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- Enhances the public image and recognition of the profession within the greater philanthropic, public, and private funding communities.
- Promotes positive relationships between grant professionals and their stakeholders.

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The Journal of the AAGP is a professional journal devoted to the improvement of the grants professional and the profession. It is a resource for teaching and learning within the profession and provides an outlet for sharing information about the profession. It also provides a forum for the discussion of issues within the grants profession and the expression of philosophical ideas.
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Developing Communities of Practice to Support Grant Development

by

Melissa Poole

Melissa Poole is a grant writer at the University of Missouri and is part of a growing network of grant writers on her campus. She has worked in higher education for over 25 years as an editor, technical writer, and grant writer and has served as a member of several federally-funded research teams.

Shrinking federal and state funding, increasing competition for fewer dollars, and increasing complexities in the grant application process are creating the need for an emerging profession of grant writing. While many college and university administrators still expect faculty to be able to find funding for their own research, many others are becoming savvy to the competitive edge provided by professionals who are skilled in the craft of grant seeking.

Grant writers can help not only navigate the complexities of the application process, but also help faculty articulate their ideas in a strategic narrative that demonstrates how the project can serve both the goals of the grant seeker and the funding agency. Good grant writers are also good at team building: they can help faculty foster the kind of collaborative teams necessary not only to write the proposal and get it submitted on time but also to carry out the project, once it is funded. Again, in today’s competitive grant-seeking arena, team-based approaches, particularly those with interdisciplinary teams, are being increasingly demanded.

Grant writing is a profession best learned through practice. Face it: none of us ever grew up wanting to be a grant writer. There is no degree program to prepare you for it. Indeed, few universities offer even a single course in it. While there are basic skills and knowledge that can be taught, grant writing, like most professional practice, is best learned through experience. We are beginning to recognize that developing expertise on the job, within the context of practice, is much more effective and efficient than sending people off-site for weeks or months of formal training.

Learning within the context of practice is also social in nature. It happens within a community of practice, by networking, negotiating, and building upon the shared knowledge of colleagues practicing and learning the same craft. We share our expertise, help to build a shared knowledge of our practice, and support the professional development of all the members.

Context

As a major research university, our institution places a high priority on grant funding to support its research endeavors and to maintain its ranking. As a
land-grant university, there is also a good deal of emphasis on program delivery through extension and outreach. Both increasingly demand the resources that can be provided by grant writers. Over the past six years, we have developed a network of 12 grant writers across a number of different schools and colleges, representing a variety of disciplines. We meet weekly to pose questions, provide answers, and discuss what is going on in our different units.

We communicate frequently between meetings via email and are building an electronic shared archive of information and resources. We often partner with one another in the development of large proposals. We offer a twice-monthly professional development seminar for grant writers and others on campus who are involved in developing and submitting proposals and host a month-long summer institute on grant writing for faculty on our campus. What follows is a description of a developing community of practice within a grant writer network at a state university in the Midwest. Recommendations for building your own community of practice may prove useful not only in building a grant writer network, but also in fostering and supporting grant-seeking project teams.

Just what is a Community of Practice?

The phrase “community of practice” was first coined by Lave and Wenger in 1991 to describe informal groups of people bound together by a common purpose who work together to solve problems and share knowledge about their practice. Recognizing that professional practice involves lifelong learning, usually within the context of other practitioners, they began to explore how we go about making explicit the tacit knowledge we gain through practice and through interaction with our colleagues. Their research and that of many others in this emerging area of study is beginning to shed light on the nature of how we learn on the job.

While there is a constellation of characteristics that describe a community of practice, the three essential elements outlined by Wenger (1998) are a common domain or realm of shared interest, a community of individuals who regularly interact, and a shared practice that they are seeking to develop. Communities of practiced form as people come together in informal groups around a common domain of interest; through community, they share and develop new knowledge about that domain and explore ways of improving their practice. These three elements might be thought of as the orienting axes for a community of practice.

Other characteristics of a community of practice include shared interests and shared values; an identity and shared history that develops over time; sociability; and a set of norms that govern interactions among the participants, including participation and commitment, shared responsibility, boundaries, and trust. What follow is a more in-depth explanation of those characteristics and
evidence of how they are manifested in our grant writing network and in the faculty research groups I have worked with.

**Key Characteristics**

*Shared Interest/Shared Purpose*

A community of practice comes together around a shared interest or shared purpose to develop their practice. This ongoing shared interest is what distinguishes a community of practice from a committee, team, task force or other group. The vertical orienting axis, our *raison d’être*, as it were, is our interest in a shared domain of knowledge; teams are more short lived, often disbanding after the project or task is completed.

Our network comes together in community around our shared interest in developing knowledge about the craft of developing proposals for grants within a university setting. We come to this profession from a variety of backgrounds and, although there are certain core skills that are necessary prerequisites for the job (e.g. good writing and critical thinking skills), there is much more about the profession that is learned through practice. We meet weekly to share concerns and resources and we network continuously via email. As new grant writers join the network, we all take on a certain level of responsibility for mentoring them into the profession.

Recent discussions about how to improve that process of incorporating newcomers into the network raised our consciousness about the issue. We realized that the old “training” model in which the more experienced experts simply “transfer” their knowledge to newcomers no longer worked. Because the work is far too complex and continually changing, it is clear that we all are continuing to learn through practice from one another. We have begun to see ourselves as a community of practice and, as we come to better understand this model, to be more intentional about living into it.

The groups that we facilitate may coalesce around an ongoing interest in an area of research. Although our involvement may be only for a short period of time, as they work together to get a proposal developed and submitted, it is helpful if we think of them not as “teams” focused on a proposal, but as ongoing collaborative communities of practice that are able to work together to accomplish the long-term goals of the project. The groups that are the most successful in getting funded develop community first around that shared interest and then seek funding to support their work over an extended period of time.

*Shared Values*

Often, but not always, mixed in with that constellation of shared interests is a set of shared values, shared opinions and attitudes, both about the practice and other areas of common concern. For instance, as grant writers in the context...
of higher education, we share common values about the importance of education in general and research in higher education in particular. Research interest groups often share similar views on different research paradigms and methodological approaches. Some, for instance, may be more biased toward quantitative rather than qualitative methodology.

Some of these commonalities make communication easier, as there are some things we can assume everyone agrees on, some things that “go without saying.” This agreement helps to support a certain level of trust and it helps to establish strong ties and meaningful relationships among members of the community. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge differences in understanding and differences in approaches. A healthy community of practice is one that makes room for all voices at the table.

**Shared History**

Over time, a community of practice builds a shared history and a set of stories of our common experiences as we work together. We share certain “war stories” from the late night work sessions, the problems encountered along the way, the celebrations when our work helps to land a large grant for the institution, and the knowledge we learn from the many conferences and workshops we have presented or attended. We develop something of a community “memory.”

**Identity**

That shared history helps to form a sense of a group identity. Just as adolescents develop a sense of identity as they mature, defining who they are and who they are not by who they associate with, whose interests and values they share, we define our identity as a community of practice through our shared values, interests, and experiences with a network of others.

The grant writer network has defined that identity both implicitly and explicitly. We have an explicit mission statement that, in some sense, defines us. We have at least the vertical axis of our orientation around developing knowledge about practice. Implicitly and explicitly, we are developing a set of norms that define who we are and how we interact with one another.

Of course, that identity is never static, but is always changing with the changes in membership of the community. For instance, we may define ourselves today as an all female network, with all the attendant characteristics that implies. But that may change as our membership changes.

Identity is a key issue for the kinds of groups we facilitate as well. It is important to make that visible at the outset, by sharing and, perhaps, negotiating what the shared interests and goals of the group are, as the identity of such groups is often oriented around that vertical axis of the shared practice or research interest. It is also important to revisit that question of mission each time
a new member joins the group, as every new member brings new ideas, new expertise, and a new constellation of interests that has the potential of changing the identity of the group.

Socialization

Socialization is critical to forming a community of practice. It provides the cohesion, the social glue, or, as some call it, the “social capital” that holds a group together as a community. Too often groups attempt to become a community of practice, particularly in academy, who focus on the practice, while neglecting the need for building community through socialization. There is something about getting together over food, whether a simple coffee break, lunch, or a full-blown party, that provides the atmosphere that allows for and even encourages people to go “off task” for a while and talk about all the other things they have in common. Such socialization helps to establish a common ground of understanding. Even the “on board” time at the beginning of a meeting, which may seem to be a waste of time because it is “off task,” is, in truth, very important in bringing a group together.

Our grant writing network finds a number of ways of socializing, both formally and informally. For example, our weekly network meetings are brown-bag lunch meetings held at noon. As part of the Office of Research, we also gather regularly to celebrate birthdays and holidays. There is also a good deal of fellowship at our annual long-range planning retreat. Ongoing research groups also need to make time for social exchange on a regular basis to help create group cohesion. It is often through such informal dialogue that group members find out how much they have in common and establish the kind of trust necessary to work together for an extended period of time. We all know that the some of the best information gleaned at conferences come from the chance connections made at the coffee breaks. Likewise, the best ideas are often penned on a napkin at a restaurant, while meeting with colleagues.

With the advent of wireless technologies, many of the collaborative proposals I have worked on were written at a coffee shop a block away from campus. The most productive research groups I have worked with over the years have been those who also made time to socialize. By making time for socialization, we show that we are making a commitment to one another, not just to the project at hand.

Norms

Every community of practice establishes norms of behavior, some explicit and some implicit. These help to define the roles and rules of expected behavior. These rules, in turn, help to establish a level of trust that makes it possible to work together more easily. Some evolve organically, over time; some need to be negotiated and stated explicitly. Consider the following:
Participation and Commitment

One of the clearest signs of having established a community of practice is simply the level of commitment and participation of the group. Members are committed not just to the practice, but also to the community itself, and therefore regularly participate in the work of the community. By establishing this as a norm, we stop worrying about whether attendance at meetings reflects levels of commitment, for instance. Busy professionals do have crowded schedules and competing agendas and therefore must miss a meeting now and then. But if participation is the norm, we know that members of the community are committed to the shared work and will pick up what they missed between meetings.

A clear sign of how the grant writer network functions as a community of practice is the level of participation in our regular network meetings, as evidenced by the fact that recently we had to move to a larger room to accommodate everyone. It’s not just that the network is expanding, but also the fact that we all want to participate, long after our period of initiation is past. We come together not just for our own individual benefit, but for the benefit of the whole group. We demonstrate our commitment to one another in making commitments to sharing our knowledge and helping to mentor each other – not just the newcomers, but all of us, for we are all continually learning this practice of grant writing.

Shared Responsibility

Another of the norms of a community of practice is shared responsibility. Members share equally in the work of the community. The organizational structure is more flat than hierarchical. Scott Peck argued, in The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace, that a true community is “leaderless.” By that, I take him to mean that all members share in the leadership responsibilities necessary for keeping the group together, pursuing the shared work of developing a common practice.

Discussions within our grant writing network are about functioning as a community of practice, sharing our knowledge and expertise to help each other. These discussions show that we are moving towards a model of shared responsibility rather than expecting one or two to “train” newcomers, is one of the clearest signs that we are moving towards a model of shared responsibility. We are also beginning to identify different areas of expertise among the group and share responsibilities for scheduling meetings, maintaining archives of resources on our electronic shared document system, and leading professional development seminars on various topics.
Boundaries

Another norm critical to forming strong communities of practice is establishing boundaries that help to define membership. Who is in and who is out? What are the conditions for membership? Boundaries help to establish group identity and trust, so that the membership and group identity is fairly stable from one day to the next (except, of course, when new members are added). The conditions of membership for our grant writing network are, undoubtedly, unique to our institution: members of the network are those with the title of grant writer who were hired through a partnership between the campus Office of Research and one of the many academic units on campus (e.g. the College of Education, the Life Sciences Center, the Extension Division). There are 12 of us now in the network.

There are scores of others on campus who facilitate the writing and submission of proposals in all those other units who don’t have the benefit of grant writers, who are NOT members of our community of practice. Their roles are often different than ours; their background and experiences differ from ours; and their level of commitment to a community of practice differs from ours. We offer a professional development seminar series for that larger group twice a month. Attendance varies from one session to the next. Many only attend those meetings occasionally, depending on their availability and interest. Their focus is on the practice, and on the information to be gleaned, but there is no sense of commitment to a community of practice. We try to maintain clear boundaries and distinctions between our network community and this larger group in our communications.

Establishing boundaries is also critical for the research groups we may facilitate, particularly at the time of proposal development. The need to continually expand the boundaries by incorporating newcomers with fresh perspectives and new ideas has to be balanced with needs for security and trust, particularly in regard to intellectual property, shared access to data, and shared authorship. We have learned more than once how important it is to establish these norms early in the process of developing a research group, so that there are no misunderstandings later. For instance, electronic archives of data, drafts of papers and proposals, sometimes even correspondence among group members need to be maintained on a secure server with password access only for group members. At present, we use MicroSoft’s SharePoint services to facilitate document sharing among research groups.

Trust

Concomitant with the norm of boundaries is a norm of trust. Building a level of trust within a group is critical to sustaining a community of practice. There must be a norm that “what is said here stays here” to create a safety zone where members can share information and try out new ideas, without fear of
reprisal or fear that someone’s ideas will show up in someone else’s work, without acknowledgement, let alone an invitation to collaboration. By creating a safe place for this level of sharing, it helps to build the social cohesion that knits the group together.

As grant writers, we are entrusted with a good deal of confidential, privileged, and proprietary information. The very nature of our work requires that we have access to confidential information. We often have access to information and new policies being developed before they go public. And, we often work with proprietary information when developing proposals. The ability to maintain high levels of trust with each other and with the faculty and administrators we work with is critical to our profession. Our group has gone a long way in establishing an atmosphere of trust. We know that we can trust one another with ideas and information, as well as concerns and frustrations, knowing that they will go no further than the boundaries of the group.

**Negotiating Differences**

Although what initially may draw a group together into a community of practice is all that is has in common including a shared purpose in developing its practice, shared goals, values, and interests. What distinguishes a mature community of practice is the ability to make room for difference. When a community has developed a strong sense of identity, it is able to create more permeable boundaries and incorporate new members who may bring different experiences, expertise, and perspectives. Such differences may create tension, but may also present opportunities for new growth.

People in a mature community of practice trusts that it will not disintegrate with the inclusion of someone who is a different. A mature group makes room for and learns to negotiate differences by giving members the opportunity to voice different points of view, without fear of being excluded. Finally, it creates new knowledge about its shared practice through the negotiation of difference. After all, that is the ultimate goal of a community of practice – to develop our practice.

**Recommendations for Facilitating Communities of Practice**

First, it is important to remember that communities of practice emerge somewhat organically from pre-existing networks. You cannot “create” a community of practice by simply calling a meeting of individuals who do not know each other, who have never before interacted, but who may share some common goals and interests. Of course, if they share common goals and interests and work at the same institution or in the same community, it is likely that they do know each other and are already part of a pre-existing network. What concludes are some tips and tricks for building on that network to facilitate a community of practice.
1. **Shared Purpose.** It's important to make this explicit. Invite each member to share his or her expectations for the group, as well as what skills and interests each hopes to contribute. Revisit this discussion periodically, particularly when new members are added to the community.

2. **Socialization.** Make a point of incorporating some social activities into the community’s agenda, formally or informally. Take time to get to know one another. Although a community of practice grows out of pre-existing networks, don’t presume that everyone knows everyone at the outset. You can do this simply through introductions and “on board” time at the beginning of each meeting to talk about something other than your shared work. You can also encourage socialization by meeting off campus at a local coffee shop or restaurant. Plan celebrations at certain milestones, like birthdays, holidays, or project accomplishments.

3. **Norms.** Every community needs to establish norms in order to get along and work together. Some you will need to make explicit (boundaries and shared responsibility) while some may remain more implicit (participation, commitment, and trust). It is important to be conscious and intentional about observing these norms and be willing to discuss them if problems arise.

4. **Negotiating Differences.** Make room for difference within the community and make room for every voice at the table. Make sure you have a meeting space and a meeting time that can accommodate everyone. Be sure to send out emails or find other ways of communicating with those who miss a meeting from time to time, to keep them up to date. Include everyone in the group emails. Make a point of including everyone in the discussion. Don’t let a few voices dominate. Find ways of drawing out those who are more introverted and those who may have a different point of view than the majority. Maintain mutual respect for each and every member of the community. The community will be enriched by those differences.

5. **Practice.** Focus on developing your practice. Develop ways of making your knowledge visible. One way of doing this is by developing a best practices model containing an archive of resources such as model proposals, budgets, tip sheets for managing graphics, navigating the accounting system, etc. Make a presentation at a workshop. Write an
article for a professional journal. Share what you know and make these resources readily available to the community. Create new knowledge together. That, finally, is the reason for forming a community of practice.

Works Cited


Foundation Perception of Nonprofit Fundraising Communication

by

Amanda Temoshek

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I own an Omaha, Nebraska based fundraising consulting company that specializes in capital campaign consultation, grant development and feasibility studies for non-profit organizations. One of my clients is a Nebraska-based nonprofit organization that strives to end child abuse and neglect. The group depends on donations to carry out its mission. Through a rigorous grant development program, the organization receives many donations, but not all the grant proposals are funded. Some foundations respond to the proposal with a letter of regret. Some respond with a check. Some don’t respond at all.

Nonprofits, like this Nebraska-based group, know how they would like foundations to communicate with them, and some have a fairly good idea of how other nonprofits communicate with foundations. The missing link is that for many organizations, there isn’t a strong understanding of what communication foundations want to receive and even more important, what communications foundations find most compelling. This article shares the perceptions of three individuals at Nebraska based foundations.

Background

Most nonprofit organizations throughout the United States depend on monetary donations to help them carry out their programs, projects, operations and expansions. Without these contributions, many organizations would not be able provide the services that people have come to depend on. According to Giving USA 2004, a study released by Giving USA Foundation, American individuals, estates, foundations and corporations gave $240.72 billion to charity in 2003. Of those donations, foundations donated $26.30 billion, while corporations donated $13.46 billion. While $240.72 billion may seem like a lot of money, there is much competition for those dollars. To assess these funds, nonprofit organizations use various forms of communication to interact with the donors in an attempt to build relationships and solicit donations. Communication includes direct mail; interpersonal communication between donors and volunteers, staff and board members; public relations through the media and special events; computer-mediated communication and grant proposals (Greenfield, 2002).
Development, which is a term used to describe the total process of fundraising or the mix of fundraising strategies, is a process of building mutually beneficial relationships between potential donors and the organization (Hall, 2002). This relationship is important to securing the donations needed to run nonprofits. Adrian Sargeant has done multiple research studies in the area of relationship fundraising and believes that if donors are treated with respect, they will continue supporting a particular organization (Sargeant, 2001a). Understanding how donors want to be treated is important to securing donations. Sargeant (2001c) believes that nonprofit organizations lack an understanding of what donors need, expect, and desire. One of the main donor needs that Sargeant and Lee (2002) identified was the ability to trust an organization. “Trust is also the basis of public goodwill. If the public has little confidence in charity, they will be less willing to offer resources to support it” (p. 780). This trust is also important not only in attracting new donors, but also in maintaining donors’ involvement (Sargeant and Lee, 2001).

Donor retention, which is based on donor loyalty, is more cost effective than attracting new donors. (Sargeant, 2001b) “To encourage loyalty, it is essential to recognize the past pattern of giving and develop the pattern of communication organically to reflect changes in donor understanding and interest and help the relationship evolve” (Sargeant, 2001b, p. 60). In studying why donors defect, Sargeant (2001b) found that the main areas that lead to donor dissatisfaction are: attraction by competition, poor quality of service, poor relationship quality and loss to other nonprofit organizations in the same market. Donors indicated that the top four reasons for lapsing in donations were: I can no longer afford to offer my support; I feel that other causes are more deserving; death/relocation, and the organization did not acknowledge my support (p. 64). Sargeant (2001b) also studied donors’ perception of nonprofit actions and determined which actions the donors’ perceive to be most important. In particular, the study looked at actions directly related to the organization’s relationship with the donor. To donors, the most important actions are: leaving it to the donor to decide how much to donate; not asking for support too often; being polite in communications; informing the donor of how money is spent and thanking the donor for the gift (p.68).

Findings also revealed a distinction between donors that were happy with the organization and continued giving versus donors who had quit giving. Often, lapsed donors had felt pressured to donate their initial gift, whereas donors who continued to give often gave their first gift through an intellectual decision, rather than an emotional reaction. The main reasons for the initial gifts: the organization had a good reputation, management was professional and the donor had a strong affinity with the cause (p. 70). In Sargeant’s 2001 *Relationship Fundraising* study, he used focus groups to study donor attrition in light of customer defection studies within the for-profit segment. “Relationship
fundraising involves donor choice. Recognizing the benefit of a future income stream, fundraisers are not afraid to invest in their donors and allow them greater flexibility over content, nature and frequency of the communication they receive” (p. 180).

Biederman and Morris (1985) looked at corporate giving and found that corporations often choose to support organizations that are in-line with the company’s objectives and that donating to selected organizations helps to further the company’s goals. The article suggested that making corporate contributions can “win friends, awards, and maybe even increased sales and profits” (p. 151). Biederman and Morris (1985) also suggested that corporations should not run their contribution program as a public relations effort and they should make corporate giving decisions as a group effort, with input from other companies and foundations. While the vast majority of donations come from individual donors, foundation donations are also important to nonprofits, whether it is a corporate, community or private foundation. Communication to foundations is often done in writing – in the form of a written grant proposal. (Martin, 2000, Flaherty Haas, 1998 and Murphy, 2000) When communicating with foundations, nonprofits must use careful planning to make sure that their proposals incorporate the foundation’s needs and guidelines, while also presenting the organization’s case (Martin, 2000).

“Corporate and foundation relations officers or other staff charged with preparing grant proposals may find that they spend three-fourths of their time on any proposal getting ready to write and one-fourth on writing” (p.85). Martin went on to say, “Proposals, like every other form of persuasive communication, require the marshaling of facts and evidence to make a case” (p.85). Proposals that are developed by nonprofit organizations are often part of a collaborative process, led by the development director and involving other organization executives and program directors (Martin, 2000, Flaherty Haas, 1998). While there is often a primary writer, other staff members are usually involved with gathering information, reading drafts and making suggestions (Flaherty Haas, 1998). In the article Preparation before Proposal Writing, Martin emphasized that one of the most important steps in the collaborative process is identifying potential funders whose mission and goals align with the objectives of the organization or program (2000). The writing style of a proposal is not as important to finding a potential donor with similar objectives as the nonprofit organization. (Martin, 2000) Martin states that:

“No proposal is declined because of an infelicitous balance of loose and periodic sentences, and few are funded solely on the strength of breathtaking prose. Successful proposal writing is clear, compelling, and concise, but successful proposals require a lot more than fluid prose. They require careful management of a
complex process and that is what a corporate and foundation relations officer does” (pp. 94-95).

While writing a grant proposal, the development officer must determine what information and details to include and how to articulate that information, while following the guidelines set forth by the foundation (Flaherty Haas, 1998). The writer’s knowledge of the foundation that he is writing to, and relationship with the foundation, affects the writing style and methodology of proposal development (Flaherty Haas, 1998). The two organizations that Flaherty Haas observed wrote successful proposals that appealed to a relationship with the foundation (p. 53). In contrast, proposals for “big grants,” that took a week or more to complete and were for “out-of-town” sources or government agencies, used a more formal writing style and provided specific information about the nonprofit’s mission and history (p. 54).

In addition to the staff’s role in researching, developing and writing grant proposals, the nonprofit’s board of directors may also assist in identifying prospects, cultivating relationships and soliciting donations on the organization’s behalf (Murphy, 2000). Board members should “identify any personal relationship they may have within the foundation. This becomes a potentially important advocacy phase of the grant process” (Murphy, 2000, p. 9). Advocacy, proposal development and grant writing are all part of foundation development. While there are many motivational and strategy books on fundraising, the academic research on the fundraising process is more limited. Relationship Fundraising, by Burnett (2002) suggests that there are a wide variety of reasons that people donate and usually not a single motivation (p. 30).

The majority of the information on donor motivation and perception of fundraising communication is based on experiences and perceptions of individual development officers and fundraisers. Qualitative and/or quantitative research in the field of foundation perceptions, needs and motivations is even more limited. Research can help answer questions such as: how do foundation representatives perceive the fundraising communication they receive from nonprofit organizations? Do written fundraising proposals or advocacy by board members play a larger role in the foundation’s decision to give? What type of nonprofit communication is most useful for foundations? How do they want to be approached? A greater understanding of these issues will aid nonprofits in developing more effective fundraising communication strategies aimed at foundations.

Foundation Perception

In order to gain an understanding of how nonprofit organizations should communicate with foundations, interviews were conducted with three individuals at Nebraska based foundations. The first interview was with Matthew Shaw (pseudonym), president of a Nebraska-based community foundation with over
Foundation Perception of Nonprofit Fundraising Communication

The second interview was conducted with Randy George (pseudonym), president and a trustee of a private foundation with over $6 million in assets. The final interview was with Amy Connelly (pseudonym), program director at a community foundation that serves Nebraska and Iowa. The interviews revealed four themes that were perceived as important issues: initial contact; follow-up; stability of personnel and board; and training with the foundation. The foundations took these issues into consideration while evaluating nonprofits and making funding decisions. These issues are either directly or indirectly related to how and what an organization communicates to the foundation.

**Initial Communication**

All of the foundations’ representatives said that their initial communication is usually a phone call, grant proposal, letter or email. For the most part, the initial contact is initiated by the nonprofit, but occasionally by the foundation. According to all of the interviewees, they would initiate contact with a nonprofit if they were interested in it because of something heard in the media or through another nonprofit or donor. According to all the representatives, during this initial contact (and throughout the relationship) an organization needs to have a clear, focused mission and understand how the programs will carry out that mission. Before applying for grants and sharing the mission or programs with others, the group needs to understand and agree with them internally.

In addition to knowing its mission, two of the foundation representatives also expressed that nonprofit organizations need to know what other groups in the community are doing. In particular, they need to know what other nonprofit organizations are serving their target market. For example, a group that serves the homeless should be aware of every group that serves that same population. Nonprofits should make the general public and potential donors aware of any collaborations or joint efforts to help that target market. One clear message throughout the interviews is that nonprofit organizations need to be concise, focused and brief when communicating with foundations.

According to the foundations, they often receive their initial contact through a grant proposal and that proposal should make a good impression. For example, all three of the interviewed representatives said that when the organization is developing a grant proposal, it needs to follow the grantmakers guidelines. Two interviewees said that this was more important than the writing style of a grant proposal. While they want to see a well-written, error-free proposal or letter, having it follow the foundation's specifications is more important. For example, Randy’s foundation gives money only to nonprofits located within a certain geographic area, but he receives requests from groups outside of the area. It is assumed that these organizations did not read or
disregarded the guidelines and as a result, the request is unlikely to get funded because it did not meet the criteria.

**Follow-Up**

In addition to making a clear case up front, the foundation representatives believe that organizations should be diligent in their follow-up with foundations. They all expressed the importance of keeping the foundations, especially those that have given money, aware of how the donation is being used. Randy told about a situation where he had given a donation to a group that didn’t respond with a thank you letter or year-end letter for example. In fact, after the initial proposal, all the following communication was initiated by his foundation. For the most part, the interviewees thought that nonprofits do a fairly good job of making an initial contact and making regular requests for money, but do a poor job of communicating in between those requests.

“They don’t communicate their success or failures. Only 20% communicate what they did with the money,” Randy said. Ideally, he would like to receive a brief thank you call when the nonprofit organization receives the donation, a written acknowledgment within a week and monthly updates on how the group is using the gift. Randy believes that nonprofit organizations appreciate the donations, but that they do not have the business skills or time to keep him apprised on how they are using the gift and how the donation is meeting its goal.

In addition to making sure the foundation knows how the nonprofit is using the grant award, one of the foundation representatives also mentioned that it is important to let them know of any personnel or organizational changes. When asked how nonprofits could improve their communication strategy, Amy said “They need to follow-up with us. For example, if key staff changes they need to follow-up and let the funder know.”

**Stability of Personnel and Board**

As Amy mentioned previously, nonprofits should communicate any personnel changes with foundations and any changes with board and staff. Personnel changes aren’t the only personnel matters that foundations are concerned with. All of the interviewees expressed the importance of the board and staff. First of all, all the foundation representatives believe there needs to be stability within the structure of the organization. They think that nonprofit organizations need to communicate their needs, goals and strategies internally before ever communicating them externally. Without clear communication between the decision-makers (staff, board and other key players) the organization may find itself in trouble. For example, Amy Connelly told me about a situation where an organization submitted a proposal for a new program. The foundation liked the idea and made an award to the group. After receiving the donation, the grant writer communicated the plan with the rest of the organization.
Unfortunately, the rest of the group did not want to implement the program and the organization had to return the check.

The organization’s structure and internal operations are important because they not only affect the ability to communicate in a timely and effective manner, but they also affect the message itself. One example of organizational structure affecting ability to communicate was a suggestion by Randy that an organization should have one person designated to write thank you letters and follow-up with foundations. If not, he believes that the communication often falls through the cracks and no one ends up sending a thank you or cultivating the relationship after a gift is given.

Matthew gave an example of how the organizational structure of the organization, in particular the board, affects the message itself. “I do need an awareness of the board members – who they are and what they do is important. If there is a small board with staff on it, that is a red flag. The more representative of the community the better. It doesn’t have to be a who’s who list, but it should be reflective of the community,” Matthew said. The foundation representatives want to see who the board members are when making a decision of whether or not to fund an organization, and a nonprofit should make sure it has a strong board of directors in place so that it can communicate that with potential grantmakers. One interviewee said that it is important that the board holds the staff accountable for thanking and following up with foundations.

The skills of the board and staff also play an important role in assuring that the organization is sustainable. According to the interviewees, foundations prefer to give donations to organizations that have the ability to manage donations, measure their programs’ effectiveness and grow revenue streams to help assure that the organization does not fail. Two of the interviewees mentioned that an organization’s ability to do these things depends on the business skills and organization of the staff and board.

Training with the Foundation

While foundations want to see business skills and organization within the nonprofit, they are aware that these abilities and talents are not always in existence. For these reasons, all of the foundation representatives expressed their desire to help nonprofit organizations improve their skills and abilities.

“They should use us as a resource more than just financial,” Amy said. Her foundation, along with the others that I interviewed, either currently hold training sessions to help organizations improve their skills, or will be holding them in the near future.

Randy’s foundation may even make training sessions mandatory for groups that are awarded grants in order to help those organizations improve their skills. “On a scale of 1-10, the quality of what I receive is probably a four. In
the future I want to have mandatory training sessions for everyone I support. I want to empower nonprofits to be more effective,” Randy said.

Conclusion

These patterns show how important it is for nonprofits to be aware of their communication both internally and externally. In my experience, many nonprofits are understaffed and the existing staff is underpaid. Executive Directors are often pulled in many directions. For example, I have consulted with a nonprofit that has had only three staff members. All of these people have extensive job descriptions that include everything from carrying out the programs to fundraising to preparing financial statements to cleaning the bathrooms. Obviously fundraising is very important because the group needs donations to carry out its mission and make sure the staff gets paid. The dilemma is that if the staff spends too much time conducting fundraising activities, it does not have time to implement the organization’s programs. Since this group barely has time to raise money, following-up with foundations and cultivating relationships is even less of a priority. I believe that nonprofits need to be aware of how they are perceived by foundations, especially if they are doing a poor job of communicating.

While a nonprofit may receive a few gifts from a foundation, if they do not build a relationship and make sure they have fulfilled some of the foundations’ basic requirements, they are putting their organizations in jeopardy of losing long-term, consistent funding. The literature revealed that donors need to be treated with respect and want to be able to trust an organization (Sargeant, 2001a). While Sargeant was looking at all donors in general and I was looking at foundations, I believe that this still holds true. In my opinion, if an organization receives a grant award and doesn’t send a thank you, or sends a thank you and then never communicates again until sending the next grant application, that behavior is not showing respect to the foundation. In addition, if the nonprofit isn’t showing respect, the foundation probably won’t have a lot of trust in them. In fact, Sargeant also found that one of the top reasons that donors quit supporting an organization is because the organization failed to acknowledge a donation (Sargeant, 2001b).

In addition, Sargeant found that one of the most important things that a nonprofit can do is to inform the donor of how a donation was used and thank them for the gift (2001b). Unfortunately, it seems that not all nonprofit organizations are doing an effective job of thanking and following-up. Both the interviews and the literature emphasized the importance of following the grantmakers’ guidelines and writing in a clear and concise style. (Martin, 2000)

Nonprofit organizations should take a good look at their current fundraising and communication activities and make a staff and board decision to make those areas a priority. I also agree with Randy that certain staff members
should have the responsibility of making sure that foundations (and donors in
general) are thanked and followed-up with. In addition, there should be policies
in place, which the board holds the staff to, regarding how long after a gift is
received it should be acknowledged and what future communication should take
place.

My study had limitations including the number of interviews. More
interviews may have shed more light on various aspects of nonprofit
communication. Another limitation was that I was not able to see any examples
of writing style or proposals especially written examples from nonprofits that had
received funding versus those that did not. For future studies, I suggest a case
study with a foundation and a nonprofit that they support that includes interviews
with both and examples of written correspondence that has taken place between
the two. I also suggest a quantitative study, similar to the survey conducted by
Sargeant, which would be directed to many foundations and would gather
information on their perceptions and needs.

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Approaches to Tribal Grant Writing and Project Planning
by
Carrie Rothburd and Alisha Drabek

Carrie Rothburd has more than ten years of experience in program planning and grantwriting. Working with Alaska Native tribes, she has helped plan projects focused on member enrollment, environmental stewardship, domestic violence intervention/tribal court revitalization, the development and dissemination of culturally responsive materials for educators, and the establishment of a regional library of Alutiiq cultural and historical materials.

Alisha Drabek is assistant professor of English and chair of the English Department at Kodiak College in Kodiak, Alaska. She is an active member of the Native Educators of the Alutiiq Region and serves on the Qik’rtarmiut Alutiit Language Revitalization and the Collections committees of the Alutiiq Museum. As an Alutiiq language apprentice, Alisha spends 10 hours each week learning Alutiiq from a tribal elder.

Developing grant proposals with a tribe can be an extremely rewarding experience for both the grant writer and her tribal client. With appropriate assistance, the tribal community has the potential to benefit in remarkable ways from proposal submission, while the grant writer has the unique opportunity to work with a client whose worldview has been marginalized for the last 200 to 500 years. In the process, she can witness and even experience community in new and perhaps unexpected ways.

Tribal project planning, development, and grant writing share core similarities with these same undertakings with nonprofits; yet the grant writer who has not worked before with a tribe must be prepared to encounter points of dissimilarity that arise from working within an alternative reality. These can pose barriers to success if the grant writer resists or does not recognize them. This article shares the experience of an Alaska Native teacher and organizer and a non-Native grant writer who have collaborated with several tribal groups to develop winning proposals for successful programs.

Navigating Alternative Governance & Administrative Structures

There are currently 562 federally recognized tribes, (DOI, 1) and an additional 172 non-recognized tribes, in the lower 48 states, Alaska, and Hawaii (Johnson), each with an elected governing body and officially enrolled membership. Tribal organizational structure is a cross between that of a municipality and a nonprofit. Operating as a sovereign nation, in
intergovernmental relations with the United States federal government, tribes have a governance and administrative structure different from that of any other type of entity. Each, in fact, has its own unique structure.

Tribes vary greatly in terms of their traditional lifeways, history, economic self-sufficiency, land base, and size, as well as the mission or focus of their government. Most tribes are led by a tribal council (not necessarily of elders), which meets regularly and consists of anywhere from five to dozens of council members. The council is the legally-sanctioned body responsible for upholding the tribe’s vision and mission, and thereby guiding its social, economic, and cultural development. Council members are often elected democratically and are empowered by the entire tribal membership.

Council members are charged with charting the course of the tribe and of guarding its ancestral traditions. The tribal council is not traditionally a fundraising body. However, it does decide which proposals to support, and often meets to discuss and pass a tribal resolution to approve a proposed project. In making its decision, the council refers to the tribe’s constitution, past ordinances, cultural traditions, and the opinions of its elders; however, it may take a vote of its adult enrolled membership or general council. In some tribes, the general council meets regularly to approve major actions of the tribal council, while other tribes convene their general council less frequently.

Daily tribal matters such as finances, member services, public relations, and social service, economic and health-related programs are often handled by a tribal administrator, who is akin to a non-profit executive director. The administrator oversees a staff of individuals, who may or may not be members of the tribe. Tribal governance is thus often multi-layered with elected, traditional leaders and paid staff working in concert to institute programs and to provide assistance to members and direction to the community as a whole.

**Points for a Grant Consultant to Consider**

- You enter a distinct community when working with a tribe. Facilitate project development that takes into account the needs and priorities of a broad representation of tribal members and defers to tribal wisdom.
- Understand that there is more at stake here than there is with most nonprofits. The tribe cannot be replaced; there is no other organization to take over or take charge of the tribe’s needs and interests if the organization fails. The grant consultant is part of an institutional framework that is championing the welfare of an entire community and its future.
- Respect that the operations of staff and board represent a sophisticated blend of traditional and modern organizational arrangements—that derive from two distinct worldviews—when addressing issues of governance, finance, social service administration, and program planning.
Acknowledging the Impact of Historical and Ongoing Oppression

Tribes are in the process of coming to terms with and recovering from the scars of historical and ongoing oppression. This oppression has given rise to high rates of unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, disease, domestic violence, and suicide among Native Americans. From outside the tribe, the trend has been to approach these issues as individual or tribally-enabled problems. This has perpetuated the perception of tribal members as in need of outside assistance and, in turn, has the negative effect of disempowering the individual even further.

Today, more tribes are asserting their right to seek solutions on their own—through community building and cultural revitalization. They are applying traditional wisdom to address issues in ways that make sense within a tribal worldview. The common thread to these solutions is self-determination. Through empowering tribal courts, tribal social service advocates, and tribal schools that teach a curriculum based in Native ways, tribes are taking back their right to care for and govern their communities in their own way.

Points for a Grant Consultant to Consider

- Be sensitive to and respect the wisdom of tribal ways. Assist the tribe in finding solutions that emerge internally from its rich traditions.
- Help to craft projects that will establish long-term solutions to the threats to Native Americans and their communities.
- Communicate to potential funders in terms that they can understand the delicate balance the tribe must walk in honoring its traditions, practices and self-determination while accepting help in doing so.

Honoring Tribal Traditions in Planning Solutions

Cultural revival among the indigenous peoples of the United States has been a major trend within the last 15 to 20 years. It has built a growing sense of tribal unity and strengthened Native identity. Tribes see modern integration of the values and practices of their ancestors’ way of life as contributing to the health and vitality of the tribe’s infrastructure, to individual tribal members, to the larger diverse community in which they live, and to the land, sea, and air that are their home. In an effort to heal individually and collectively from the damage done to their people and to perpetuate their traditional way of life, Native Americans seek to pass on their traditions to their young people, who also wish to connect to their past.

Many tribes have undertaken intergenerational projects to empower tribal members both to acquire traditional knowledge and to tighten bonds between generations. Until recently, Native people were forced to choose between a successful, although often illusive, lifestyle that emulated the ways and values of
the mainstream majority or a lifestyle of tradition and, often, poverty and marginalization. Many are now finding that they need not make an either/or choice and that they can consciously integrate the two. In effect, they are learning to navigate and to be at home in two worlds—teaching their young to understand and respect where they came from while also encouraging them to acquire skills that enable them to be successful in the larger world.

Tribes have undertaken a vast range of projects as part of the trend to become stewards of their own future and of their territory and to administer funding for services on their own. They have revitalized and learned their native language; developed state-of-the-art libraries to house cultural materials; updated public school curricula to include materials culturally relevant to tribes; and reinvigorated the tribal court system to handle issues of adoption, custody, foster care of children, and the resolution of cases of domestic violence. In all of these instances of tribal self-determination, careful planning and hard choices have been essential to maintaining respect for traditional ways while also operating in the modern world.

**Points for a Grant Consultant to Consider**

- Facilitate planning that respects traditional lifeways and integrates elders’ perspectives. Assist the tribe to focus on its self-determination.
- Be mindful of the sometimes conflicting priorities of grantors and the tribal community and careful not to allow the grantor’s objectives or expectations to drive the tribe’s development. Change must arise internally from within the tribal structure or it will not be effective or sustained.
- Support the tribe in winnowing out solutions that make the most sense to the tribal community and develop a plan that will work in both worlds. Some mainstream modern techniques will not fit within the tribal community and may compound the situation they are designed to address.

**Fostering Consensus-Based Planning**

The Native way of looking at the world reveres the connections among generations, people and place, and the past, present, and future. In respect for diverse perspectives and unity among its members, tribes value the importance of consensus decision-making in formulating plans. Indigenous peoples recognize the complex interrelatedness among what initially appear to be unconnected ideas and approaches. Discussion and planning spirals through many layers helps to arrive at the best solution or truth. This is an organizational style in which the opinions of all matter equally and where elders are viewed as the experts in life. It is only when everyone has internalized and agreed to a shared choice that
action is taken. This reasoning reflects the emphasis on community and the need to include traditions and varying points of view. It is impossible to separate and look at aspects of a problem or situation—the whole must be considered and a solution or next step sought that takes into account all aspects of that whole at once.

The indigenous style of planning can sometimes be baffling and even frustrating to the non-Native, who is accustomed to an emphasis on linear logic and hierarchical organization. It can appear circular and overly-inclusive to an outsider. However, given sufficient time to develop a solution, this method of planning can prove a decided advantage as the project becomes an organic creation with support throughout the community.

**Points for a Grant Writer to Consider**

- Allot more time to planning and getting ready because of the emphasis on consensus and the need to allow elders, the experts in tradition, to weigh in.
- Attempt to see the world, as much as possible, through a Native lens. Be willing to learn the traditions, ways, and values of the world you have just entered, so that you can ask the right questions to gather the information that you need.
- Be willing to step outside your usual style of thinking to find the bridge between Native logic and the dictates of a hierarchically structured RFP.

**Respecting Tribal Modes of Communication**

While communication patterns vary significantly among tribes, as do their indigenous languages, many value silence and nonverbal communication and its connotations. They also have their own understanding of what sorts of questions and responses are appropriate and which are not. A grant writer who is just getting to know a tribe cannot judge the communication or relationships among members in the same way she would with others from her own culture.

**Points for a Grant Consultant to Consider**

- Again, be willing to slow down, to take the time to build communication and to take the lead from others better versed in the tribal style of communication. Enter the scene with a willingness to engage in cross-cultural communication and to learn different ways of imparting and receiving information. Remember that some words will have a charged meaning to a tribal member that you may not anticipate.
- Consider yourself a student and a translator. Your role is to communicate the worldview and planning of the tribe in such a way that respects the perspective of the tribe while also communicating its needs, vision, and
desired outcomes to a potential funder.

- View the proposal with both primary and secondary audiences in mind—the need statement especially. Consider how the tribal members will read the application as well as how the funder will sympathize with it. Does the proposal cast the tribe in a negative and hurtful light in an attempt to achieve what is in its “best interests?” If so, revision is crucial to ensure that a balance is struck between convincing a funder of need and painting a respectful, while compassionate portrayal of the tribe. Remember tribal members are not just a constituency; they are a family.

- Accept that some clash between cultures may be inevitable. Keep your sense of good humor and irony alive and your faith that you and your tribal client will ultimately achieve understanding.

**Supporting the Growth of the Tribe**

While tribes vary in the extent to which they apply for funds or undertake independent projects, most tribes are committed actively to furthering their self-determination through the proposal writing process. As increasing numbers of tribal members gain experience in tribal planning and governance, much of the work of tribal development is accomplished from within. However, many tribes still hire professionals with experience in developing, executing, and evaluating new projects to accomplish their strategic plans. The grant writer who works with a tribe must be prepared to lead at times as well as to follow—to be a teacher who is able to explain the planning and proposal submission process. She must work carefully in this role to advise and inform her tribal client of what she is doing, to leave important choices up to the tribe, to keep in mind always that she is aiming to increase the tribe’s capacity for self-determination.

**Points for a Grant Consultant to Consider**

- Your goal as a tribal grant consultant is ultimately to empower the tribe and put yourself out of a job.
- Your work furthers cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Your relationship with your tribal client represents an instance of people reaching across a cultural divide and shaking hands.

**Conclusion**

Tribes vary greatly in their administrative structure, mission, and the focus of their government. Each is a sovereign nation. Governed by a tribal council and managed by a tribal staff, tribes offer a range of social service, health, cultural, legal, and environmental programs that care for their people and for their land base. In an effort to heal individually and collectively from the damage done to their people and to perpetuate their traditional way of life, Native Americans seek to pass on their traditions to future generations, while also
encouraging their younger members to acquire skills that enable them to be successful in the larger world.

More and more tribes are engaged in community building, cultural revitalization, and a return to traditional wisdom as a way to address the issues that confront them, taking back their right to care for and govern their communities. The Native way of looking at the world reveres the connections among generations, people and place, and the past, present, and future. In respect for diverse perspectives and unity among its members, tribes value the importance of consensus decision-making in formulating plans and recognize the complex interrelatedness among what initially appear to be unconnected ideas and approaches.

For the grant consultant who is open to working with tribes, there is the satisfaction of knowing that her work matters greatly and that it contributes to the perpetuation of a way of life and to the identity that might otherwise vanish. In order to do her work well, she must become a student of culture and of intercultural communication, mindful of the sometimes conflicting priorities of grantors and the tribal community. She must be willing to learn the traditions, ways, and values of the world she has entered to assist the tribe in maintaining its focus on self-determination. She must be committed to methods of consensual decision-making, to respect for the knowledge of elders, and to encouraging change from within the tribal structure and community.

Not all grant writers are suited to working with tribes; for those who are, the work can be life changing. In endeavoring to learn another way of life, these cross-cultural ambassadors have the chance to reflect upon their connection to their own past and its traditions and to examine the role our nation has played and continues to play in the life of indigenous peoples. Grant writing with a tribe offers the grant writer the unique opportunity to decide rather than take for granted how she will live in the world.

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Ten Ways to Reduce Organizational Stress

Ten Ways to Reduce Organizational Stress for a
More Positive Place to Work

by

Phyl Renninger and Karen Stinson

Phyl Renninger is the Director of Resource Development for Florida Community College at Jacksonville. As a grant professional, she has written grants for a variety of topics as well as to countless state and federal funding agencies. In addition, Phyl is the Mayor of Orange Park, Florida, a current doctoral candidate, and the President of AAGP.

Dr. Karen Stinson is the newly appointed superintendent of Van Buren Community School District in Southeast Iowa. Dr. Stinson has been an educator for many years and has now written and received over $9 million in grants for Iowa school districts. In addition, Karen is the Secretary of AAGP.

The busy grant professional who works in the ‘high-pressure’ and ‘deadline-driven’ environment needs to be able to deal effectively with stress. Recent American Association of Grant Professional Charity Channel discussions included some fun and helpful suggestions for relieving stress that included: massages, chocolate, laps around the office, isometrics and singing. While we are active supporters of any and all of these healthy solutions to stress, we would like to offer ten long-term suggestions to reduce organizational stress and increase positive climate in your work environment.

Stress is harmful to you, your staff, and your organization as a whole. Staff turnover in both small private and public sector organizations is listed at 11%. In the larger private sector organization, the average is 17% while in the large public sector the percentage is listed as 9% (Personnel Today, 2005). If you have a small private sector organization of 50 people, 11% turnover means 6 people a year will leave. This creates enormous costs in time and resources. The increased costs range from 1) interviewing potential candidates, 2) notifying valued clients that a client server is departing, and 3) dips in productivity while the incoming staff member climbs the learning curve to get a handle of the full scope of the position. Losing a critical staff member can have a major impact on productivity. Turnover would not be a problem if there are an unlimited number of people to fill each position, but according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the country will have 10 million more jobs than people by 2010. In addition the report stated that less than half of all people in the U.S. are satisfied with their jobs. With the issues of turnover, job demand, and unsatisfied workers, organizations must do everything in their power to keep their trained staff productive and satisfied in their work environment. One way to do that is to address and reduce stress.
Stress can be caused by any number of issues such as work related politics and pressures, children’s actions and activities, concern for aging parents, financial disappointments, retirement worries, and health problems. For some, stressful situations are temporary; for others, stress is a chronic condition. “For women, the period from 40 to 49 years was found to be stressful, but the period after 50 was remarkably free of stress and conflict. Men, however, had a significant increase in stress beginning at age 50 caused by increased feeling of failure which intensified their efforts to reach their goals. However, those intensifying efforts ceased by age 60.” (Olfactory Research Fund, Ltd.) We offer the following ten ways to increase the positive climate at work.

1. **Have a vision.** It is really difficult to reach your destination if you do not know where you are going. One way to determine whether you are all on the same path, is at the next staff meeting, ask everyone to write down what they think the long-term goal of the organization is and their role in helping to reach that goal? Have each staff person turn in their sheets in random order and then read them out loud. If you have agreement on the goal, then you are all on the same path. If there are marked differences in the responses and how each member feels they can help the organization achieve the mission, then progress will be much more difficult. If you are all headed in a slightly different direction, you may find that you are working at cross purposes. An example of a long term goal or vision is to provide effective youth substance abuse prevention activities in the community. A social worker may feel that the vision of the organization is to have families who work effectively together as family members. The prevention specialist may see the vision of the organization directed toward preschool education that includes healthy self esteem. The manager may view the vision as collaborating with partners to share resources. While each of the individuals can help in their own way to accomplish the task, if they can not see the bigger picture and succinctly state the vision of the organization, then they are most likely less effective in working together within the organization or outside of the organization. Have clear goals, with an understandable process, and measurable outcomes. Imagine you are writing a proposal and do not know what you want to do, how you want to do it, or how you will know if you are successful at what you are doing. Your proposal will not be funded and your project wouldn’t have clear direction. But we often do not apply the same process to our own organizational structure. The lack of a common vision can create increased stress when everyone is not marching to the same music. So check the goals of your team members, identify that common vision, and make sure the organization knows where they are going.
2. *Take good care of your people.* “Your mission, should you choose to accept it,” should be for attrition. It is not a “mission impossible” but a realistic effort to work together as a group and to retain your best employees. The key players in your organization play the greatest role in that effort. If you are a key player, than look around at your people and analyze retention in your organization. The direct supervisor has been found to be the person most influential in the decision about whether the employee chooses to leave or stay (Mulligan, 2005). This is both a program and people part of the equation for taking good care of your people. There has to be a good balance between benefits and a good environment for working. For example, if you are underpaying, you are likely to lose an employee, but if you pay them well and treat them badly, you are also likely to lose them. The best combination is clearly, competitive pay and excellent working situation. Many people reported that they would stay in a job where they were less well paid if they had a supportive work relationship than if they were highly paid but not well treated. (Nickerson, Schwartz, Diener, Kahneman, 2003). “It makes sense that lack of understanding about rewards can sabotage motivation, and that concern about pay would distract from work. But this study also found that low awareness and poor understanding can eventually lead to low commitment and turnover. And the benefits from sharing more information are striking. The data, gathered from 6,000 managers and employees, found knowledge about pay and the performance management process was positively linked to organizational effectiveness,” (World atWork, 2002). So look around, check the benefits, check the working conditions, and do an office analysis of the balance in the department. An unbalanced environment can cause more stress and than directly affect your office retention and satisfaction.

3. *Empower your staff.* Research indicates that people are happiest when they have some control over their own work space and climate. (Burke, Oberklaid & Burgess, 2003; Scarpello & Campbell, 1983) Increased opportunities for independent decision making can lead to improved morale and greater employee satisfaction. Less autocratic, top-down leadership means less staff turnover and a more positive work environment particularly with younger employees who may already be used to more autonomy and a more informal work atmosphere. Organizational leaders do not need to abdicate veto power or become laissez faire but a reasonable amount of site-based decision making creates more ownership and actually has been found to improve the overall work environment.
4. **Set reasonable timelines.** Providing a cushion of time before the deadline will help reduce stress and actually increase productivity. From the cushion to the deadline, plot out intermediate deadlines from today making sure that the task, person and product is clearly specified. Some supervisors feel that they should provide only direction and not specific timelines or guidelines, providing ultimate empowerment to the employee. While that may be possible with experienced employees who have been with the organization for many years, with the current high rate of retirement from “boomers” and influx of new workers and volunteers, timelines are critical (Hart and Waismann, 2005) to differentiate the role of managers and leaders. For example, while creating an agenda, managers plan steps, timelines, budgets, and resources while leaders establish direction and vision. The manager’s role in an organization is to minimize deviations and help produce predictable results; on the other hand leaders energize employees to help them overcome those obstacles. The best supervisors particularly in smaller organizations are able to do both effectively with their employees differentiating the level of specificity and direction needed for each employee.

5. **Provide ongoing learning and growth opportunities to encourage professionalism.** There are a number of excellent opportunities to expand knowledge in grant-related areas, many now available online or through other distance learning mediums. If funds are a problem, consider trading services with another organization by having one of your staff serve as their facilitator. Another idea is to pool staff development funds and bring in one speaker or facilitator for several non-profits. Staff development provides content knowledge but also benefits the organization by providing staff the opportunity to collaborate with peers in a meaningful way. Mulligan (2005) reports that top performers are very concerned about challenging work and opportunities to advance. An excellent staff development program is not enough. In the most effective company with the highest rate of attrition of the best employees, the direct supervisor talks to the employee on an individual basis about career aspirations and provides the tools to reach those goals. Highly talented people need to be engaged, involved and encouraged to remain motivated to work for an organization.

6. **Ask for input from employees to determine morale and ensure that staff members have a chance to direct important issues.** A suggestion box,
anonymous surveys or other opportunities for honest feedback may help see where there are problems before they become major issues. Providing multiple opportunities for staff input will result in higher staff morale, better teamwork, and lower turnover. Re-recruiting has become a popular new term to describe the process of recreating interest in the employee in your organization. Key components of a re-recruiting program include: buddy system and team system; open-door policy; performance management system; regularly scheduled meeting; and formal career planning for at least all key personnel. If staff members are provided opportunities to deal with small issues, it may eliminate larger ones.

7. **Reward the process and not just the product.** Celebrate success in, for example, completing a research step or meeting a milestone. While most in the grant profession are very driven by the final product, acknowledging the process will enable staff members to remain energized in completing activities. Kent (2005) recommends allowing employees flexible benefits to improve employee commitment and reduce staff turnover. Rather than an employer stipulating precisely how a worker will be rewarded, employees have a degree of choice as to which benefits they receive. Examples of non-taxable benefits can include childcare, pensions, mobile phones, or in-house sports facilities. If your organization can not provide monetary benefits, work-life balance can be one of the options to provide employees the chance to spend part of their time in their home office as a reward for work well done.

8. **Support the new staff member.** Adjusting to a new climate can be very stressful. The cost of staff turnover is high by the time recruiting, hiring, training and processing a new employee is factored into the costs. New staff can feel isolated with out guidance and assistance. Mentoring, either formally or informally, can be helpful. By the end of 2007, 23% of the workforce is expected to retire. In Kim Nash’s report “Don’t Let Boomers Bust Your Business,” deep mentoring that includes eight to ten hours per week with experts (mentors) is recommended. Nash (2005) also recommended classes led by internal managers that include informal knowledge including who are the key players in the organization.

9. **Keep your work environment well-organized.** We can all relate to how totally chaotic and disorganized offices can become when trying to meet deadlines. To prevent continual chaos, include clean up, filing and recharging into your timeline so that you insure that you do not start a new project without closure to the old one. It is important to take time to
back up files, sort, and restock material or supplies. Disorganization can reduces productivity and increases staff stress.

10. **Create a pleasing office space with pleasant smells.** Research indicates that scents in the workplace can have dramatic effects on perceptions of mood, workload, effort, frustration, and performance (Raudenbush, Meyer & Eppich, 2001). Did you ever notice conferences or meetings that have peppermints on the table? Results indicated that peppermint odor significantly reduced perceived physical workload, temporal workload, effort, and frustration. Most of us take our sense of smell for granted. No one thinks a lot about the sense of smell, but everyone knows that it adds to the enjoyment of everyday activities. Fragrance can also affect our moods, ease stress, encourage relaxation and enhance alertness. According to the authors in “Aging Well with Your Sense of Smell”, a Yale study found that “the smell of spiced apples can ward off a panic attack in some people and reduce stress levels. Other fragrances known for their relaxing qualities are lavender, vanilla, rose, chamomile, neroli, and ylang-ylang”. (20) In the “The Sweet Smell of Success” (Isen), the pleasant odor of “cinnamon bun” released in ambient air by a standard vaporizer significantly increased creative problem solving ability as measured by the Remote Associates Test. There is further reason to believe that odor-induced positive effect may facilitate learning, reasoning and general (or “noncreative”) logical problem solving.

Numerous studies have shown that odor can affect mood, anxiety and stress, performance in memorizing and memory retrieval tasks, sustained attention projects and problem solving. (Jellinek 1994). Some examples of the use of fragrances include the following:

- Lemon has been shown to help clerical workers to make fewer computer and word processing errors.
- Lavender helps a person perform mathematical calculations faster and with fewer errors.
- Peppermint improves performance in sustained attention tasks.
- Pleasant fragrances have been shown to improve workers’ behavior in situations involving conflict and their ratings of people and objects. In addition, they also help to reduce stress.
- Fragrances have also been used to promote well being in meeting rooms and hotel lobbies.

Why bother with all of the rewards and benefits? A 2005 Census of more than 600 businesses found that the single most important driver for
Ten Ways to Reduce Organizational Stress

improved business performance is a solid strategy to hire, retain, develop and reward employees (HR for ROI’s sake). That “single most important driver” is composed of a very complex set of factors that enable you to create a pleasant work environment and reduce stress. So look around your office or work space and analyze for vision, caring, empowerment, timelines, professional growth, morale, reward, staff development, and organization all within a pleasant environment. Keep in mind when dealing with the “complex” human being -- the solution itself is also complex, so numerous factors contribute to success.

Work Cited


“HR for ROIs Sake.” Industrial Engineer 37.6 (2005): 10.


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