



STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

A JOURNEY IN ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

An Introduction for Regional Comprehensive Centers
and their SEA and LEA Clients

Allison Layland, PhD
Sam Redding, EdD

Strategic Performance Management and the National Comprehensive Center

The National Comprehensive Center will take the lead in studying strategic performance management (SPM), reporting learnings, and convening the implementers—Regional Comprehensive Centers and their client state and local education agencies (SEAs and LEAs). Peer-to-peer exchanges, communities of practice, and cross-disciplinary literature discussions are a few of the activities that will further SPM work and expand application possibilities. The National Comprehensive Center will be a leader in these efforts.

The National Comprehensive Center

The National Comprehensive Center (NCC) at Westat is one of 20 technical assistance centers supported under the U.S. Department of Education’s Comprehensive Centers program from 2019 to 2024. The NCC focuses on helping the 19 Regional Comprehensive Centers and state, regional, and local education agencies throughout the country to meet the daunting challenge of improving student performance with equitable resources. Partners in the NCC are the Academic Development Institute, Bellwether Education Partners, and RMC Research Corporation.

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Introduction

Strategic Performance Management was first conceived in the spring of 2015 when Dr. Sam Redding, then a consultant with the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP Center), was grappling with questions of organizational development and performance management at the state education level. Realizing that performance management should flow from an agency's strategic plan, Dr. Redding was advised by Dr. Dean Nafziger, the Center's director, to consult Dr. Allison Layland, then with the Florida & Islands Comprehensive Center. With a background with strategic planning in corporations and in state agencies, Dr. Layland was frustrated with poor implementation of strategic plans by state education agencies (SEAs). Putting their heads together, Dr. Layland and Dr. Redding tackled the question, "What does it take for an SEA to effectively plan, implement, monitor, and adjust performance to get the kind of results needed now and in an unpredictable future?" In something of a eureka moment in their early discussions, they realized that performance management relies on a strong foundation built through strategic planning and that a strategic plan is nothing without a strong performance management process to follow it. Thus was born Strategic Performance Management (SPM), capitalized for the process specifically advanced by the BSCP Center, then one of seven content centers funded from 2012 through 2019 by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education.

So what is SPM, and why is it different from conventional strategic planning? SPM integrates strategic planning with performance management into a seamless process by which an education organization, such as an SEA, district, or school,

“develops and operationalizes a plan that goes beyond the basic elements of vision, mission, values, goals, and strategies to include careful analysis of the functions performed by the [organization], its units, and its positions (roles) to facilitate effective placement, assignment, and training of personnel. The emphasis is on planning through strategic thinking and synthesis that allows the [organization] to make critical adjustments as needs and context change. It helps guide leadership in decisions about what ideas to pursue and about what not to do” (Layland & Redding, 2019, p. 2).

Typically, a strategic plan is created for five years and includes a vision, a mission, values, goals, and strategies, along with a timeline and deliverables. Some plans may even include objectives or milestones and actions. More often than not, the plan is developed by the leadership team and handed down to staff. However, in some cases the input of internal and external stakeholders has

been included in the planning process. Hamel (1996) emphasizes that most strategic planning is not strategic, but a “calendar-driven ritual’ that is ritualistic, elitist, and easy rather than being inquisitive, inventing, and demanding” (p. 70), and Mintzberg (1994) notes that “Strategic planning, as it has been practiced, has really been strategic programming, the articulation and elaboration of strategies, or visions, that already exist” (p. 107).

SPM goes beyond the typical practice of strategic planning to engage staff from multiple levels of the organization in analyzing and synthesizing data and operationalizing the core vision, mission, values, and goals through strategies, milestones, and action planning. In other words, the people expected to carry out the plan are engaged in the process. However, a well-developed plan may still lack the commensurate action for its execution. Years of research focused on companies and private organizations provide conflicting evidence as to whether strategic planning impacts organizational performance, even though many leaders see it as a valuable process (Begun & Kaissi, 2005; Swayne, Duncan, & Ginter, 2008). “Most companies [in the study] indicated firm commitment to strategic planning, even though 87% of chief executive officers, business unit heads, and corporate planning directors reported feelings of disappointment and frustration” (Gray, 1985).

SPM reaches beyond a plan to integrate performance management with a strategic thinking and planning process that is called “setting the strategic direction” rather than merely planning. What do we mean by performance management? Performance management is “the systematic process by which an agency involves its employees, as individuals and members of a group, in improving organizational effectiveness in the accomplishment of agency mission and goals” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d., para. 1). Originally, performance management was viewed narrowly as the appraisal of the performance of individuals within the organization. However, through the work of Peter Drucker, Henry Mintzberg, and others, performance management has evolved to include the performance of the entire organization and the subunits that constitute it (Drucker, 1991, 2002; Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009). Measures of performance moved beyond the individual to include the way teams and organizations carry out work based on the organization’s goals, as set in its strategic plan. In SPM, a performance management cycle involving periodic review of implementation data provides feedback loops to monitor and report progress and adjust course as needed. The cycle builds accountability as well as the means to identify needed responsive supports to address challenges and keep work flowing.

The SPM process is divided into four areas of focus or modules. Module A focuses on the planning component more traditionally associated with strategic planning (vision, mission, values, goals, strategies milestones, and performance measures). Module B guides staff through an analysis of current functions and structures to better align personnel with the organization’s intended direction. Module C makes the direction real through action planning by collaborative teams. Finally, Module D begins the performance cycle to focus on accountability for the work the teams have themselves planned and to build conditions for innovative thinking and prudent risk taking by adjusting course and reallocating supports in response to the data. Figure 1 represents the SPM process.

Figure 1. Strategic Performance Management Process

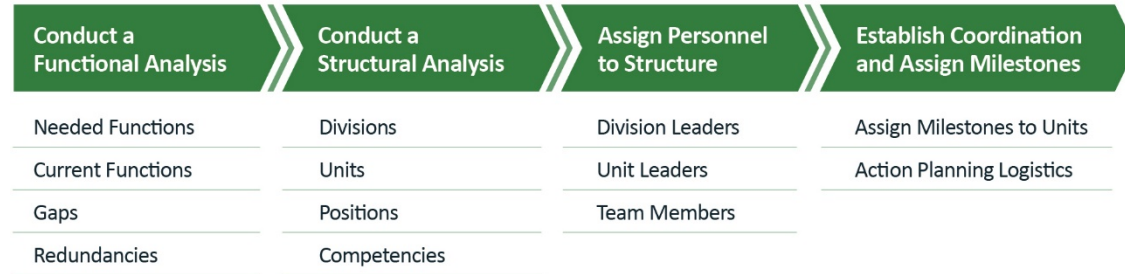
Module A

Set the Direction



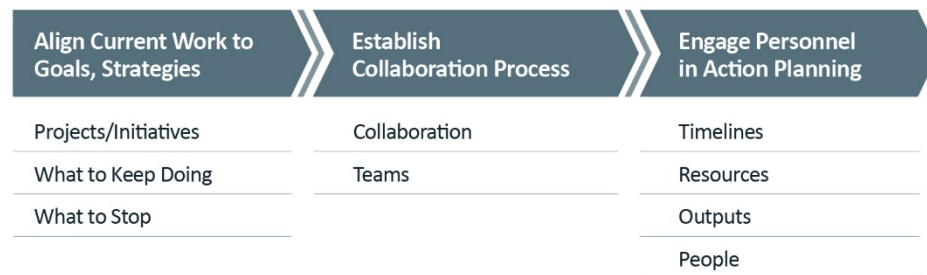
Module B

Operationalize the Direction



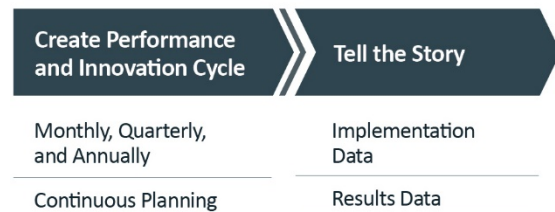
Module C

Design Actionable Work



Module D

Implement a Performance and Innovation Cycle



SPM applies a productivity lens to guide leadership in deciding what to pursue and what not to pursue. A productivity lens prompts leadership to consider all options in the use of resources and effective practices to achieve desired results, while creating the conditions for innovation. The lens emphasizes equitable distribution and use of resources, including human capital, to better implement strategies, milestones, and actions. When an SEA, district, or school focuses on productivity, people are finding better ways to leverage resources to maximize the organization's goals.

SPM's communication lens prompts leadership to pay attention to communication to assist people in understanding and coping with the change SPM brings to the organization. SPM is viewed as a change process because it often results in changes in structure, function, and practice at multiple levels of the organization. Key to any change is the process of sense making, an *"active attempt to bring one's past organization of knowledge and beliefs to bear in the construction of meaning"* (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 395). SPM helps the agency establish communication procedures through the process of creating or revising the strategic plan so that internal and external stakeholders have opportunities for input. The communication lens further prepares the agency to bring all staff up to speed on the operational methods of SPM and to communicate with external stakeholders about the direction the agency has set for itself and its relationship to important constituencies.

A "best practice" lens focuses on the question, "Is what we are planning to do (or doing) encouraging or applying what is known as best educational practice?" To produce better results, teams consider best practice in addition to more productive or innovative alternatives to the current course. This is especially true at the school level, where improvement processes can be strengthened by implementing or strengthening specific evidence-based or sound practices (see Layland & Redding, 2017; The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). The level of evidence for a practice's soundness has also been given various labels, including best practice, evidence-based practice, research-based practice, effective practice, scientifically based practice, promising practice, and emerging best practice. *"School improvement programs typically recommend that local improvement plans include at least one study on an intervention to provide strong evidence, moderate evidence, or promising evidence"* (Layland & Redding, 2017, p. 31. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 uses criteria to categorize evidence-based practice as strong, moderate, promising, and as demonstrating a rationale according to specific criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

The SPM Journey

Over the last four years, the BSCP Center has engaged three SEAs, a branch within an SEA, an insular area public school system, the Bureau of Indian Education, and the Hawaii State Public Charter School Commission in the SPM process. In addition, we assisted in applying SPM to school improvement efforts in districts and schools in two SEAs. Each organization engaged in the process for its own reasons; however, common across the agencies was a desire to enhance performance in order to improve student outcomes. For example, one SEA staff member shared that the SEA was

engaging in the process to address organizational structure issues, whereas another engaged in SPM to operationalize the state board of education's direction and to synchronize its intentions with those of the agency. SPM was found useful for new agency leaders as well as an opportunity for veteran leaders to reexamine the context and direction of the agency.

The entry point into the process was different based on each organization's context and needs. One organization did not have a strategic plan, whereas another had a plan but had concerns about implementation. One organization was handed a recently created plan, whereas another had one that was old and had never really been implemented.

We did so much more; anytime where we can make significant change and our daily work aligns with our board outcomes is good, and we are still doing it. It is now ingrained in our normal work.

—SEA Director

Regardless of the context, need, or entry point, all of the organizations engaged in SPM for at least two years, with the exception of one that had completed only the planning phase by the end of the 2012–19 grant period for the Centers. This SEA plans to continue the process with its new Regional Comprehensive Center through the new grant period.

Below we offer a summary of our work with SEAs, districts, and schools. We then share successes and lessons learned. We close with suggestions on the future of SPM.

State Education Agencies

Our SPM journey began in 2015 with three SEAs: Arkansas, Kansas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The work quickly expanded to include a branch in the Missouri Department of Secondary and Elementary Education. In each case, the SPM process began with a Direction Team comprised of the Chief State School Officer (CSSO) or equivalent position and the senior leadership team; however, as the process progressed the teams expanded to include middle management and, later, other employees. Essential to the success of SPM was the full commitment and regular attendance of the CSSO, as our experience bore out.

Articulating an organization's strategic direction, within the current context and in anticipation of changes in context, calls for the creation of a clear vision (the organization in its ideal state), mission (its purpose), values (the underlying ethics), and goals. In SPM, goals are few, broad, and student focused, ensuring that each goal includes *all* or *every* student, thus validating each student and family regardless of ability, race, gender, or sexual orientation. In addition, goals are not constricted by the use of SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timebound) goals,

although all elements of a SMART goal are included in the compilation of goals, strategies, milestones, actions, and performance measures. The separation of the broad, student-focused goal and strategies from their performance measures has proved especially critical to generating the necessary thinking about the goals and strategies apart from consideration of their measurement; and the measures, with their baselines and targets, are more realistically established without being trapped into an indefensible goal, such as 79% of students will read proficiently or the impractical goal that 100% of high school graduates will matriculate to college. In SPM, goals are boldly stated for all students (or each student), and the performance measures for them are separate statements, constructed to move forward from established baselines.

SMART goals also are not appropriate for every situation, especially when the organization functions within relentlessly shifting contexts. Reeves and Fuller (2018) note that the more malleable the environment, the more ambitious and broad goals should be. Although SEAs have federal and state statutes and regulations to deal with, they now have more flexibility than ever to shape the context and expectations for their schools. *“Broad goals can facilitate the exploration necessary to navigate unpredictable environments”* (Reeves & Fuller, 2018, p. 2). An early adopter of SPM created such a broad goal and related strategy on student-focused learning systems that staff thinking was pressed. What is a student-focused learning system and what does it look like when it is working well? The uncomfortableness of not knowing the answers to these questions gave way to creative thinking and collaborative learning, resulting in more innovative approaches to instruction and schooling. The breadth of the goal meant that it would remain apt for many years to come, which its strategies might change and certainly its milestones would adjust annually.

...it was good to see all of us sharing some of the same concerns, likes, and dislikes, and how we function as a group, not just [career and technical education].

—SEA Division Leader

Performance management focuses on the performance of the entire organization and the subunits that constitute it, as they have defined their direction, goals, and measures of performance and, significantly, as they have planned their own work. SPM calls for a deep analysis of functions, structures, and performance, including an examination of what is working and what is not working within an organization. The Operations Team in Module B analyzes current functions and structures and compares the analysis to functions and structures needed to effectively pursue the goals and implement the strategies. The result is the identification of gaps and redundancies and problem-solving discussions to address each. For example, one SEA realized that research was a critical functional gap while another reorganized its personnel based on the analysis.

Another shift occurred in rethinking the relationships between various divisions and units. All too often, SEA work occurs in siloes driven by funding sources. For example, child nutrition is an operational unit even though nutrition is a critical part of early childhood development and instructional readiness. Federal programs and student services are often seen as separate units even though the emphasis on evidence-based instructional practices is a critical part of the work in both, as well as college and career readiness, accreditation, etc.

Module C engages staff at all levels of an organization in action planning, which includes identifying needed collaborators for the work. Collaboration is not the same as coordination or communication, so it is critical to have a clear understanding of what it means within the context of the organization. The leadership team defines collaboration for its agency, describes what it looks like within the context of the organization, and details a process to select, engage, and deselect collaborators and collaborative teams as a fluid component of planning and performance management. As a result, each SEA saw a marked increase in purposeful and effective collaboration across the organization.

We are collaborating so much more; we know each other's work and are making stronger connections.

—SEA staff member

One of the most significant shifts has been in clarity about accountability for results at the individual, team, and organization levels. The shift from a routine and reflexive compliance with requirements, for the job, program, or agency, to an innovative approach to getting results through well-designed work plans and savvy adjustment in course has been palpable. This is the desired effect of a performance management methodology. Attempts at true performance management beyond the individual often fail due to (1) a disjointed mix of tools, practices, and techniques; (2) losing sight of the original construct being measured; and (3) lack of adequate alignment with overall goals and strategies (De Waal & Van Der Heijden, 2015; Milosavljevic, Milanovic, & Benkovic, 2016; Potocki & Brocato, 1995). It is critical that a performance management system aligned to an organization's goals and strategies include activities designed and "owned" by the staff responsible for their execution. Feedback data are scrutinized to improve results, to adjust course, to reallocate supports, and *not* to assess blame, an attitudinal change from a "gotcha" mentality sometimes found in bureaucracies. *"If these [performance management] activities do not add value to an organization or align with its strategic direction, they will fail to make meaningful contribution to the bottom line and they will be discarded"* (Potocki & Brocato, 1995, p. 403).

In SPM, Module D engages key leadership teams in implementing a performance management cycle. The overall leadership team, comprised of the CSSO, senior leaders, and Division Team and Unit Team leaders, implement a performance management cycle with specific review routines:

- » **Monthly Status Reporting.** Every month, each lead unit, unit members, and collaborators, if identified, meet (in person or, for some, virtually) to review progress on the actions they have planned, report status, and adjust course as needed. Unit Teams review progress and collaborations; make adjustments in people and resources, as needed; and identify any recommendations for the Division Team.
- » **Quarterly Division Team Performance Review.** Each quarter, the Division Teams (division leader and leaders of units in the division) meet to review the progress of each unit relative to its action plans and the annual milestones. Adjustments are made to actions and, if needed, to milestones in light of data.
- » **Annual Leadership Team Performance Review.** At least once a year, the Leadership Team (CSSO, agency-wide leaders, and division leaders) meets to review performance data relative to milestones and performance measures. The team adjusts milestones for the coming year, updates performance measures, and sets targets two years ahead (Layland & Redding, 2017, 2019; Redding & Layland, 2017a, 2017b).

Both implementation data (milestones and actions) and results data (goal and strategy performance measures) are used to provide supports to address challenges and make timely adjustments to stay on course. Figure 2 depicts one year of a performance management cycle.

Figure 2. Annual Performance Management Cycle



Each SEA reported a significant shift in culture as the performance management process took root. As Peter Drucker, the management guru, proclaimed, “*Culture eats strategy for breakfast*” (Campbell, Edgar, & Stonehouse, 2011). Organizational culture must match strategy to achieve high-quality implementation. Schein (1985) noted that because culture can restrain a strategy, the organization must shift to a culture supportive of goals. The SPM process uncovers and addresses cultural issues, from poor communication to lack of collaboration to inconsistent terminology. SEA leaders observed that a happy byproduct of the hard work of SPM is the emergence of a more cohesive, collaborative culture focused on strategic work.

There were cultural, professional, and conceptual barriers that we did not realize that came out that we are still addressing.

—Charter School, Commission Director

Districts and Schools

The BSCP Center’s Casting a Statewide Strategic Performance Net: Interlaced Data and Responsive Supports (Layland & Redding, 2017) and a related publication for the Council of Chief State School Officers, entitled Utilizing Integrated Resources to Implement the School and District Improvement Cycle and Supports: Guidance for Schools, Districts, and State Education Agencies (Layland & Corbett, 2017), outlined a framework to apply SPM to school improvement, especially within networked systems of support, including the SEA and districts. This incipient methodology was introduced in Oregon with the District and School Effectiveness Office of the Oregon Department of Education. Oregon’s continuous improvement process includes elements of performance management through the Oregon Systems Framework Domains and Indicators. Over the course of a year, district coaches were identified and trained to facilitate the new continuous improvement process that includes SPM. The process begins with the identification of vision, mission, and goals, followed by strategies composed as theories of action. As in the SEA version of SPM, each strategy is stated using the **If we..., then...and...** format, with the “and” connecting to the goal. The logic of the hypothesis created through the theory of action leads to actions and outputs to achieve annual measurable targets. *“Formulating a Theory of Action brings deeper meaning to the strategy for those not only doing the work, but those that will be impacted by the work. It can also provide clarity when considering how to measure the work’s impact”* (Layland & Redding, 2019, p. 30). Figure 3 details a theory of action.

Figure 3. Strategy Theory of Action



By adding elements of SPM to a continuous improvement process, district staff receive timely implementation and results data to inform responsive supports needed to assist schools in implementing their improvement plans.

The U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Education (VIDE) expanded SPM at the school level by applying it to a three-year collaborative school improvement cycle. A school-based Collaborative

Success Team creates or revisits its vision, mission, and values. School goals parallel the VIDE goals, with school-specific performance measures. The comprehensive needs assessment goes beyond school demographic and student performance data to include program data (what is the implementation, impact, and cost-effectiveness of each program implemented by the school) and practice data (what and how are evidence-based practices being used). The Collaborative Success Team engages staff in not only discussing the data but also selecting the practices and indicators to be pursued over the next three years, adjusted twice a year, and reviewed monthly. A performance cycle enables monitoring and progress reporting, and data are used to adjust the course for success.

For the first time we are aligning everything, we are all on the same page working together to improve.

—Collaborative Success, Team member

Successes

Over the past five years, the BSCP Center and its partner Regional Comprehensive Centers have worked and learned together with SEAs, districts, and schools to implement SPM. Each organization showed progress based on a pre- and post-SPM self-assessment and interviews with key personnel, as reported in the BSCP Center's external evaluation. All but one SEA continues to use the SPM system to track and report progress. Monthly Status Reports provide implementation progress data, and an End of Year report provides a summary of the percentage of actions and milestones completed annually, a narrative account of accomplishments, and suggestions for new milestones. One SEA posts quarterly progress reports on its website, providing stakeholders with true transparency of performance. In addition, each organization reported:

- » increased ownership of work
- » a strong sense of accountability that positively influenced people and their work
- » increased cross-organization collaboration and a reduction of silos and departmental territorialism
- » a renewed energy and focus on work

In other words, SPM is building a more positive culture that supports the organization's vision and mission and its pursuit of goals. We have much more to learn about optimal implementation of the most effective SPM processes.

The 2018 external evaluation for the BSCP Center set out to attain a deeper understanding of (1) the reasons that SEAs decided to implement SPM processes, (2) the successes and challenges associated with implementing SPM, and (3) ways in which the SEAs operate differently as a result

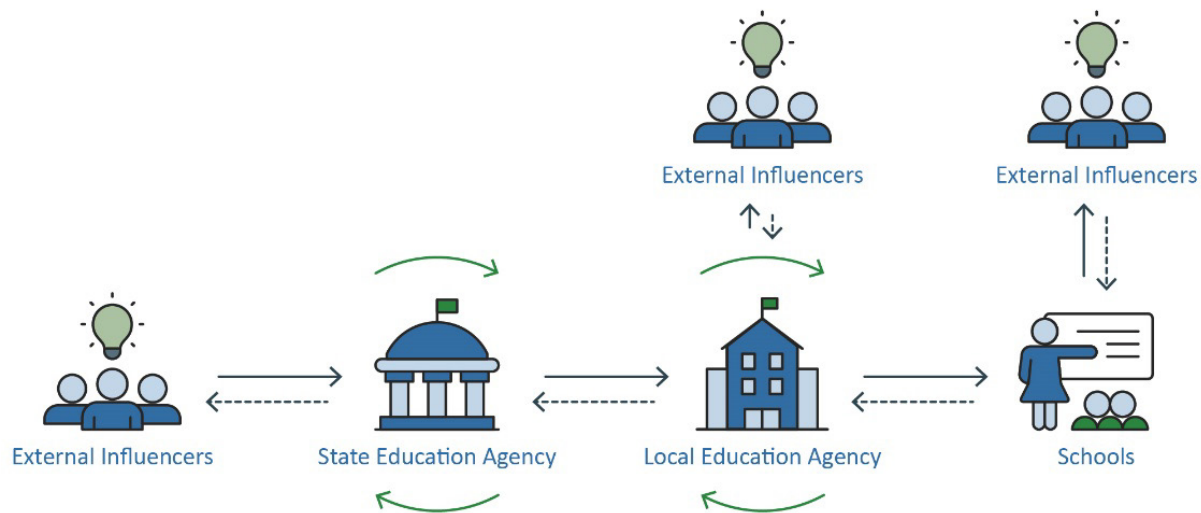
of SPM. The evaluation team conducted structured telephone interviews with a total of 20 people involved in SPM implementation and reviewed progress summaries and feedback obtained through evaluations of training/support activities. It concluded that:

- » Before initiating SPM, the agencies identified significant areas in which growth was needed.
- » SPM is viewed favorably by participating agencies, whether their initial reason for choosing it was new leadership, reorganization, or a recognition of management issues.
- » The SPM process has helped facilitate the posing and answering of “hard questions” about SEA operations.
- » Effective SPM implementation is grounded in effective management of people, ongoing communication within and across departments, and securing buy-in at all levels of the organization.
- » Interview data suggest that participating SEAs have made improvements in integration and efficiency of operation but that they continue to encounter challenges in maintaining momentum and focus over time (Hildreth & Turnbull, 2018).

Lessons Learned

As the report for the external evaluation for the BSCP Center indicates, the SEAs continue to face challenges despite the progress they have made, especially the discipline to sustain a high level of implementation. Through the SPM process, SEAs typically identified communication as an area in need of improvement for the agency. *“SPM considers both the organization’s internal operations and its relationship to external entities to better leverage and provide equitable resources and improve results”* (Layland & Redding, 2017). This statement of intent by the developers of SPM was acknowledged in the BSCP Center’s most recent publication, which integrates the Center’s work on strategic communication with the SPM process (Layland & Redding, 2019).

Communication. SPM is a change process and, as with any change process, communication and common language are needed to build foundational understanding and conditions for change success. We found that traditional methods of communication were not sufficient to build understanding. Key messaging targeting specific individuals and groups provides opportunities for human sense making of change initiatives (Lewis, 2019; Spillane, 1998; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002). Therefore, we have now integrated strategic communications into the SPM process (see Layland & Redding, 2019).

Figure 4. SEA, LEA, and School Contexts

Pacing of implementation. The BSCP Center originally designed the implementation process to occur in six meetings with agency leadership over several months. The one-day meetings proved insufficient. Two-day sessions at monthly intervals proved most productive. This called for creative scheduling and added time to make revisions based on reflections at the beginning of each session.

Goal for internal operations. The original format insisted that the agency adopt goals that were student-focused goals. While this proved to be a wise requirement in many ways, each organization also struggled to connect some aspects of its operations to students and felt that something was being left out. The solution was to add one operational goal aimed at internal needs, even as it was also clear that these goals ultimately impacted the agency's ability to affect the field and students. Below are examples of such goals:

- » The Department will provide efficient and effective customer service that benefits students, respects government resources, builds meaningful partnerships, and serves all stakeholders.
- » All students will benefit from an education system that is effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable.

Independent facilitator. An independent facilitator is a crucial piece of implementing SPM. The facilitator acts as a critical friend, pushing when it is needed, pulling back as the process is flowing, taking the pulse of the organization. At times the facilitator needs to say things that may not be welcomed by all but that, because of the facilitator's perceived objectivity, are effective in moving the process forward. Adjustments often need to be made on the fly, and patience is a virtue. As one SEA leader put it in describing the BSCP Center's facilitation:

“You did your homework and knew us better than we knew ourselves. A few times it was uncomfortable, and that was indication that you all did your work well – got us to think hard – forced us to think about the why.... You knew when to push and when to pull back.”

—Charter School Commission Leader

Where do we go from here?

Strategic planning and performance management are not new concepts; however, education agencies and other nonprofit organizations have struggled to embrace and use the concepts, especially in unison. The SPM process provides a mechanism to bring performance management to SEAs, LEAs, and even schools, individually or through a network (see Layland & Redding, 2017). The experience of the BSCP Center and its partner Regional Comprehensive Centers over the past four years has laid a strong foundation to advance SPM for education agencies. The National Comprehensive Center will take the lead in studying SPM, reporting learnings, and convening the implementers—Regional Comprehensive Centers and their client SEAs and LEAs. Peer-to-peer exchanges, communities of practice, and cross-disciplinary literature discussions are a few of the activities that will further SPM work and expand application possibilities. The National Comprehensive Center will be a leader in these efforts.

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About the Authors

Allison Layland, Ph.D.

Dr. Layland is currently the Chief Education Strategist for the Academic Development Institute (ADI) and served as a consultant for the Building State Capacity and Productivity Center (BSCP), providing technical assistance to state education agencies, districts, and schools in areas related to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. She has consulted with more than 11 state education agencies on effective implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and has more than 20 years of teaching and leadership experience in general and special education at the school, district, and state levels. As an adjunct professor, Dr. Layland facilitated special education teacher preparation at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She has also worked at the corporate level in the telecommunications industry as a Communications Director and has a number of publications on strategic performance management. Dr. Layland received a bachelor's degree in elementary and special education from Mount Saint Mary College in New York, a master's degree in special education from James Madison University in Virginia, and a doctorate in education administration and policy studies from the University of Denver.

Sam Redding, Ed.D.

Dr. Redding is the former Executive Director of ADI, now serving as its Chief Learning Scientist. He was a consultant with the BSCP Center at Westat. Dr. Redding also served as the Associate Director of the Center on School Turnaround and as Senior Learning Specialist for the Center on Innovations in Learning. A former high school teacher and college dean, Dr. Redding has published in the areas of statewide systems of support, performance management, school improvement and turnaround, personalized learning and personal competencies, change leadership, innovations in education, and family and community engagement. He has consulted with more than 30 state education agencies and many districts and schools across the country. As a Senior Research Associate at the Laboratory for Student Success, he headed the Lab's research and implementation of comprehensive school reform. He holds master's degrees in psychology and English and a doctorate in educational administration from Illinois State University, and is a graduate of Harvard's Institute for Education Management.