



RETHINKING Development in the Nonprofit Sector

By Susan Bumagin

Several years ago, I was called in by the CEO of a nationally recognized health and hospital system to help apply for a multi-million-dollar grant. The faces of about 20 top-level staff around the table momentarily froze when the CEO asked me if I would write the grant and I said, “No.”

“If you want a grantwriter,” I explained, “I’d be happy to refer you to someone who knows a great deal more about hospital systems than I do. But I think you need to work through the issues put forth by this application. I can’t do that for you, but I can guide your process and make sure you produce a document that’s useful to you as well as responsive to the grant application.”

No one can guarantee a grant award, but I could, I told them, guarantee a good result. “Good, how?” the CEO asked.

If you rely on a grantwriter, it may be time to change your strategy.

“Good, in that you will be much further along with a plan to address these issues. You’ll have developed a map. Good, in that you will work as a team to get this done and come away with a higher level of staff buy-in as you move these issues forward.”

“Well,” the CEO said, “we really believe in what we’re doing in these areas, and we’re going to move ahead whether we get the grant or not.”

I got the job — and they got the grant.

“We need a grantwriter” is a common cry among nonprofit organizations and public institutions pursuing public and private monies. Having worked for a long time in the nonprofit sector as well as for foundations, I understand this cry very well. There’s just too much to do and never enough staff or resources to accomplish what must get done. So spending money on development activities — and especially grantwriters — is something organizations are often willing to do.

If my experience is anything like the norm, it used to go like this: I’d get a call from a person who would ask: “Do you write grants?” “Sometimes,” I’d say. If we came to an agreement, I’d receive a stack of often unorganized material to review within a day or two. I’d have a short time to gather information from key (but very busy) informants and organize materials into a cogent proposal with goals, objectives, and evaluation plans. I might or might not get it right, according to those who hired me, who themselves might

not have clarified what they hoped to accomplish other than getting the grant.

I’m not saying that it’s impossible to put together a viable grant in this manner. I’m sure it’s been done. But it’s not the most effective way to put an organization’s best foot forward, and it does little to further an organization’s growth and development. Nowadays, if people ask me if I’m a grantwriter, I say, “No, I’m a grant strategist.” I see my role as that of guide and teacher. I hope that the process we work together allows an organization to need less of me the next time.

It may be shortsighted to set one’s sights only on getting a grant.

It’s important that key leaders and managers (with input from staff) articulate who and what an organization is. I recently participated in a process involving 10 key staff, one of whom assumed the critical role of coordinator. All were extremely busy, yet each of them made time to contribute to the document. “Here it is — what a great team!” said one upon completion. Two weeks earlier, I’d been told by the chief of staff who hired me that this group had little to no previous experience with writing grants. And yet, they produced something they were proud of, and the process moved them forward on the issues they were forced to think through. Within weeks, they were awarded one of only six national grants and, what’s more, told that theirs was the best written and conceptualized grant proposal in the country!

It’s not always possible to pursue money that supports exactly what an organization wants to do. But it helps a lot if the grant is in an area

of significant interest, especially because the process is a substantial investment of time and energy on the part of many.

“Are you interested in pursuing this particular area of interest if you don’t get the grant?” I asked one chief officer.

“Not really. We don’t have the money,” he replied. But during our wrap-up session, he was in a different place when he told me, “We’re so much clearer about where we want to go with this.” The few intense weeks of working together had produced a roadmap for the issue area and refined a tool that could now be used to guide strategic development of this area of interest elsewhere, should they not get the grant. It also, he said, increased team spirit and confidence in their ability to compete for grants in the future. The organization had grown.

There are no guarantees for even the best conceived and written grants. Sometimes, it’s simply the funder’s prerogative to go with an organization at a different developmental stage or location. It may, then, be shortsighted to set one’s sights only on getting a grant.

I’m all for teaching people how to fish. “We couldn’t have done this without you,” says one chief officer an hour after the grant application was sent. “But you’ll be able to do much of this by yourselves the next time,” I reply. While it’s useful for an outsider to review the grant application and the work being done to make sure the proposal really answers the questions asked, organizations can learn how to produce substantive, conceptually sound proposals on their own. Rather than assigning the job of gathering information and grantwriting to one person (whether in-house or out), it’s more effective to assign an in-house staff person to coordinate the process and, when needed, an outside consultant to function as cheerleader and coach.

“Go slow to go fast” is a slogan
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CREATIVE FUNDRAISING IDEAS

Hold a Virtual Drive for Donations

Consider adapting the virtual food drive held by Accenture and Aidmatrix (www.aidmatrix.org/accenture). The virtual drive uses online technologies to make donations happen efficiently.

A virtual drive can be an extremely personalized experience. It lets people view specific items on line and choose which ones they want to donate. In the case of the food drive, the items are the food staples most needed by local food banks. The technology also calculates how many donations have been received and the benefit obtained because of the drive's leveraged power.

Draw a Triangle

For the largest return on your fundraising, create a triangle for the past year. To make the triangle, rank all your donations and grants by dollar amount, with the largest at the top. (Enter all of one donor's gifts as one amount.) Subtotal the 10 biggest amounts. Next, subtotal the next 100 (in other words, gifts #11 through #110). Then subtotal all the smaller contributions. The three subtotals should be roughly equal. If one is much smaller than the other two, solicit in that range. Exploiting those opportunities will lead to stronger fundraising all around. For more information, contact Nick Levinson, P.O. Box 8386, New York, N.Y. 10150.

Try a "Poor Man's Auction"

If you're afraid an auction may be too rich for many of your attendees, here's a way to be sure everyone participates. When people purchase an auction ticket, enter them into a drawing to win their choice of any auction item. List some of these items on the back of the auction ticket to generate enthusiasm. The Charlottesville Catholic School tried this idea, sold all their tickets, and raised \$25,000—more than they would have raised for any one single auction item. For more creative auction ideas, see the "Charity Auction Newsletter" (www.benefit-auction.com).

I've used consistently over the years because the planning stage is where you develop a clear idea of what you want to do, why you want to do it, what it will take, and how you plan to measure your success. While writers and consultants may be able to tease out enough information to produce a credible document, such information doesn't come from the gut and lacks the depth and nuance of information produced by the organization itself. It's that from-the-gut passion that ultimately differentiates a great proposal from a mediocre one.

The pursuit of grants is a strategic activity that provides clarity about an organization's goals, objectives, strengths, challenges, and organizational capacity. Grant strategy consultants offer added value when they use their knowledge of what reviewers look for to provide constructive criticism and suggestions. A good facilitator who effectively manages a process involving many partners and points

of view is where I'd put my money if I were leading an organization.

It's time, then, for nonprofit organizations and public institutions to rethink their grant seeking strategies. Developing a grant proposal is best accomplished as a staff activity with the help of a staff coordinator and, as needed, a grant strategist. When developed by key staff rather than by grantwriters, the final product provides clarity and buy-in for an organization's goals and direction, and it offers additional benefits of team building, pride in the final product, and greater confidence in a group's ability to accomplish its goals as a team. This shift from relying on one grantwriter to harnessing the depth of knowledge of an organization's key players has implications for reordering workload priorities within organizations so that grantwriting activities become an inherent and ongoing piece of strategic planning. ■

Resources

Hutchinson, Bill & Ann Otter, "Straight Talk from Foundations and Corporations," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 3, No. 5.

Remley, Dirk, "Two Keys to Successful Grant Proposals," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 3.

Vartorella, William, "Focusing on Foundation Grants: The Powerful Reverse Needs Assessment," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 4.

Zola, Irene, "Do You Need a Proposal Writer?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No.1.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development (www.snpo.org/li).

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