The Art of Proposal: Twenty Simple Steps for Success in Grant Writing

BY PAULETTE BLACK

Finding a new grant opportunity and having a grant application approved is an exciting event for any organization. In an era of increased fiscal austerity and accountability and expected transparency, grants are still a realistic source of support for nonprofit organizations. Although there are no guarantees, the grantwriting process can be an excellent exercise in fine-tuning programs and articulating projects that can help an organization address its goals and continue its mission.

Grant requests are competitive, and each application is judged not only on the merits of the application itself, but also on the capacity of the organization to carry out the project — from grant submission and approval to project implementation, documentation of expenditures, evaluation, and final reporting back to the funder. Some staffed organizations involve board members or volunteers in the writing process, while others hire a professional grant writer. In any case, it is advisable to learn the nuts and bolts of grant writing. The grant writer always should know the funding organization's mission and how the project for which funding is being requested fits into that context.

Here are a few tips gleaned from my years of grantmaking experience, which includes serving on or chairing grant-review panels, developing grant application questions, monitoring grant projects, and working with dozens of grant seekers and funders.

ESSENTIALS

1. This almost goes without saying, which is why it's No. 1 on the list: **Understand the basics** of nonprofit management, including board development, strategic planning, and project management. You don't need to be an expert, but it certainly pays to do your homework.

2. **Know thy funder.** Before submitting any grant application, research the focus of the funding organization, including previous and current funding trends, such as geographic area, average grant size, and areas of interest. Pay particular attention to the stated parameters of funding and the goals or purpose of the grant category in which you are making application. Further, know your organization's history with the potential funder. For example, has your organization ever applied for or received a grant from them? What were the results? If declined, why?

3. **Establish a relationship** with the funding organization well before the grant application deadline. Determine if it is appropriate to call or visit with the staff to better acquaint them with you and your organization. This will vary depending on whether the granter is a public agency, corporation, or private foundation. Be ready to discuss why a particular funder would be interested in your particular project, given their philosophy of giving.

4. Consider whether your project is an **appropriate fit for the funder**. Read the funding policy or grant guidelines carefully before beginning the grant application. Visit the funders' website or call to determine if what you have in mind is eligible. You may determine that the funder is not

the appropriate source from which to seek support for your organization or project. You will save yourself time and effort by taking this step.

5. Plan to have another person read through your completed application prior to submission. **Look for spelling errors**. I advise applicants to write answers in a separate document, then copy, cut, and paste into electronic applications. Remind yourself to "save" an application in process, make a copy, and don't forget to hit the "submit" button on electronic applications.

THE FINE DETAILS

6. **Use the legal name** of your organization rather than DBA or an abbreviated name. Be certain your 501(c)(3) status is still current. Make copies available of legal documents, such as the IRS designation letter, recent 990, current board list, recent audit, support letters, etc. Funders often require these or other supporting documents. It's best to organize them early.

7. **Provide accurate contact information**, including postal, email, and website addresses and phone numbers. Some funders may contact the applicant for additional information, and it is imperative that you or your designee be available to answer questions as part of the due diligence process.

8. Give your project a **brief but interesting title** that would sound appealing in a press release or publication.

9. Read each application question carefully and answer the specific question(s) concisely and completely in the space provided. Try not to repeat answers or use "see attached."

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

10. Project need, purpose, description, and narrative should be **succinct and informative**. Explain the significance of the project not only to your organization but to the population you will serve. Avoid inflated impact statements or exaggerated expected outcomes of the project. Clear and direct descriptions, which are realistic and reasonably achievable, are viewed more favorably than epic or overly ambitious claims.

DOLLARS AND SENSE

11. Provide **accurate financial information**, including annual budget and recent financial statements. Funders are less likely to invest in a project if the organization appears to have fiscal difficulties or spotty financial management. Be able to articulate the percentage of support from public funding, corporate support, earned income, foundation support, or endowment.

12. Always specify how you plan to use the funding requested. Make sure your amount is **realistic and reasonable** for the type of project and in the context of your organization. Some funders will not approve a grant request that exceeds 10 percent of the annual budget, while others will not approve 100 percent of the costs of a project. Grant reviewers may compare your requested project amount to other similar projects. Some funders require matching funds or a cash match. Determine if the funder will or will not accept "in-kind" contributions as a match.

COLLABORATION

13. Who else is involved and invested in the proposed project? **Partnerships and collaborations** can be an invaluable asset and demonstrate your organizations' effort to build capacity and secure a broad base of support, both financial and programmatic. Partners may include other

funders, individuals or volunteers, sponsors or organizations that will help your organization implement, publicize, and/or evaluate the project.

14. While many boards have a "give or get" philosophy, many funders look for and expect each individual board member to make a personal contribution toward the organization as an indication of their confidence and belief in the mission. Organizations should strive to have **100 percent participation in board giving**, whatever the amount.

STAYING POWER

15. **Measurable outcomes and evaluation** are essential notions in grantmaking. Describe the anticipated impact and tangible results of the project for which funds are requested and by what process that determination will be made. Consider how you will measure, document, and communicate impact and results of the project and to whom, when, and where. Some organizations develop press releases or post results through social media.

16. **Sustainability plans** are also key to grantmaking in this new era. Explain how your organization will continue the project beyond the funding being requested. This may involve additional grant applications to other funders, targeted fundraising, or inclusion in the general operating budget. Most funders will not fund a project or organization "in perpetuity." Not all projects or programs are designed to be ongoing, and if that's the case, make clear that it's a one-time-only project.

17. **Document, document, document!** While not a formal part of most applications, you should plan to make copies of publications, publicity, articles, photos, etc., which capture the excitement of the project as it progresses. This will add to your final reporting and also help in future grant applications, donor requests, and telling the story of your organization.

18. **Make site visits your friend.** Expect a site visit by the funder at any point in the grant process. Site visits are part of the due diligence and monitoring process and may include meeting with staff or board members about financial stability or governance of the organization, observation of the project as it is implemented, culminating sessions, or other benchmark events in the life of the grant.

19. Once funding is approved, plan to **recognize the funder** with appropriate placement of name and logo whenever possible. Check with the funder for their preference in logo usage or wording. Most funders require a written letter acknowledging financial support, indicating the amount received, when, and for what purpose.

BRAGGING RIGHTS

20. Be proud of each grant received, no matter how small. Inform your board and celebrate each success!

Paulette Black, M.S., ATR-BC, is Senior Program Officer for the Kirkpatrick Foundation. She is a graduate of Oklahoma State University and completed post-graduate work at the University of Oklahoma, leading to national registration and board certification as an art therapist by the Art Therapy Credentials Board. Black has twenty years of experience in state government as a program director in two state agencies, providing grant oversight and leadership for programs in arts education.

To contact Paulette Black, send an email to **pblack@kirkpatrickfoundation.com**.