How Grant Consultants Make Me More Professional

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My recent GPA chapter activities again had me reflecting on the time I spend on extra professional commitments. For the March 2015 GPA-Arizona (AZ) Chapter, I co-organized a panel of grant consultants to discuss their experiences launching and expanding their business. The GPA-AZ executive committee placed the following learning objective at the top of the meeting agenda:

“Competency:
Knowledge of practices and services that raise the level of professionalism of grant developers.”

My first thought was, “Yes, that’s right. Consultants have made me more professional.” Below I offer some of the concrete ways that consultants have helped me to serve more effectively as a salaried employee, or as termed euphemistically, a ‘staffer.’ Through my interactions with grant consultants, I’ve concluded that I had been conducting myself according to a set of assumptions that did not necessarily benefit my organization, nor ultimately, the target outcomes that I was hired to promote. In short, I was not optimizing institutional practices that would increase grant awards.

Speak out, and don’t sugar coat the message.

Initially, I believed that I should work on every grant or with every group that approached me, though my style and expertise lends itself to working productively on selected projects. Grant consultants assess which clients are the best fit and put a price on a project’s effort. Though my prospective efforts were not tallied on a per-project ‘bid’ basis, there was nonetheless a measurable cost. I learned from consultants that I need to track the time that I spend on a project. Too often, I would complain ineffectually about ‘wasted’ time. Alternatively, unbiased, accurate time assessments allow me to engage leadership more effectively in conversations about the value and relative priority of different grant projects for the organization. Furthermore, consultants have taught me that there’s a hidden cost – lost opportunities – that must be revealed to leadership to allow for strategic decision making.

Lead, don’t just attend, meetings.

I, like many salaried staff, would spend a major portion of my day in unproductive meetings. Consultants, by contrast, don’t attend meetings unless required to address critical project needs deemed valuable to the client. Consultants have taught me the benefits and methods of leading meetings versus passively sitting in on them; it is more powerful to create the agenda, keep the meeting on task and on time, reflect back the accomplishments, and drive the next steps with action items. Even if invited merely to attend, I always come prepared to lead with bullet points and ‘ready-to-distribute’ materials.
**Provide advice**, not just *information*.

Consultants have taught me to provide **structured information** that leads to decisions. Tools such as matrices to prioritize funding opportunities or to assess resubmission potential can be a subtle yet concrete way a ‘staffer’ can present prospect research or peer review impressions not only to the grant project leaders, but to department directors, research vice presidents and others with a larger agenda to expand the organization’s grant portfolio.

**Honest critiques**, not ‘soft’ critiques, improve grants.

Often the project leaders will tell you their proposal is novel and unique. Grant professionals are trained to be critical of such statements. In between lies the truth. I recognize that I might have biases, even if I don’t know for certain what the peer reviewers will say about a grant. However, the more data I provide in terms of agency/foundation priorities, history of funding for the given grant opportunity, assessment of competitors and other factors, the more professional my advice. Consultants have taught me to speak without fear, even while I am aware of the need to maintain relationships, since I don’t have the ‘contract termination’ option.

**Be selfish**, not *giving*, when prioritizing projects.

In my first year as a full-time grant professional, I thought I needed to be ‘fair’ and give my time equally to every group that requested my assistance. Consultants have taught me that is not a sound approach because my time, my career, credibility, and ultimately, my reputation are at stake. If I give my time unselfishly, my outputs will not achieve the outcomes of my organization. And this is what defines my worth and achievements as a ‘staffer.’ My VP will not care that I worked on 20 grants with the same intensity if none are awarded. Though I certainly continue to prioritize by deadline, I also learned from consultants that I must **influence my work priorities**.

**Share**, don’t *hoard*, tools you develop.

A variety of GPA members participate in GPA’s weekly Twitter #grantchat. However, it is often the consultants who share unfamiliar links, articles and other information that are of greatest benefit to my growth. Many of these ‘products’ are their self-made data gathering and reporting tools. In essence, these individuals are giving away unique offerings of their business for free. The generosity of consultants has reminded me that as a ‘staffer,’ I am here to teach others, not to create dependency. I realize that in sharing my expertise, I can expand my organization’s grant culture and increase grant quality exponentially. In addition, I have adapted consultants’ handy tools, i.e., ‘grant readiness’ assessments, to my own necessities. So now, by distributing these tools, I can pay it forward to other ‘staffers’ like me.

In honor of the first International Grant Professionals Week, I urge you to **thank a consultant** for making you more ‘**grant professional**’ this year.