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THE ROAD TO GRANT FUNDING: Five Rules for Successful Proposals

Last month we discussed the letter of inquiry (LOI), which can open the door to funders. But a good LOI only wins you an audience. The funder will next ask to see a proposal, and the proposal generates the funding. How do you craft it?

Here are five rules for proposals that work:

Rule 1: Know what kind of grant you're asking for. Among the most common are:

- Program or project grants, which support a specific project or program. You'll probably be seeking this kind of grant. State your planned activities and outcomes, and funding goes for that project only.
- Operating support grants, which cover the ongoing costs of your organization or program such as rent, salaries, supplies, insurance, and equipment. These are the most valuable grants and the hardest to get since they sustain the least glamorous aspects of your work.
- Capital support grants, which fund expenses like buildings, construction, and major equipment. Unlike operating support, these tend to cover one-time outlays.
- Matching grants, in which the funder matches the amount you raise from another source.

Rule 2: Don't make the proposal too long or too short. The grantmaker will often state the length it wants. If it doesn't, make the proposal as long as it needs to be — and no longer. Funders are busy and appreciate brevity.

Rule 3: Understand your core goals. A successful proposal is typically:

1. *Responsive.* Tailor your appeal to the grantor, particularly in these areas:

- Interests. Emphasize how CC! will advance the grantmaker's goals. For instance, if the grantor seeks to build kids' commitment to school, highlight the success of CC! in this area. If it focuses on cutting youth violence, stress that aspect. Occasionally, statements on the funder's website conflict with those from the Foundation Center, the main clearinghouse for grant information. In such cases, favor the funder's website since it's usually more recent and authoritative.
- Proposal structure. Grantors commonly specify that you provide a, b, c, d— in that order. Follow these instructions explicitly.
- Requirements. Especially be sure to meet each of the grantmaker's requirements. For instance, if the funder says your community benefits must extend to hospitals, make sure to say they do. Don't let a simple oversight here doom your request.

2. *Pragmatic.* Contrary to most people’s assumptions, your basic idea is not the key to the proposal. Grantmakers hear good ideas all the time. Instead, their focus is on implementation. They want to know it will work. To convince them, you need a plan that is both realistic and time-based, has clear and measurable goals, and presents evidence of the benefits CC! has brought other communities.
3. *Clear.* Many proposals fail not because the cause isn’t worthy, but because the presentation is disorganized or vague. So keep your structure logical and your prose lucid. Favor shorter sentences. Use apt, lively words rather than gray institutional jargon and legalese. Cut redundancy. Employ the active voice instead of the passive (“CC! will enhance school climate” rather than “School climate will be enhanced by CC!.”) The grantmaker should never have to work to grasp your meaning.
4. *Specific.* Shun generalities and state your plans precisely. For instance, instead of “We’ll use art to teach the Six Pillars,” say, “We’ll stage a watercolor contest for first- to sixth-graders, and the students at each level who best illustrate the Six Pillars will win passes to an amusement park.” Substitute the concrete for the abstract wherever possible.
5. *Honest.* Don’t try to hype grantmakers. They have good instincts about which plans will work; it’s their job to separate the solid from the frail. Don’t overstate your case or the results they can achieve. It’s better to deliver more than you promise. In particular, don’t be afraid to ask for the amount you really need. You don’t want to get the grant and find out too late that you’re still under-funded. That means accurately determining your needs, thinking all the costs through. If you carefully analyze your budget, you’ll impress the grantmaker with your solidity and make a better argument.

Rule 4: Understand how to hold the grantmaker’s attention. A good proposal is simultaneously a story, an argument, and a business plan. Like a good story, it should hook the grantmaker’s attention early, maintain suspense with a vivid sketch of the problem, and resolve it with the project description. Like an argument, it should stress the importance of the problem and explain persuasively how you’ll alleviate it. Like an effective business plan, it should offer a solid, well-conceived course of action.

Rule 5: Structure the proposal sensibly. If the funder provides an outline, follow it to the letter. If not, consider using the structure below taken from the Foundation Center’s free short course on proposal writing. It has six parts:

1. *Executive Summary* (one page)

The Executive Summary is the most critical part of the document. It creates the first impression and lingers longest in memory. Moreover, funders receive a torrent of proposals and can’t read them all, so they often use this page as a test of whether to continue. The Executive Summary should contain:

- a. **Problem.** Pique the grantmaker’s interest at once (1-2 paragraphs).
- b. **Solution.** Describe your CC! plan, make a brief but compelling argument for it, and cite the results of the South Dakota study (1-2 paragraphs).
- c. **Funding requirements.** Explain how much you need and how you’ll fund it (1 paragraph).
- d. **Your organization.** Show you have the expertise to carry out the CC! program (1 paragraph).

Write the Executive Summary last when you have the clearest sense of your key points.

2. *Statement of Need* (two pages)

Why is action necessary? Here you dramatize the problem of poor character and its consequences such as lying, cheating, and stealing. Lead with a real-life example from your community. Use results from Josephson Institute's Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth (<http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/Survey2002/survey2002-pressrelease.htm>). Supplement them with the 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/yrbs>). Be strong, but don't overstate. Frame the problem as one you can significantly influence.

3. *Project Description* (three pages)

How will your CC! program help? Grantmakers focus on implementation. First they'll want to know that CC! works. Second, they'll want to know that *your* plan will work. So highlight the South Dakota study — the scientific research on up to 8,000 students that shows CC!'s striking success — and mention the other evidence available at charactercounts.org. Next, describe how you will use CC!: what you'll do, how and where you'll do it, how long the CC! program will last, who'll staff it, how many people will benefit, and how you'll assess its results. Put forth a plan that's both realistic and time-based, with clear and measurable goals.

4. *Budget* (one page)

How will you spend the grantmaker's money? Think of all likely expenses. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need. Make sure your budget is reasonable and jibes with the rest of the proposal. Be honest with the funder.

5. *Organization* (one page)

Why is your group right for this task? Describe your organization, focusing on its capacity to carry out the CC! program. Stress your years of work with CC!, any successes, and any experience relevant to your proposal.

6. *Conclusion* (two paragraphs)

A good conclusion should restate key points and sum up. Craft these paragraphs carefully. They're the icing on the proposal.

Writing grant proposals is an art. If you're serious about winning a grant, you'll need a detailed description of proposal writing. For more information about each of these sections, go to the Foundation Center at <http://fdncenter.org/learn/shortcourse/prop1.html>.

Cheryl A. Clarke's *Storytelling for Grantseekers* (Jossey-Bass, 2001, \$26) offers an even more extended treatment with many tips for holding grantmakers' interest.