Taming the Green-Eyed Monster

By Teri Blandon
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The letter has arrived. The grant proposal you worked on with Department A has just been awarded a contract! The program director is thrilled and shakes your hand. The CEO happily announces it in the all-staff meeting. High fives go all around.

Then, the director of Department B comes up to you. “So, how come we never get these grants?” Uh oh – that green-eyed monster called jealousy has reared its ugly head.

Although this seems like an awkward situation, it is actually a golden opportunity to educate your colleagues on the wonderful world of grants. Many times, these jealous colleagues are only seeing the end result – the happy faces, the congratulations from superiors, and the new programs created. They don’t understand the work that went into getting that contract – and what managing that grant program entails. Contrary to late-night infomercials, grants are not free money.

To assist Department B in overcoming their jealousy, I recommend that you take the following proactive steps.

First, make sure that there are no internal barriers to this department developing grant programs. Grants take time. Many organizations set priorities on which projects can be grant-funded and how many grants can be successfully managed. Check with the appropriate person (your supervisor, the CFO, etc.) to make sure this department has the clearance to work on grant applications.

Next, sit down with your program colleagues and provide a mini-course on the grant process. Explain that funders evaluate proposals based on the following essential criteria and related questions:

- **Need** – What is the societal problem that the project addresses? How do you know the problem exists? If the “need” is internal (i.e., “we need money to do this project”) that is not a satisfactory rationale for funding. To paraphrase fundraising consultant Kay Sprinkel Grace, program staff should stop looking in a mirror and instead look out the window to identify the need.

- **Target** – Who will be served by the project? How will the clients for the project been identified and recruited?

- **Impact** – What will be gained by the project? What difference will it make on the participants and the community?
• Timeline – When is the funding needed? Since it is not uncommon for decisions on grant proposals to take six months or more, a project that requires immediate financing is not likely to be funded in time to serve the need described.

• Sustainability – What is the plan for support after the grant funds have been expended and the contract has expired? Funders will usually provide financial support for a limited time period (sometimes for only one year at a time) with no guarantee of continued funding. Even if additional funding is provided, “donor fatigue” often sets in after three years.

Then, talk to your colleagues about the prospect research process. Explain that there is rarely a perfect fit between a funder’s giving focus and a project. Part of the art of successful prospect research is being able to assess whether the project strategically aligns with the funder’s goals and objectives. Often, the project needs to be researched from several different angles to find viable funders. And sometimes there are no fits.

Proposals need to be adjusted to fit different funders’ guidelines, interests, giving levels, etc. Last summer, I submitted four proposals for a documentary that had a well-articulated program description explaining the documentary, the related website and social media elements, and the community engagement plan. Even with this extensive description in hand, each proposal took hours to prepare as the foundations had different questions and requirements. “One size fits all” does not apply to proposals.

At this point, it is important to underscore that a submitted grant proposal is essentially half of a contract, with the grant award letter or agreement constituting the other half. Many people who are new to grants don’t understand this fact. They think that a proposal can be based on what the project director is thinking of doing, rather than a commitment to actually implement the submitted plan of operation. These colleagues erroneously assume that they can change the scope of the project after the grant is awarded without consulting the funder. This is obviously incorrect, and you will need to be certain that they understand this before you submit a proposal.

Finally, discuss the likely requirements that will be part of the contract when it is awarded. Remind them that the money has to be appropriately accounted for and that your finance department may have specific instructions on what the project staff will need to do. Explain that the funder will want progress reports, sometimes as frequently as quarterly, which need to be prepared with the project director’s input. Most importantly, remind them that any changes in the project timeline, budget, or other significant aspect must be approved by the funder as the changes occur. They should understand that grants management is a huge responsibility, and a grievous mistake could mean the loss of funds not only for that project but for the organization.

By this point, the project staff’s eyes may glaze over and they may decide that grants are too much of a bother. Or they may decide that they are ready to give grants a try. No matter what the result is, the important thing is you have given your colleagues sufficient information upon which to make an educated choice about pursuing grants funding.
And hopefully, a few more colleagues will have a better understanding of how challenging your job really is.