USING FIRST AND THIRD PERSON PRONOUNS IN GRANT NARRATIVES

While I was conducting a grant writing training class for a nonprofit's staff, a staff member took issue with my use of the first person (singular/plural) pronouns in the examples of a grant narrative. This staffer stated, "I took a grant writing course with a grant writing company and the trainers told us to use third person singular because grant proposals are a form of formal writing—like research papers."

I told the staffer that for most of the nonprofit’s grant applications to private and business foundations, the use of the first person singular/plural (we, us, our) should be used. The pronoun used for federal or state grants depends on the audience reading the proposal:
- If writing a research proposal where the reviewers are scientific peers, then third person singular (the school, his/her, and it) may be appropriate.
- If writing a program proposal for services, where the reviewers may be other nonprofit staff, then first person singular/plural may be appropriate.

The staff member was not satisfied with the answer because grant proposals are "formal." I told her that I would survey other grant professionals to get their input and share the results. While 90% of my colleagues agreed with using first person singular/plural pronouns, about 10% stated they routinely use third person pronouns to draw a spotlight to the nonprofit organization.

I prefer to use first person singular/plural pronouns in my narratives to set the right tone because:
- It helps to draw the reader into the solution. For example: We are committed to lowering the teen pregnancy rate in XYZ County through education and support services. Whereas the third person singular can make the solution stiff and antiseptic: The Anytown Teen Center is dedicated to lowering the teen pregnancy rate in XYZ County through education and support services.
- It saves space!
- It shows a community response to a problem. When partnerships are a key part of proposals, the use of "we/our" helps to show a united community.

As a grant reviewer for private and government grants, I've seen proposals using both types of pronouns. Were the proposals evaluated differently because the narrative consistently used first or third person pronouns? No, because the quality of the narrative wasn't diminished because of the stylistic choice of the writer.

While researching for this article, I came across one grant writer’s website who stated the second person pronoun (you) should be used to help engage the reader in a conversation about the problem and solution. I’ve never used this type of pronoun in a grant proposal, have you?
A great resource for all things grammar (and a source for this piece) is Grammar Girl (http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl). The “Grammar Girl”, Mignon Fogarty, also has a weekly (free) 10-20 minute podcast on grammar and language that is entertaining and educational.

What is your pronoun preference for grant proposals?