“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way.” - Charles Dickens

It seems that grant professionals each have an opinion about the funding environments in which we work. Each of us views it quite differently depending upon our own successes and disappointments; and, individual opinions can change rapidly—usually upon receipt of a rejection letter. However, collective opinions generally change when significant amounts of new funding become available or major funding cutbacks are announced—especially federal cutbacks.

Throughout my career, I have generally chosen to view each economic shift as one of the “best of times.” I’m a pragmatic person with a dash (or two) of optimism. For me, it’s important to focus on my glass being half full, not half empty. Those who know me well weren’t surprised that I strongly disagreed when a colleague recently challenged me on sharing with beginning grant writers my optimism in finding funding. I respectfully and emphatically disagree! I’m not too optimistic. I’ve got it down to a fine art—perhaps even a science—because obviously what I’m doing is working for me and my college.

You see, I believe that this great big, beautiful world offers us all unlimited opportunities for success—personally and professionally. We simply need to keep our eyes and hearts open to new opportunities. We must work smart (versus hard) as we select and pursue opportunities that come our way. I believe that I will successfully find grant funding for each and every project my college seeks to implement. Sometimes, it takes longer than I had expected, but I’ve yet to be stymied by a few rejection letters. I just keep plugging along in pursuit of my goal of giving our faculty and staff the money they need to prepare our community’s workers and students for entry into today’s global workforce.

**Characteristics that Define My Success**

I believe that there are many reasons that I have found success as a grant writer. Some are just inherent to my personality, others I’ve had to learn along the way.

**Pragmatic.** Yes, it’s true. I’m a very down-to-earth, realistic person. I examine the facts first, then I logically evaluate the situation. I believe in working smart versus hard. “Hard” working grant writers are constantly slaving away at each and every grant opportunity that is posted. “Smart” grant writers evaluate the potential benefits and likelihood of success for each potential grant opportunity before they begin writing the application. As a “smart” worker, I decide which applications to pursue based on the published criteria, funder interests, shared missions, institutional capacity, and organizational interest. I don’t waste time on mismatched opportunities that have limited chances of winning or successfully implementing.

**Persistent.** I could not possibly count the number of times that I have heard a grant professional say, “Oh, I’m not submitting an application for that competition because I did it last year and we didn’t get an award.” Boo, hoo! So they didn’t win the first time. That doesn’t mean that they wouldn’t have won a contract the second time, if they had only tried again.

Most funders provide reviewer comments for applicants that didn’t receive a grant award. I consider these the equivalent of free consultant services. After all, the funders’ professional staff provide a
critique that highlights areas that I should rewrite and strengthen. Thus, smart grant writers don’t give up. They always reapply in subsequent competitions conducted by funders that have previously not given them a grant contract, and often they are rewarded with a contract the second or third time.

Just today, I sent off a request for the reviewers’ comments and evaluative feedback for a U.S. Department of Labor proposal that I wrote. It wasn’t funded this time. Note that I just said “this time”—because next time, I’m going to win that contract for my college and our partners. I’ve won several multi-million dollar Department of Labor grants before, so I know I can do it. I don’t care if there are financial cutbacks in the number of grant dollars that may be flowing out of Washington, DC. I’m going after my share armed with all the knowledge and free advice that I can harness for my team.

Adaptable. I realize that changes can seem threatening at first. Heck, changes can feel threatening all along the way. Grant professionals rely on the skills and knowledge that they have acquired throughout their careers. However, this can be a hindrance to success in today’s funding environment if we aren’t open to the changes that occur almost daily. While some are expected, others are unforeseen. Instead of fearing change, the most successful grant writers are those that say to themselves, “Ok, I may not feel comfortable with this change, but I must accept and address it.”

I think that the best book I’ve ever read about adapting to change is Who Moved My Cheese?: An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life, by Spencer Johnson, M.D. It is a light-hearted tale of two mice and two little people and how they respond when their “cheese” is longer in the expected place within their maze.

I think that the most important lessons that every grant writer should take away from this teaching tale are:

- **The “cheese” keeps moving.** Smart grant writers anticipate this and get ready to deal with it.

- **The “cheese” should be watched and monitored closely.** By observing how the “cheese” may be gradually changing, smart grant writers will be able to respond to changes over time, as they evolve.

- **Those that adapt to change quickly are going to find the new “cheese” more quickly.** Smart grant writers are constantly attending conferences and training sessions to ensure that their skills are up-to-date and that they are informed of the latest government funding initiatives and foundation giving trends.

- **We should never forget that change is constant.** Smart grant writers know that each new day brings with it changes, so they look for them and adapt to them.

Competitive. Have no doubt, I’m a competitive person. I love winning and this makes me a far better grant developer than my colleagues that aren’t. I strive to win each and every grant competition that I enter. I don’t care if the financial gain will be $500 or $5 million. What is important to me is that I get the money needed by my college to do what needs to be done for my community. Sure, I enjoy recognition, but actually it’s not the recognition that motivates me. It’s the winning for my team. Thus, I want my applications to be perfect. I want them to be based on the latest research and best practices. Thus, I keep myself abreast by reading professional newsletters, newspapers, and reports.

Humble. We all make mistakes—each and every one of us. Yet, I know grant writers that will insist that they didn’t “win” the contract because they weren’t lucky, or didn’t have a friend in the right place. They simply can’t seem to acknowledge that perhaps (just perhaps) their grant application wasn’t the best. I acknowledge that there are always ways to improve an application. I’m not too proud to admit that I make mistakes or could have written a better proposal. I’m consistently
reviewing my rejected proposals for clues as to how I can improve in the future. In other words, I’m not afraid to learn from my mistakes.

Another part of being humble is having the ability to share the glory of a win. I always talk about my grant teams when celebrating a win. I couldn’t do what I do without the input and support from program staff and administrators. It isn’t a personal win for me. It’s a team win.

**Puzzle Solver.** I like putting together the pieces of the funding puzzle. Whether we (or our co-workers) like it or not, equipment and supply purchases are simply not fundable as stand-alone grant projects. These types of expenses must be requested in a comprehensive project plan that has measurable outcomes and objectives. I know that I must constantly be thinking about ways to integrate these “can’t stand-alone” expenditures into larger grant requests.

For example, five years ago my college’s ESL coordinator dreamed of offering Rosetta Stone software to her students. However, with forty stations in her lab, the cost of buying the program for each computer was prohibited within her budget. So she asked me to find her the money to make her dream come true. It took me a few weeks but I found a small grant opportunity that would allow her to “pilot” her project on five stations. She bemoaned the fact that it was going to be for only five students at a time. I assured her that if she was patient, I would help her find the remaining dollars based on the success of her pilot. I am happy to report that today all forty computers are fully equipped with levels one through three of the Rosetta Stone software—and ten of them also featured the new levels four and five. It was simply a matter of piecing together a funding package that would get her the funds she needed.

**Appreciative.** No grant is too small for me to spend my time on if it will make a difference for my community. Many of my grant colleagues share with me that they won’t waste their time on small grants. Anything less than $20,000 is a waste of their time—or so they think. I know that a small grant award can have amazing impacts though.

Case in point: two of our college-level math instructors asked me to find them money to purchase classroom sets of graphing calculators. As is commonly known, many students choose a community college because they cannot afford to attend a university. They come to our doors with limited resources. The recommended graphing calculators cost approximately $125 each, so many of our students come to class with much older, out-of-date calculators. This makes following the instructor and lesson much more challenging for them.

To remedy this, the instructors wanted to purchase two sets of “traveling” calculators. With rolling carts, they wanted to take calculators for each student to class with them each day and to have five calculators in the lending library at the college for after-class use. And all they needed to make this grant dream come true was $5,000. It took me about one year and two grant competitions, but two weeks ago I received notice that we have received an NEA Foundation grant for the full amount.

It might sound silly, but when I heard the news, I was as excited to receive this grant (which means so much to these two faculty members and their students) as I was two weeks ago when I learned that we had been awarded another Texas Workforce Commission contract in excess of half a million dollars.

**In Conclusion**

Attitude is everything in the grant world. If you believe there is no money out there for the getting, there won’t be any for you. As for me, I’ll keep on believing it is “the best of times” and winning grant awards—whether big or small—that will make a difference for my college and community.