Federal Grant Reviewers: A Tool to Establishing Yourself as a Well-Rounded Grant Writer

As grants professionals, we are often mired in the complexities of our work, and can experience tunnel vision. I find it difficult to step out of my comfort zone, particularly when I’m working on a federal grant proposal. The complexities and depth of the application requirements make it nearly impossible to focus on other tasks, and view our work from an aerial perspective. We all make grammatical and copy editing mistakes, especially when we have looked at an application (for what seems like) the 20th time. However, I recently decided to step out of my comfort zone and step into the shoes of a federal grant reviewer.

Last year I signed up to serve as a federal grant reviewer for the Corporation of National and Community Service. I received no response for months, so I figured my application was dead in the water. Then, in December 2013 I received an email requesting my support to serve as a panel reviewer for one of their grant programs. I eagerly accepted, and thus began my additional role as a panel reviewer. There were numerous required trainings, templates to review, and of course, understanding the complexities of the funding opportunity announcement. Since I never wrote a CNCS grant previously, this was going to seem especially new to my novice eyes.

I served on a panel with two other individuals and a coordinator. The process was very organized, and materials were very helpful. I cannot speak for other federal application reviews, but I felt very confident going into the review.

As we all know, reviewing other people’s writing is much easier than reviewing of our own writing. However, being a grants professional, it was easy to spot the applications that did not adhere to the instructions and provide the necessary information versus the applications that were clear and well-conceived. I can honestly say that while the experience was time consuming, I learned a great deal, and will continue to participate on an annual (if not semi-annual) basis.

Here are some of the most salient points that will hopefully push you towards becoming a peer reviewer:

- Consider this professional development to enhance your approach to grant writing and serve your organization and/or clients.
- Gain a different perspective about who reviews grant applications (I have heard positive to negative feedback about panel reviewers) and how it is necessary to understand that many reviewers do not have your level of expertise.
- Think critically about the words you present on paper. Are they impactful? Does your statement of need tell a story? Does your logic model make sense?
- Become grant reviewers of your own grants, or colleagues’ grants, and help others do the same for you.

I am sure you are busy and have competing deadlines, but it is important for us to be thought leaders in the field. How can we diversify our capabilities if we do not allow ourselves to expand beyond our comfort zones? Grant writers can become reviewers, grant managers can become writers or researchers, and we all become subject matter experts in various areas. This makes us invaluable to the organizations and clients that require our support to further their missions and public policy goals.