Like Looking in a Mirror

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By: Teri Blandon
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The assignment for this article was intriguing: When you look at other grant professionals, is it like looking in a mirror? Rather than just talk about myself – a topic only I find fascinating – I decided to informally survey some of my grant professional friends. I was curious about how they perceive themselves, how they view the rewards and challenges of their jobs, and what they do for fun. While there were differences, the similarities were striking.

Before launching into the commonalities, let me dispel one myth. A grants professional is not someone who sits in the office all day writing proposals and rarely interacting with people. If we weren’t skilled at dealing with people, no projects would ever be funded with grants. We deal with people constantly: project managers, accountants, funders, evaluators, publicists, and lawyers to name just a few.

As an experiment for this article, I counted the number of people I interacted with on a recent grant, from preparing the proposal to the execution of the grant agreement. The list was rather daunting: program director, project controller, educational outreach specialist, general counsel, legal assistant, finance manager, executive assistant, CEO, two external program partners, and two foundation program officers. A total of twelve people – all at varying levels of authority, experience and connection to my organization – had a hand in this one grant.

So what are the traits of a successful grant professional? What are the ways in which we are similar? Eighteen colleagues who responded to my questions provided a wealth of information.

The top characteristics cited were organized and detail-oriented. These did not surprise me – there are so many tasks that a grant professional has to juggle and so many details to monitor. You are not going to last long in the grant field if you cannot keep track of everything and everyone.

Creative was also mentioned many times. The successful proposal writer is not only skilled in the mechanics of writing, but can captivate the reader with words. But even before taking pen to paper, we often have to be creative in how we research prospective funders. We have to ascertain and highlight those elements of the project that might be attractive to various funders, without diluting the essence of the project.

We are collaborative and cooperative. As mentioned before, we have to work with a wide variety of people, all with their own experiences, perspectives, and agendas. (I sometimes think that a psychology workshop at the joint CharityChannel Summit/Grant...
Professionals Association conference would be as valuable as the ones on grant writing!) Often, we are the one of the few who can bridge any competing silos in our organizations.

We are **persuasive** not only in our writing but also with colleagues. Grant proposals don’t write themselves, and sometimes it takes a great deal of diplomacy to convince program staff and executives that doing the work will be worth the payoff. We are also **persistent** – especially when faced with a looming deadline.

Grant professionals are **intellectually curious**. Whether we write about a lot of different subjects or focus on a particular area, our jobs require us to become “instant experts” in a topic. We hunt down research for the needs statement and ask questions to clarify the narrative and budget. We learn as much as we can so we can become passionate and effective advocates for the project.

We **thrive on challenges**. It can be hard work to get the information you need – and when you need it – from colleagues and clients. Program people often have a difficult time understanding the complexity of the proposal process. The deadlines are often short, but the decision process can take a long time. And the expectations are always high.

In a way, we are **thrill seekers**. While there are many aspects of our jobs that we enjoy, what give us the biggest kick is getting that grant. It is an unbelievable rush to open the letter and find out that a program we care deeply about is getting funded. Whether it is helping people find housing, teaching children to read, providing health care to those who can’t afford it, or one of a myriad of good causes, there is no greater feeling than knowing you made a difference in someone’s life.

Finally, I asked my colleagues what they did for fun. This is where the differences among us were the most apparent. After a long day of dealing with people, deadlines, demands and writer’s block, many of the respondents liked to do more solitary things, such as gardening, painting, reading, needlework or mindless television. Others liked to do active things that engaged them with others, such as coaching or playing sports, attending concerts, playing with children or grandchildren, traveling, or participating in a rousing game of poker. Interestingly, only one person cited any kind of writing as a hobby – and she writes fiction.

I promised all my survey-takers that they would remain anonymous, so I won’t mention them by name. But you know who you are – thank you all for sharing your candid insights about who you are and what you do.

What about you, fellow grant professional and reader of this article? Does the above description sound like you?