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Chris Mihm is the Managing Director for Strategic Issues at the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). He leads GAO's work on government-wide governance and transformation issues. Strategic Issues addresses such topics as performance management and collaboration, human capital management, intergovernmental issues, federal budgeting, regulatory policy, and federal tax policy and administration.

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What GAO Found

Lasting solutions to the federal government's high-risk problems offer the potential to save billions of dollars, dramatically improve service to the American public, strengthen public confidence and trust in the performance and accountability of the national government, and ensure the ability of government to deliver on its promises. GAO maintains a high-risk program to focus attention on government operations that it identifies as high risk due to their greater vulnerabilities to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement or the need for transformation to address economy, efficiency, or effectiveness challenges. Since 1990, more than one-third of the areas GAO previously designated as high risk have been removed from the list because sufficient progress was made in addressing the problems identified

In each of our updates to the High Risk List for more than a decade, GAO has assessed progress to address the five criteria—leadership commitment, capacity, action plan, monitoring, and demonstrated progress—for removing a high-risk area from the list.¹ In our 2015 update to the High Risk List², GAO added clarity and specificity to its assessments by rating each high-risk area's progress on each of the five criteria using the following definitions:

- **Met.** Actions have been taken that meet the criterion. There are no significant actions that need to be taken to further address this criterion.
- **Partially Met.** Some, but not all, actions necessary to meet the criterion have been taken.
- **Not Met.** Few, if any, actions toward meeting the criterion have been taken.

These five criteria form a road map for efforts to improve and ultimately address high-risk issues. Addressing some of the criteria leads to progress, while satisfying all of the criteria is central to removal from the list. In 2015, most high-risk areas, overall, either “met” or “partially met” the criteria of leadership commitment and “partially met” the remaining four criteria of capacity, action plan, monitoring, and demonstrated progress.

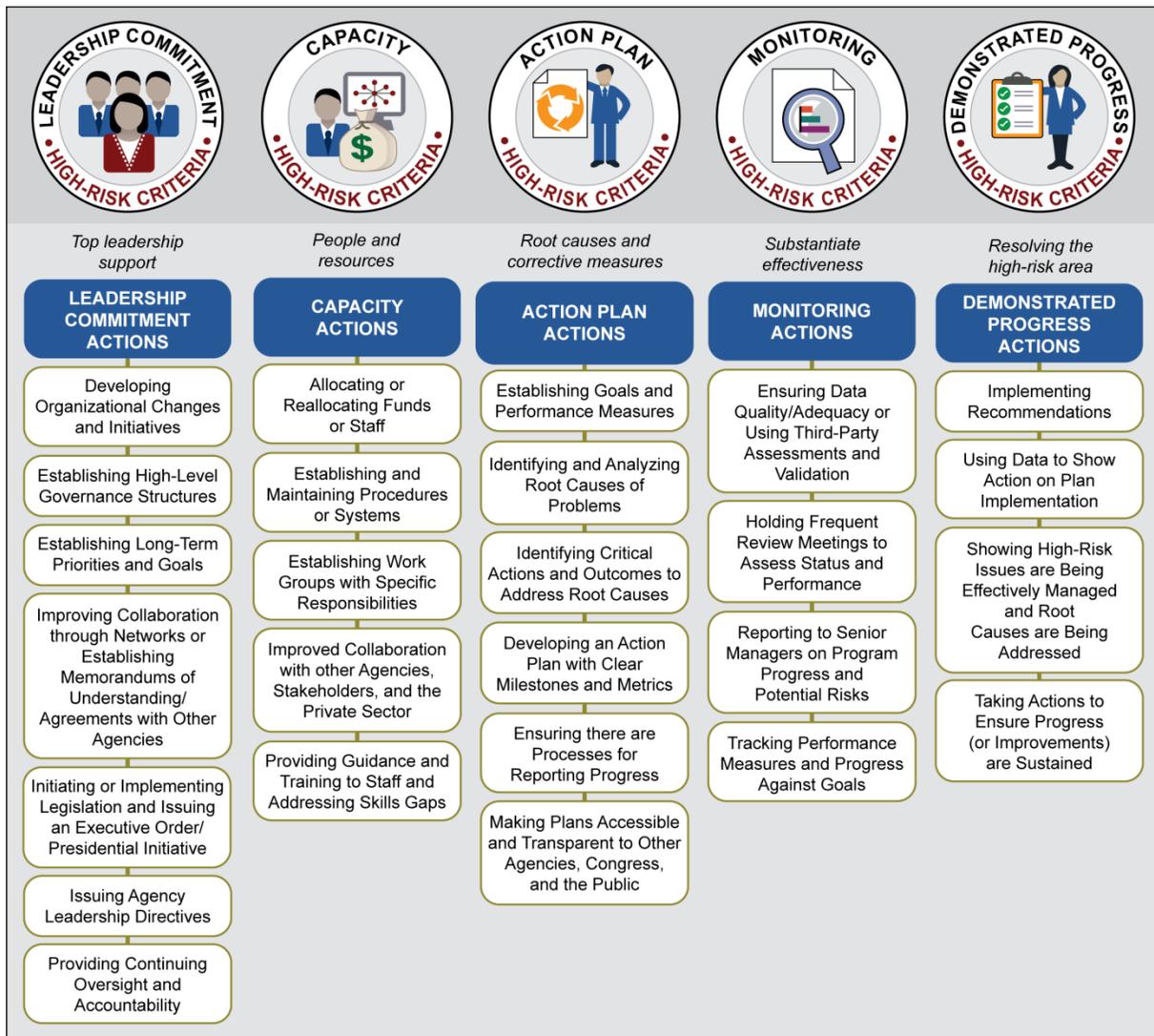
In our April 25, 2016 report done at the request of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, GAO presents illustrative examples from the 2015 High Risk report for each of the five criteria that demonstrate actions agencies have taken that led to progress or removal from the High Risk List.³ Federal agencies can use these examples as guides to make additional progress on addressing the High Risk List. Figure 1 shows the five criteria and illustrative actions taken by agencies to address the criteria.

¹GAO, Determining Performance Accountability and Challenges and High Risk, [GAO-01-159SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: November 2000).

²GAO, High-Risk Series: An Update, [GAO-15-290](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 11, 2015). GAO, Determining Performance Accountability and Challenges and High Risk, [GAO-01-159SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: November 2000).

³GAO, High-Risk Series: Key Actions to Make Progress Addressing High-Risk Issues, [GAO-16-480R](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 25, 2016).

Figure 1: Criteria for Removal from the High Risk List and Examples of Actions Leading to Progress



Source: GAO. | GAO-16-480R

Why GAO Did This Study

GAO's next update to the High Risk List is scheduled for issuance in early 2017. In the interim, GAO is providing information from its 2015 report on how agencies made progress addressing high-risk issues. This report provides illustrative actions that agencies took that led to progress or removal from the High Risk List that could provide guidance to agencies whose programs are on the High Risk List. GAO also provided illustrative examples from its 2015 report of areas where progress was not made against criteria and more needed to be done to demonstrate progress.

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