"We Can't Give What We Don't Have"
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Have you ever thought about how your attitude and perceptions as a grant writer impacts your organization’s development and implementation of grant-funded programs? If not, I invite you to think about it today. Because I believe that grant writers have a far greater impact on an organization’s ability to raise funds than many of you probably realize.

Recently, I had the privilege of hearing an moving keynote presentation by Raul Magdaleno, an internationally known inspirational speaker. Without even knowing what a grant writer’s job entails, I believe that he accurately summed up the impact that each of us can and should have upon our grant development teams’ success. And he did this with just one sentence consisting of just seven small words.

While powerful words when grouped together, they aren’t fancy words. I promise that you won’t need a dictionary to understand them. In fact, none are more than four little letters long. So what are these inspiring words? “We can’t give what we don’t have.”

What? What does that even mean and how does it relate to our jobs as grant professionals? The answer is simple. As leaders, we can’t inspire our coworkers if we don’t have inspiration in our hearts. We can’t instill hope that we will win any grant competition if we don’t have hope within us. We can’t inspire optimism if we aren’t optimistic. And we most certainly won’t be able to convey confidence in our organization’s ability to be a successful grant competitor if we aren’t confident in our own abilities.

So how do we do this? Well, I want to be honest. At times it can be a challenge. But I’ve learned over my many years as a grant professional that just as Raul Magdaleno told us, we have to ignore the naysayers. Or better yet, challenge them with a simple response that assures them that “yes, I can!”

Magdaleno likened those that achieve much in the face of oppression or negativity as being like the bees that pollenate our flowers and crops. For years, scientists said that they couldn’t understand how bees could fly. Actually, they said that it was aerodynamically impossible that they could fly. But somehow they do. After all, their bodies are so much bigger than their little wings. It just didn’t make logical sense that they could fly at all – much less accomplish such important work while doing it.

Finally in 2005, a scientist discovered that a bee’s flight is possible because of the wind forces generated as their wings change direction. It turns out that the rotation of their wings creates a wind force under their wings that lifts and propels them. Who would have thought that these simple twists make it all possible?

As a non-scientist, I do believe that this means that it is the wind beneath their wings that makes them fly. As trite as it may sounds, are you ready to be the wind beneath your colleagues’ wings? Your coworkers and clients are counting on the fact that you will be.

From the Beginning

How many times have you caught yourself simply sending out the official notices of grant competitions to your coworkers by email? You were busy so you didn’t even include a note about how a particular grant competition was a good match to their program needs. You didn’t mention that you were excited
about the possibility of working with them on the application. And thus, you lost a great opportunity to
inspire and motivate them to consider all the possibilities that the new competition might offer.

Most the grant writers that I know are truly inspired – and I’m confident that you are too. You love your
chosen professional and find great inspiration in your work (or you probably wouldn’t be reading Grants
and Foundation Review). In fact, long before you find a new grant competition, you’ve already thinking
about how you could better present your case to the next funder.

Your passion for providing optimal services for your agency’s clientele drives you. Your personal passion
motivates and inspires you to work harder. And if you’re like me, before you determine which grant
competitions you should enter, you’ve already started writing need statements based on your
knowledge of the latest demographic information. You’ve located several best practices that might be
beneficial to incorporate in your programs, and you’ve even read several research reports that
document new and successful program strategies.

But you miss a key opportunity to share your feelings with your coworkers if you don’t express your
excitement, optimism, and confidence in your emails announcing the new competition. Sadly, you may
lose your best chance to inspire them to work on another proposal with you. To work a few extra hours
to help pull a new proposal together. To spend some of their free time thinking and dreaming about the
ways that their programs could be more successful. To go the extra mile to make life better for your
clientele and community.

So don’t forget to share your passion and thereby inspire your coworkers from the first time you
mention a new opportunity to the last communication you have with them when it is submitted.

More than Just Information

Effective communication is more than bullet points of information. As Magdaleno said in the keynote
speech that I attended, “Information without inspiration is futile.”

Take a moment (or two or three because this is important) to consider whether or not your verbal and
written communications express your own optimism and confidence in your team’s ability to win each
and every grant competition that you ask them to work on. Remember, optimism and confidence go
hand in hand. Seldom will you be successful if you don’t have both.

So do you ever catch yourself saying words such as “we might get this grant” or “these are really difficult
to win”? If so, stop it. These types of phrases don’t build enthusiasm or confidence that the time and
effort devoted to completing the grant application will result in a win.

You need to be the one (even if initially you are the only one) that exudes optimism. You need to tell
your coworkers that you are believe that your application will be the best. That you will receive a grant
contract. That your program will be better able to serve your community because of this funding
opportunity. And that you will be awarded a grant contract because they all worked with you to develop
a winning proposal.

Believing in Yourself and Your Team
It is imperative that you be optimistic from the beginning. Don’t let the little voices in your head convince you otherwise. Don’t listen to the naysayers. Remember that you must believe that you can (and will) win each competition. You must believe this and then you must share your belief with your coworkers.

As for me, I personally believe that I’m one of the greatest grant writers in the country. Yep, I truly believe this. (Note that I didn’t say “the best” – just one of the best.) I’m confident that not only can my teams win each competition that we enter but that we will in fact win the grant contract. And I believe that my optimism instills a commensurate degree of optimism in my colleagues and supervisor. After all, we all know that attitudes are catching.

Thus it’s important that you remember that no one wants to work for nothing. And if your coworkers anticipate getting nothing after spending countless hours collecting data, reviewing draft application forms, collaborating with community partners, and securing buy-ins from internal administrators, they will not want to be involved in any way, shape, or form with your grant teams. And frankly, neither would I. So one of the most important roles you (as their grant writer) must do is to instill confidence in their heart and soul – by demonstrating that you have it in yours.

So let’s talk about a true life story of how optimism overcame the odds to win a fourth grant contract from a single state agency – all within a three year time period.

At my college, we are in great need of equipment dollars and scholarship funds (very scarce commodities in my part of the country). It seems that most private foundations and many donors believe that tuition dollars and local taxes should more than cover the training equipment costs of a two-year college. Likewise, many think that Pell grants will cover the financial needs of all the students struggling to pay for college. Sadly, while they may think so, it’s simply not true. Nearly every community college that I know of struggles to fund both training equipment and scholarship programs.

Thus when our state began offering a new grant program solely for the purpose of buying training equipment or providing scholarships for students entering high-demand fields, we jumped on the opportunity to apply. The first year our college applied for approximately $300,000 in construction trade training equipment, and our college foundation applied for about $175,000 in scholarship funds. I wrote both proposals even though several people at the college questioned the probability that we would win two contracts. But as I often remind my coworkers, “ask ye might receive, don’t ask and I guarantee that you’ll get nothing.”

So with great confidence, I submitted both proposals. I soon learned that my optimism was well placed. My college won both grant contracts for the full amounts requested. We got much needed scholarship funds for moderate income and unemployed students and we received much needed money for construction trades training equipment.

Then the next year, the state offered the equipment grants once again. And optimistically, we once again applied – for more construction trade training equipment, and we won a full contract for about $280,000. Wow! I was doing a happy dance. We’re succeeded in getting contracts in excess of $750,000 from this one state grant program.

But wait, there was more to come. When the state again offered the program competition the next year, I recommended that we apply once more. After all, we certainly could document the need for the
equipment based on the immense construction and expansion projects going on in the greater Houston area. Why not ask for more money?

My supervisor asked me if I was confident that we could possibly win a fourth contract. I smiled and said, “Why not?” We’re good. We complete our contracts on time and as proposed. We have documented needs.

Thus I was confident that we could win a fourth contract. And guess who was right? Yes! It was little ole me. We received another award for just over $300,000. That brought our total of these funds to more than $1 million dollars. I was ecstatic.

And my story isn’t over. In November, we submitted a fifth application for additional equipment funds for our process technology program. We don’t yet know if we’ll receive an award, but trust me when I say that I believe we will. I’m certain that you will agree - that’s optimistic!

A Competitive Nature

I once had a supervisor that expressed surprise at my competitiveness. An accountant, he thought that perhaps I was “a bit too competitive.” When he told me this, I just smiled and told him that he should thank the fates that brought me to his door because a grant writer that is not competitive is usually not a very unsuccessful one.

I’ve never misled any of my colleagues or supervisors. I like to win. I once had an assistant that said that I literally do a happy dance when I learn of a new grant award. It seems that I get so excited that even if I’m sitting down my feet move – a lot I’m told. Well, since I’m a lousy performer on the dance floor, it’s great to know that I do have a few moves in my feet for what I’m most passionate about – grant contracts!

So let your colleagues know that you will do anything and everything necessary to win each and every grant competition. Tell them that together you know they have the ability to win the grant contracts necessary to support their programs.

It’s been my observation that competitive people work harder to win. So let them bask in the glow of your confidence and passion. This will help you create a positive competitive team spirit that will surely make them winners more often than not.

Most importantly, remember that you can’t give what you don’t have so make certain that you approach each and every new opportunity with all the inspiration, hope, and confidence that you can muster. Your organization is counting on you to be the leader that helps them win.