Grants: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

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Even if not known by name, most grant professionals have or will experience Finagle’s Law. That is, if anything can go wrong, it will...and at the worst possible time. Plus, it will all be your fault and everyone will know it. Likewise, if there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the first to go wrong.

Welcome to the glorious world of grants.

To avoid seemingly unavoidable occurrences, grant processes must be safeguarded. A well supported pre-planning process is key to ensuring the submission of timely, complete and fundable proposals. Once funded, this groundwork will make reporting and close-out much easier as well.

Rather than being accused of chasing money, we (as the grant writers) must: (1) validate that the funding opportunity fits our mission and priorities; (2) determine our organization’s bandwidth is capable of managing the grant; and (3) engage the right people who will ultimately be held accountable for what we so eloquently propose.

Hopefully, your organization has already set-up a functional grants office. Even if a staff of one, grant professionals must work diligently to establish relations with finance, executive leadership, site directors, field staff and others.

Sometimes, grant professionals must first educate the leadership on what is needed and why. I cringe to hear comments such as - “Grant writers are just secretaries on steroids.” “It’s only filling out forms.” “Can’t the executive director just spit these out?” And last but not least, “Just do one template and change the names to shotgun the proposal statewide.” Yikes!

And unfortunately, some of us are so intent on writing everything we know that we end up reducing the font size to 4-point – a very avoidable mistake. But most of us do follow funder guidelines and make our proposals fit the interests of each individual funder.

So what could possibly go wrong?

The devil is in the details, especially when you are up against a deadline for more than one proposal and suddenly problems arise. You notice that there is no street address listed to give the trusted overnight delivery service. Or you miss a minute detail listed in the program guidelines. In one case, I heard of a municipality that was denied funding because the public notice did not include every zip code that they listed in their target
community. And complexity varies with the type of private or public funding - as does the degree of project planning needed.

Remember if anything just CANNOT go wrong, it will anyway! If we perceive four possible ways in which something can go wrong and circumvent them, then a fifth way - you’re unprepared for - will promptly develop. Just when you think you have it all mastered, you will discover that it really does take a village to write a successful grant proposal. Thus, it’s important to have a plan B, C, and D ready at all times.

I recently assisted with a $30 million federal grant proposal. Of course, the Request for Proposals came out just before Christmas and the applications were due in late January. Quickly, my agency engaged external partners and pulled what we could from other proposals. And even though the visionary was unavailable until the last minute, thanks to teamwork, perseverance, and lots of coffee, the final product is fundable (I say with fingers crossed).

Common and extraordinary mistakes and occurrences that may impede development or submission of a successful grant application include: (1) believing I can control “it”; (2) not involving the right people “early on”; (3) simply ignoring any part of the guidelines; (4) arbitrarily changing the length of the proposal; and, (5) not allowing the proposal to speak for itself.

Lastly, among that which could possibly go wrong are: proposals that never make it out your door; proposals that miss the last overnight pickup; and proposals that are denied due to an oversight on your part.

But don’t lose heart. Surely the next one will be funded for twice as much as you requested. It has happened – I’ve seen it!

So in conclusion, remember that if everything seems to be going well, you have obviously overlooked something – take another look.