“Use the Force, Grant Professional”: Reflecting the voice of your organization

Jen Hurst, M.A.

My son just turned six years old, and my house is littered with new Star Wars action figures and Lego sets. Everywhere I look, I am reminded of iconic moments of the saga. Most striking to me is the moment when Luke Skywalker is careening down the trench in the Death Star, and he hears Obi Wan Kenobi’s advice to listen to the Force instead of the computer-guidance system.

When I write grants, I often feel like Luke Skywalker in that trench. Voices flood my head begging me to listen to the program director’s goals for the coming year, the CEO’s vision, the Chief Development Officer’s experience grantwriting, the training that I have received, and the advice from other members of the Grant Professionals Association’s Los Angeles Chapter. Then there’s my gut instinct, which I have found myself pushing aside as “professional development” makes me second-guess common sense.

When Luke Skywalker shuts off his computer-guidance system, I have a slight panic attack. But there are ways to use those voices the way they are intended - to strengthen your message.

(1) Listen
Through presentations, marketing materials, reports, and proposals, many people put their unique perspective on your cause, based on the needs of the audience. Part of our job as grants professionals is to listen to these voices. Talking with program staff and the people impacted by your programs will give you a very different perspective than the academic journal you spent your weekend reading. Our effectiveness as grantwriters hinges on our ability to hear and understand the different perspectives about the needs, change forces, and landscape of the mission we are serving.

(2) Capture
In many ways, the grants professional is positioned to capture all of the voices of an organization. Case statements, statistics spreadsheets, outcomes, outputs, and benchmarks will all end up in your writing toolbox. Last week, I had the opportunity to attend a State Senate hearing regarding funding for services for people with disabilities. I covered the handout with quotes and statistics that I could use for future case statements. Once I was back at my desk, I entered every tidbit into my resource library for future writing projects.

(3) Shift
Information should move us, but it’s up to you to choose which direction to go. Every new voice that you listen to has the power to strengthen an existing case statement, expose a need, or make you realize that a need you thought your organization had may no longer exist. As a result of the notes that I scribbled at last week’s Senate hearing, I am working on a stronger way of sharing the need for
funding partnerships. It might not be the highest priority on my list for this week, but now I have the beginnings of a powerful argument that is waiting to be shared.

(4) Respond
If you are able to keep your notes on each of these voices organized, you’ll find that people start coming to you for information. You will be able to anticipate your need for statistics early enough in the process to help drive the conversation about outcomes and benchmarking. Not everything that you gather will be helpful on an ongoing basis, but opportunities will present themselves to share information that shifts the conversation. Before the end of the Senate hearing that I mentioned earlier, three of my coworkers had asked me for copies of my notes. Instead of being reactive and chasing down statistics, those notes empowered us to be proactive in how we approach potential funders.

(5) Use common sense
No matter how good your process is for listening, capturing, shifting, and responding, you need to use common sense. Don’t be afraid to “use the Force” and step away from a well-defined process. Though best practices exist for a reason, there are always moments when it is best to step away from them.

If I’m honest, this is my caveat for this article.

I listened to other grant professionals in how they develop a voice for their organization. I captured a few best practices from other articles. I shifted my perspective using those sources. This article, in a way, is my response. However, you’ll notice that I’m not using footnotes. I didn’t print copies and highlight key terms. What I am doing is sharing this concept with others in my profession with the hope that you will respond. Turn this article into a dialogue – maybe with me directly through LinkedIn, or through your local GPA chapter. Being a Jedi of grantsmanship is not enough if you are not creating opportunities for others to access, learn from, and influence the voices that you are listening to.