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How to Write a Grant Proposal

Proposal writing is time-consuming. You must first clearly describe a specific problem found in your community or area of interest, design a program that will address it, and then describe the program in detail for the grant maker (funding source). If this is your organization's first attempt at applying for a grant, the entire process will benefit your organization. Your goal is to end up with a well-conceived proposal that lays out a strategy to address the problem, as well the funding to pay for it.

Step 1: Agree on the Problem

For a proposal to receive funding, the grant maker must be convinced that funding your program will have a positive and measurable affect on your community.

Start by identifying a need. What problem or issue in your community can be improved or changed with the grant money and a good effort? You may feel that there is a need to clean up a polluted river. But unless there is general agreement in the community on the need for your project, it may be difficult to get a grant to fix it—and even more difficult to complete the project.

Involve All Stakeholders

To develop a successful proposal, it's important to involve all of the stakeholders. A stakeholder is anyone affected by, or with an interest in, the project. For example, stakeholders in a river clean-up project include citizens in your community affected by the pollution, the party or parties responsible for the problem, anyone that will be involved in the clean up, businesses, government, and other entities that will help pay for the clean up, and government agencies that regulate pollution and water quality.

Seek involvement from the organizations you already partner with, and consider forming new relationships with like-minded groups. A diverse group is good, since the levels of participation will vary among partners.

Plan a meeting of stakeholders at a convenient time and an acceptable place. Be prepared for disagreement among the stakeholders—remember that your goal is to try and achieve a consensus of opinion. Consider bringing in professional facilitation if your group is larger than a handful of people or if you are unsure of your ability to manage differences between groups.

Define the Problem or Situation

Involve stakeholders in developing a clear, concise description of the problem or situation. More than one meeting may be necessary to arrive at a consensus that satisfies most of the stakeholders. The effort will be worth it. Once people agree on the problem, the rest of the work flows more smoothly.

When describing the problem, avoid using subjective terms like "ugly" or "outrageous." Instead, using the most current information available and, giving credit to the source, describe the problem objectively. Avoid attributing blame.

Describe the Impact of the Problem

Use the same clear, objective language to describe the problem's impact, both in social and economic costs. It is a shame if pollution in a river harms wildlife, but it's more compelling to show that people can no longer fish or swim in the river because of pollution. Show how the situation has changed the way people live.

Investigate Possible Causes of the Problem

Even if the cause(s) of the problem appear obvious to you, seek formal agreement from as many stakeholders as possible on the cause(s). The amount of detailed evidence you will need to present to a grant-making agency will vary. If a formal investigation into the causes has not been conducted, consider forming a committee to conduct or oversee an investigation and a follow-up report. Bring in outside or neutral investigators or experts to bolster your credibility. And even if there is agreement on the cause of the problem, you may still need an investigation to formally document the cause and to quantify as many factors as you can, depending on the grant's requirements.

When describing the problem, avoid technical terms and jargon wherever possible. Instead, use layman's terms. All stakeholders should clearly understand what is being said.

Step 2: Describe What You Hope to Achieve

You've described a problem and identified the most likely causes. Now you need to focus on the solution or desired outcome of your proposed activity. What will occur as a result of your project? How will a situation improve? If the problem is a polluted river, will people be able to swim in the river again? Will they be able to eat the fish?

Measuring Success in Outputs and Outcomes

Be careful not to confuse these terms. Outputs are measures of a program's activities; outcomes are changes that result from the activities. Outputs matter because they lead to outcomes. Note that in our example, an output might be an increase in the size of a stream-side vegetative buffer. An outcome might

be the resulting increase in the oyster harvest that occurs because the buffer stops pollutants from reaching the river. Also realize that a funder may specify a different way to measure success.

Identify the Key Outcomes

Some projects will have a long list of outcomes. Here are some possible outcomes resulting from a river clean up:

- * People will be able to swim in the river.
- * People will be able to fish and eat their catch.
- * Boating on the river will be more popular.
- * A clean river will create momentum for a riverfront revival.

Work with your stakeholders to develop a consensus on two or three primary outcomes.

Set Realistic and Achievable Outcomes

Your projected outcomes must be realistic. Some pollution will always exist within the river. Reducing the pollutants to an acceptable level in one year or even five years might be impossible. Consult with experts—local ones are fine—and determine what is realistic for your situation. If the river clean up will take ten years, say so. Failing to meet goals will make getting additional funding in the future more difficult. It is far better to promise less and exceed your goals than to over-promise and under-deliver. However, don't seriously underestimate what can be achieved. Promise too little, and the project may not appear cost-effective.

Measure and Record the Result of Your Work

State what measurements you hope to achieve and when you hope to achieve them. If you are going to reduce pollutants in a river, to what level will they be reduced? Use specific numbers or a range. (For example, a pollutant will be decreased by 15 to 20 parts per million, or ppm).

If you cannot measure or count an output, do not include it. Perhaps your stakeholders agreed on the following key objective: People will be able to fish and eat their catch.

You can make this objective measurable and observable by stating it this way: "Pollutants in the river will decrease by 15-20 ppm. At this level, people will be able to eat from the river at least once a week."

Focus on End Results

Always keep in mind your goal(s). Every activity should be evaluated on how it helps to achieve the ultimate goal(s).

Step 3: Design Your Program

Now that you know where you are and where you want to go, your next step is determining the best path to get there. The best path is not always the shortest, quickest, easiest, or cheapest.

So, how do you decide the best path for your project?

Get Expert Opinions

Grant makers, both governmental and private, often have experts on staff who can help you. When contacting a funding source, explain that while you might be asking them for funds in the future, for now you're interested in their expertise.

Research What Others Have Done

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Try to find organizations that have developed projects similar to yours. Look at the failures as closely as the successes. Knowing what does not work is often more valuable than knowing what does.

You may also get information from the popular press and from professional journals—one exists for just about every topic you can imagine. Search the Internet and contact professional associations. If you are near a college or university, find out if a faculty member or researcher has studied the problem. But don't just read about what others have done. Learn about projects firsthand by visiting the project site. If a visit isn't possible, contact those involved in similar projects by phone, email, or letter.

Get "Buy In" From Stakeholders

Whatever solution you choose, it's essential that all key stakeholders agree fully on the plan. This is often referred to as "buying in" and is often critical to your success. You may never get 100 percent agreement, but you want to prevent overwhelming opposition. People are most likely to support a project they helped create.

Ask your stakeholders to show support through letters of support and commitment. Letters of support state that the person or organization agrees with what you want to do and will not oppose you. More valuable are letters of commitment that specify how the person or organization will assist you. The assistance may include contributions of time, money, labor, space, supplies, materials, and other necessities.

Clearly Describe Your Solution

With your key stakeholders' and experts' assistance, clearly describe your solution. What will be done, and by whom? If your project is technical, you may want two versions: one expressed in technical terms and the other in lay terms. It is important that both technical experts and the general public understand your plan.

A clear description of how you plan to achieve your desired outcomes, with a timeline and detailed workplan, can be a great help in obtaining funding and getting a broader range of stakeholder support.

Step 4: Locate Funding Sources

Now that you've agreed upon a solution and program design, you need to find the resources—the people, the equipment, and the money—to get your project done. Locating funding requires an investment of time and careful planning. Many funders have a lengthy process for reviewing proposals.

Start with Organizations or People You Know

As most funders, both government and private, provide money for rather specific purposes, your search can be targeted. Inquire with the most obvious choices first, like those that have funded similar projects in your geographic area. If your solution is outside the scope of their funding, they may be able to point you toward the right source. Can they introduce you to contacts at organizations with which they have a relationship? Then, meet with the individuals to whom you've been referred. An introduction from someone the funder trusts lends you credibility.

Use the Internet to Research Funders

Visit the federal government Web site www.grants.gov, the central source for locating and applying for up to 900 programs from 26 federal grant-making agencies, covering \$350 billion in annual awards. In addition, check individual federal agency Web sites, as not all programs are listed on www.grants.gov. Also check state and local government Web sites to see what grants they offer. State and local governments administer many federal and private grants and will list these as well.

Questions to Ask When Reviewing a Funding Source

Once you find a promising funding source, learn as much as you can about that organization and its particular funding program. Read the information on the organization's Web site thoroughly to find out:

- * Do you want to work with this organization?
- * Does it typically fund organizations and projects like yours?
- * Do you qualify for a particular program?
- * Can you meet all of the grant requirements?

Establish a Relationship with the Grant Program Officer

Grant announcements, often called "Request For Proposals" (RFPs), usually list a contact person—the program officer—who manages the process. Arrange to meet the program officer, preferably in person, or by phone. Program officers are usually experts in the application process and may be knowledgeable about your type of project. Let him/her know about your organization, its accomplishments, and your proposed project. Confirm that your project is eligible for funding. Ask any questions you have about the grant announcement and clarify anything you don't understand. You will not appear foolish by asking a question; however, it would be a real mistake to omit a main item from your grant application.

Involve Your Funder in Your Project

Your funders are key stakeholders in your project. Make every effort to fully involve them. Invite representatives to be on hand for key milestones. While some funders want little involvement beyond giving you the money and periodically receiving a report, others want to be very hands-on and share in your success.

Step 5: Write Your Proposal

Once you have a written description of your program, needs, outcomes, and activities, use this as the basis for numerous grant applications. Tailor each proposal to each funder. Use the style and format that the funder prefers. Most organizations make their winning proposals public. Study these proposals. Use them as guides for how to assemble yours, what information to include, and what style and terminology is preferred.

Each RFP usually specifies what information to include and in what format. Some specify page limits and even font size. Many request electronic or online (via the Internet) submission of applications. Carefully read through all of the directions and ask about any that seem unclear.

Follow the Instructions

If there is a ten-page limit, stick to ten pages. You may feel that running over by a page or for a sentence or two is no big deal. However, the grant maker may feel that if you cannot comply with a simple page-length restriction, you can't be trusted with funding.

If you think you need to take exception, get permission to do so from the program officer at the funding agency. Include a statement with your application explaining that you have permission to deviate and your reason for doing so.

Study the Criteria

Most grant programs are competitive, meaning only the proposals judged best by the grant maker get awards. The RFP may specify evaluation criteria and allocate a certain number of points to specific sections or components. Study all of the application criteria. Check with the program officer to see if there are other criteria or factors considered in making the funding decisions.

Use a Checklist to Make Sure Your Application is Complete

Make a list of all criteria with the point values, if applicable. Use this checklist to be sure that you have included everything that is required. Missing or incomplete items often result in outright rejection or at least a lower score, limiting your chance for funding. Use your checklist as a table of contents for your proposal, to make it easy for reviewers to find the required information. Pay particular attention to your budget, making sure all costs are eligible and fully explainable.

Consider Hiring a Professional Writer

While not essential, many organizations prefer to hire an outside consultant to write the proposal. The primary advantage is that the writer is able to devote time to the project, which you might not have. A consultant with expertise in a particular grant program can assure that you address all of the often complex regulatory requirements.

The disadvantage of hiring a professional writer is that the writer may lack the passion and project knowledge that you and other stakeholders bring to the project. The resulting proposal may be slick but may lack passion or urgency.

Edit Carefully

What you say and how you say it may be the only information the reviewer has about you, your community, and your project. So, be sure that your proposal is clear and easy to understand. Before you attach your signature to an application, be sure that the application is complete and accurate.

Thoroughly edit your text. Try to eliminate all spelling and other typographical errors. Follow standard grammatical usage and avoid jargon and local expressions. Electronic dictionaries, spell checkers, and grammar checkers will catch 80 percent of your errors. Have two or three people read your proposal to catch the remaining 20 percent.

Give Your Proposal to a "Cold Reader" to Review

Ask one or two people who have not been involved in the process or project—and can come to the proposal "cold"—to read the proposal. Give them a copy of the RFP and the review criteria, but little other information. Ask them to read the proposal quickly. (That is how reviewers will likely go through it, at least initially.) Do they understand it? Does it make sense to them?

Meet Deadlines

Most grant programs have deadlines that are specific and unyielding. Missing one will most likely eliminate your chance for funding during that cycle. Allow plenty of time for delays, because they invariably happen during the proposal writing process.