Headache Relief for Novice Writers: Tips for Thoughtful Grant Planning

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“Just read over this and make it happen,” the grant writer nonchalantly stated as he placed the 80-page program narrative into my hands on my first day of work. There was no training manual, knowledge of the Grants Professional Association or LinkedIn discussion group to assist me as the new program director. The classic English proverb proved true, “Necessity is the mother of invention.” The need to implement a complex grant led me to learn firsthand the necessary components of a well-written grant that is attractive to funders and simple for grant management staff to implement.

The following points will hopefully alleviate a few headaches for the novice grant writer:

- **Involve program staff in the proposal development and review process.** Invite existing program staff to contribute to the grant proposal process. Often, the people working the program can give you the most accurate understanding of how a program works, design flaws, areas for improvement and needs. They also make great volunteer reviewers.
  - Questions to ask program staff when starting out:
    - What are the actual needs of the target population?
    - What barriers do you face in providing this program and/or service to your clients?
    - What are the strengths of your programs?
    - What are the weaknesses of your program?
    - If there was no limit on program funding, how do you see the program expanding or growing?

- **Develop realistic and attainable goals and objectives.** Some grant writers create work plans that only Superman himself could implement.
  - Ask yourself: Could I implement the plan if asked? If it is confusing to you, it will be even more confusing to others.

- **Avoid convincing statements that are based in opinion or strong feeling.** Many novice writers make the mistake of using opinions, rather than facts, to convince the reader of the importance of the cause. Instead, use available data and research to support the need statement. Provide citations for research findings.

- **Design evaluation plans that match the scope of the program and the size of the organization.**
  - Determine if the program requires an external or internal evaluator. If an internal evaluator is acceptable, is there someone on staff who can do this work?
- Ask the program director to describe current program evaluation methods.
  - What tools do they use to track evaluation?
  - Do these methods work?
  - How could this process be improved?
  - Can they provide you with an annual program report?
  - How often are outcomes measured? How often are they reported?
  - Do they have program baseline data?

- **Avoid boring proposals.** Even the most well written proposals can come across as boring to reviewers.
  - Why is the funding necessary? Connect the heart of the problem with the solution posed in your application.
  - Have someone who knows nothing about the program read over your proposal and provide commentary. Does the application make sense? Are there any improvements that can be made?

- **Don’t forget the attachments section. Plan early.** Most grants require Letters of Support or Memorandum of Agreements. Some agencies need at least 30 days to get the appropriate approval. Don’t get caught with a completed application, but without the necessary signatures on your support documents.

As a novice in the grantwriting field, don’t be afraid to ask questions. Read as much as you can. Get active in your state GPA chapter. Become a grant reviewer. Find a mentor to take you under their professional wing and enjoy the ride.