981 budget:

- Increase and promote the safety of the Nation's transportation system through stimulating Government agencies, transportation organizations, the transportation industry, and the public to take appropriate actions.
- Develop support for the timely fulfillment of Board recommendations.

Some of the Board's major objectives did not seem relevant to its long-term goals. For example, the plan did not relate what major objectives were relevant to the Board's goal to increase and promote the safety of the Nation's transportation system through stimulating others to take appropriate action.

According to Board officials, many of the Board's long-term goals and major objectives were more managerial than mission oriented. Also, the Managing Director said some goals and objectives could not be quantified.

The Board's overall goals and objectives were not shown in its plan. Instead, goals and objectives were listed by organizational components. More importantly, the priorities that the Board had assigned to the numerous goals and objectives that were listed were not shown.

THE BOARD'S BUDGET IS NOT  
A GOOD IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

An agency's budget is its short-term plan for action (implementation plan) for carrying out goals and objectives in the long-range plan. It is not a substitute for effective long-range planning. The budget process aids effective management by

- outlining the agency's activities for the coming fiscal year;
- showing how and why an organization spends its resources;
- measuring variances between actual and budgeted costs; and
- establishing accountability among managers, thereby increasing productivity and efficiency.

The Board's budget does not show the total resources that the Board will devote to any one activity or program. For example, one of the Board's major functions is investigating accidents. It plans to investigate 1,783 accidents and issue reports on 53 of them during fiscal year 1981. But the total resources that the Board will devote to these efforts are not noted in its budget.

The budget also does not show which Board activities and programs will be used, and the extent of this use, to accomplish short-term objectives. For example, the budget does not show what Board functions, activities, or resources will be required to fulfill the Board's short-term safety objectives.

A number of the Board's short-term objectives seemed to relate to its major objectives; but, like the Board's major objectives, the short-term objectives were more managerial than mission oriented.

In addition, short-term objectives were not always reasonable, measureable, achievable, or specific, thus impairing the Board's ability to compare objectives with accomplishments in order to assess performance. For example, one short-term Board objective was to conduct quarterly recommendation review meetings with the the Department of Transportation to assure timely implementation of safety recommendations. While the holding of quarterly meetings is specific, measurable, and no doubt reasonable and achievable, it does not assure timely implementation of safety recommendations--the most important aspect of this objective.

PROGRAM EVALUATION IS AN  
IMPORTANT FACTOR IN PLANNING

In recent years, the Congress and the public have increasingly emphasized Federal program accountability. This emphasis has, in turn, increased the importance of the various Federal information gathering systems and analytical activities referred to as program evaluation.

Program evaluation provides the feedback an agency needs to measure its performance against its goals and to redefine its goals as necessary. Program evaluation is needed to strengthen weak programs, support effective programs, and eliminate unproductive programs. It can also provide the objective information needed to make difficult program and budget decisions.

In this report, we define program evaluation as a method of providing input into future policy and management decisions through a formal, organized appraisal of the manner in which existing programs are

- achieving their stated objectives;
- meeting the performance expectations of responsible officials, interested groups, and/or the general public; and
- producing other significant effects.

BOARD LACKS AN EFFECTIVE  
PROGRAM EVALUATION SYSTEM

The Board has no formal plan for systematically reviewing its programs. Also, Board officials said previous program evaluations were not concerned with comparing program outcomes with objectives and inputs. (The absence of quantifiable goals and objectives further compounds this deficiency.) In fact, the Deputy Managing Director said the Board's former program analysis officer had not really performed program evaluations. As a result, Board officials said they did not know for sure whether Board resources were being used where they could do the most good.

The Board has hired a new program analysis officer who will be responsible for developing and implementing a program evaluation plan. However, this is the Board's only program analysis officer, and many of this individual's duties and responsibilities do not concern program evaluation.

CONCLUSIONS

The Board needs to establish a more effective comprehensive planning process. A better planning process would, among other things, help the Board to accomplish its missions, goals, and objectives; evaluate its performance; and identify weak and ineffective programs in order to improve or eliminate them.

MANAGING DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS  
AND OUR EVALUATION

The Managing Director questioned the Board's need for a better planning process. He said that planning of the nature referred to in this report was best suited to a large agency, not a small one like the Board. He believed his day-to-day contacts with key executives were sufficient direction. In addition, he did not want a separate, permanent planning staff. Further, he said that even if additional resources were available for planning, he would rather use them to carry out the Board's mission.

We believe planning should be a key management function in all agencies regardless of size. In smaller agencies like the Board, planning may be less difficult and complex, thus minimizing the need for a separate, permanent planning staff. However, an effective planning process must exist.



The absence of a permanent planning staff should not hinder the Board from improving its planning process. Temporary resources for this function could be obtained, as is now done for the Board's existing budget and planning activities. If this diversion of resources interferes with the Board's ability to accomplish its mission, the Board could try to obtain additional resources.

The Managing Director provides direction in his day-to-day contacts. But these contacts are not the same as a coordinated, systematic approach for defining the Board's mission; setting goals, objectives, and priorities; and conveying this information to Board employees, the Congress, and the public. We continue to believe these activities can best be carried out through development and implementation of a long-range plan.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the Chairman, National Transportation Safety Board:

- Separate strategic planning from the budget process by requiring a specific long-range plan.
- Assure that the long-range plan includes a clear definition of the Board's mission; specific, quantifiable goals and objectives; and priorities for achieving these goals and objectives.
- Strengthen the Board's budget process by requiring that the budget show (1) the total resources that will be used to carry out specific Board programs, activities, or functions, (2) how Board programs and activities relate to short-term objectives, and (3) how Board programs, activities, and short-term objectives relate to the long-range plan.
- Assure that a formal program evaluation plan is developed for determining whether Board programs and activities are achieving established goals and objectives, meeting performance expectations, or producing other significant effects. Because the Board has only one program analysis officer, who has dual responsibilities, assure that sufficient resources are available to implement the program evaluation plan.

As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions taken on our recommendations to the House Committee on Government Operations and the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

We are sending copies of this report to the four committees mentioned above and to the House and Senate legislative committees concerned with the Board; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; interested Members of Congress; and other parties.

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesy of the Board's staff during our review.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Henry Eschwege".

Henry Eschwege  
Director