

A Transformation to Quality Government

Spend a few hours a year applying 10 steps to a national issue or problem

The federal government has embraced its share of new programs over the years in response to citizen's demands for better government at less cost. A few of these programs have included zero defects, total quality management, reengineering and reinventing to name a few.

Although some of these programs remain, the relatively new kid on the block is the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA). GPRA was inspired by similar initiatives at the state and local level and was introduced into law in 1993.

GPRA requires federal departments and independent agencies to improve the quality of their operations through the development of 5-year strategic plans and submission of annual performance plans and reports. The requirement covers both efficiency (doing things right) and effectiveness (doing the right things).

Plans are developed in consultation with Congress and are included in the president's budget. These plans include goals, objectives and performance measures that are results oriented and will be used to assess the effectiveness of policy, budget and management decisions.

What's new about GPRA is that it has gained bipartisan support as members of Congress and their staffs closely monitor and evaluate agency compliance. Although implementation to date has not been without difficulty, Congress has made it clear that GPRA is not a fad and accountability is expected.

Given this bipartisan commitment to continuous improvement, GPRA provides the foundation for a unique quality transformation that will be unprecedented in the history of the United States. To support this transformation, two actions are required.

First, the president and Congress must apply the framework of GPRA to their own operations to assess the quality of policies and legislation that agencies implement. For example, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) can be required to provide quality service to the taxpayers, but alternative tax policies could eliminate the need for an IRS as we know it today.

Second, the process owners (we the people) must hold our political representatives to the same standards of performance excellence that we expect from federal agencies.

The common ground

As stated in the Declaration of Independence, the United States was founded on the ideals that that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain

inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our founding fathers accepted the belief that we all have natural rights, and they accepted the responsibility for developing a system of government, as defined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, to ensure these rights.

Quality, the desire to do the right things right, is the common ground. Reducing variation is the key to quality. Variation represents the difference between the ideal and the actual. An ideal represents a standard of perfection that one can strive for but never achieve, thus providing a foundation for continuous improvement.

Improving quality in all aspects of American life requires that we the people develop a national consensus on the numerical evidence we need for assessing progress towards our ideals. Many potential indicators are already being collected but are not aligned to the ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Some examples of possible indicators for each category are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Some Indicators of Quality Government

Ideals	Indicators
Life	Life expectancy, crime rates, health care affordability
Liberty	Tax rates, voter turnout, literacy rates, employment rates, education levels
Pursuit of happiness	Yearly income, home ownership, race relations

Once a consensus on the indicators is established, the next challenge is to educate all citizens on how we can work together to continually reduce variation from the ideal. GPRA provides the framework that the president and Congress can use to help facilitate this process.

Applying the quality technology to reduce the variation in perceived, actual and expected quality will require a synchronization and balance of power that will take decades to fully implement but can be started immediately by every citizen and quality practitioner.

Simply identify an issue or national problem that you and/or your political representative have a passion for working to resolve. Use the following 10 steps to improve the situation or to assess the effectiveness of past or current improvement efforts:

1. **Plot points.** Identify existing performance indicators and develop a trend chart(s). The Federal Interagency Council on Statistical Policy maintains statistics and information for over 70 federal agencies at www.fedstats.gov.
2. **Study the process.** Identify requirements and describe the process that generated the numbers used in the first step. A good place to start in understanding the process is with a review of existing policies, laws, regulations and procedures. Identify the outcomes agreed to be the ideal by those working to resolve the issue

and those who will be impacted by any changes. The challenge is to improve something in one area without making it worse in another.

Generally, people tend to agree on facts and ideals, but conflict arises over desired outcomes. Disagreement can be illustrated through the use of a bell curve showing that a few people are for and against a respective outcome, and everybody else is somewhere in between. No matter what the issue, however, people who are opposed to a respective outcome can find common cause and work together to achieve the ideal. Performance indicators provide feedback indicating that change is resulting in improvement.

1. **Identify causes and find common cause.** Identify why outcomes from the current process are not living up to the ideal identified in the second step. A common cause is one that the people working toward have the desire, power and responsibility to improve.
2. **Identify alternatives.** Develop two or three alternative courses of action. There are generally three types of alternatives: doing nothing (maintaining the status quo), incremental improvement or radical improvement.
3. **Select the best alternative(s).** Compare and select the best alternative(s) to include clear identification of the intended outcome as well as possible unintended consequences.
4. **Make a plan.** Document what you are going to do, set a target date, estimated time and resources required, and individuals who are going to take the action.
5. **Implement the plan.** Take action, preferably on a small scale. State and local governments, as well as individual and community action groups, often have successful initiatives that can be independently tested to help validate improvement initiatives before they are applied nationally. The ASQ Accelerated Change Collaborative Series provides an excellent model for documenting and sharing best practices.
6. **Assess results.** What was supposed to happen? What actually happened? What went well and what didn't? (Note: On the trend chart, you need at least seven consecutive data points either above or below the average, or seven consecutive points in a row either trending up or trending down, to indicate a change or shift in the process.
7. **Document and share results.** Ideal times to report to the American people on results and bipartisan commitment to planned improvement actions might be around when the president gives his annual State of the Union address or a federal election is held. This type of accountability might even lead to increases in voter turnout.
8. **Continue to reduce variation from the ideal.** The journey to continuous improvement requires all Americans to strive to live up to their potential as

individuals and as a nation. The quality technology provides a common language for determining when change results in improvement.

A call to action

Thomas Jefferson remarked that if we want an enlightened society, we must have an enlightened citizenry. The American transformation to quality is inevitable, as more citizens become enlightened to the fact that the quality technology can be applied to improve quality in any aspect of life.

GPRA provides the framework that the president and Congress can use to accelerate this unique transformation by challenging all Americans to work together in striving to achieve ideals that took a revolution to establish and a civil war to maintain.

You (we the people) can help to support an American transformation to quality by spending a few hours a year applying the 10 steps to a national issue or problem and sharing what you've learned. The result will be an improved quality of life for us all.

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Timothy J. Clark is a quality improvement practitioner who works as a systems accountant for the Department of Defense Finance and Accounting Service in Indianapolis. He is a Senior Member of ASQ and a regional councilor for ASQ's Public Sector Network Division. He earned his master's degree in public administration from Ball State University in Muncie, IN. He is the author of *Success Through Quality: Support Guide for the Journey to Continuous Improvement*, published by ASQ's Quality Press. He can be contacted at tjclark@asqnet.org.

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