Do You Continue to Write When An Application Doesn’t “Feel Right?”

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Many of us know the feeling. You are working diligently to draft a narrative, yet you are struggling to find the right words for the program description, to outline the goals and objectives, or to explain how the program will be evaluated.

Is this a sign of writer’s block or a sign that something isn’t as solid as it should be in the program design? As a grant writer (whether wearing the grant writing hat in addition to many duties or wearing it all the time because grant writing is your sole responsibility), you are in a unique position of being able to see all parts of a program application come together before it goes to a funder. Therefore, this also puts you in the unique position to have a more complete sense of when something is “off” with an application than other members of your grant writing team.

I believe that one of the toughest lessons for an organization and its staff to learn is when to cease working on a grant application thus passing on the opportunity to apply for a funding opportunity. Once learned, an organization needs to come up with a process to help make these types of decisions. But making a decision to stop working on an application mid-process is much more difficult than saying no to applying for a funding opportunity after your initial review of an RFP. This is especially true because your grant writing team has already reviewed the funder’s priorities and done so much work.

Fortunately, most nonprofits have developed a good working process for sifting through applications and opportunities to determine what seems to be one of the best fit. That brings us back to how to handle the hiccup that comes when what is being written doesn’t “feel right.”

As the head of the grant writing team, if you find yourself struggling with it, I recommend that you take the following steps to help determine if your organization should continue working on the application.

**STEP 1 - Identify your specific concerns about the draft proposal.** Make some quick notes for yourself. Are your concerns limited to one specific portion of the application? Or is it just a gut feeling that something doesn’t “feel right” about the application as a whole?

**STEP 2 - Step back from the application and provide yourself with some time to think about it.** Give yourself at least 24 hours to process your thoughts and feelings – that is assuming that the funder deadline and the one your colleagues have agreed upon will allow you to take a full day. Providing yourself with some distance from the...
application can help you separate your concern about the application from a possible case of “writer’s block” or any other cause.

**STEP 3 - When you again focus on the application, look back at the notes your previously wrote.** Return first to the section that prompted your concerns. Did walking away for a day help provide you some clarity? Do you have some new ideas about how to approach that section in a new way? If your concern focused on the entire application, spend some time looking through all of your initial notes that you wrote about the proposed program design. Check to make certain that you have incorporated all of the key pieces into the draft thus far. Your grant writing team gave you lots of input, be sure that you haven’t overlooked any key linkages.

**STEP 4 – If you still have concerns, call a grant writing team meeting.** You’re the professional grant writer, if you still have concerns and are feeling uninspired about the application, a meeting is needed. Together, your team and you need to address all concerns and issues to bring together a cohesive application.

Note that whether you are part of an organization’s development department, an executive director of an organization, or a grant writing consultant, I always recommend identifying who is a part of the grant writing team during the initial discussion about an application. This provides authority and support for the lead person to gather data, to get supporting budget documentation, and to review the draft documents. And in this case, it gives credibility to the leader regarding how concerns will be discussed and addressed – thus, making the decision about whether or not to move forward with the application.

**STEP 5 – Provide the current draft materials and a synopsis of your concerns to the grant writing team members.** This should be done prior to sitting down with them to discuss concerns and issues. This gives your team members time to thoughtfully review your concerns before the meeting.

**STEP 6 – During the meeting, discuss the initial concerns and brainstorm ways to address them within the proposal structure.** If the group brainstorming and discussion brings about some “ah ha” moments, that is wonderful! Now, you’re ready to go back to the draft and work with your team to fix it. Hopefully, after the meeting, everything will be back on track. Your feelings of unease will have subsided. And, you will be able to complete the application as originally planned. Don’t forget, your gut feelings about needed changes are an instinct that you should trust!

**STEP 7 – If all is not well, it is your responsibility to start the difficult conversation about passing on this opportunity.** If on the other hand, your team seems frustrated in reaching consensus about the highlighted issues during the meeting and is unable to come up with suggestions to address the initial concerns, you will need to take charge. As the leader of your team, I believe it is your responsibility to start the difficult conversation. Should your team pass on this grant opportunity? Should the team postpone the application until after the program design is more solidified? Are there other options to
consider? If the team does not agree on passing up this opportunity, you may need to go through the above process again.

**STEP 8 – If the decision is to press forward, it is your job to make the application as strong as you can with the materials and information that have been provided to you.** Remember that the ultimate decision to submit or not submit is in the hand of your organization’s top leader. The organization’s leadership may appreciate the due diligence type process you took your team through, but still decide to apply. So if you aren’t the executive director or CEO, you need to be prepared to work diligently to address your concerns and make the application as strong as possible.

In the end, the final decision may feel very subjective. Try to remember that as the leader of the grant writing team, you had to address concerns that your organization’s plans might not be a good match with the funder’s priorities. That what seems like a stretch in the narrative responses may make your application not fundable. That early in the program design stage your team didn’t create well-developed goals or objectives. That the funder is going to feel a similar sense of unease with the program design.

At times, it is better to stop work on an application. To decide to move on to another opportunity that feels more appropriate. Or, to put the application on the back burner while your team reconsiders its plans and the different circumstances that the future may offer.

In the long run, I feel that trusting your gut when something doesn’t “feel right” is important. To have an established process in place to address concerns doesn’t leave the decision in the hands of only one person. In fact, these are signs of a high-level grant-seeking process and are key to any nonprofits successfully getting the grant funds they need.