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**Program Expansion Versus Mission Creep: How to Know
the Difference**

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Abstract

Nonprofits should carefully choose the right grant opportunities to pursue. This paper helps grant professionals identify the differences between programming designed to strengthen the organization and unsustainable programs invented to chase dollars. Strategic planning is one key to achieving long-term program sustainability.

Introduction

In the last decade, the U.S. has seen its greatest economic peak and one of its most significant declines in history. The nonprofit sector has not been insulated from this fiscal volatility. According to Giving USA, “while total charitable giving is growing, if it continues to grow at current rates, giving will not reach the high of \$344.48 billion in 2007 for at least six years (adjusted for inflation)” (Lilly School of Philanthropy, 2013, p. 2). Thus, a smaller pot of funding is now available, making competition for those dollars fierce.

When economic times are tough and resulting grants options limited, grant professionals are tempted to chase the money in order to increase funding. For example, the federal government enacted the expansive American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) at a cost of 831 billion, primarily to create jobs (Congressional Budget Office, 2012, p. 1). The Reason Foundation evaluated over 8,300 ARRA grantees and concluded, “more than seven out of 10 companies did not hire workers at all or had to lay off the workers they did hire” (Randazzo, 2013).

The negative consequences of chasing dollars, however, are not limited to tough economic times. Whenever entities chase dollars, it is no surprise that programs frequently become unmanageable and outcomes, such as jobs, evaporate. Grant professionals can help their organizations create strong, sustainable programming by focusing on the nonprofit’s mission, core competencies, and capacity.

Mission

As with all staff, grant professionals must internalize the nonprofit's mission and understand how it applies to their individual tasks. The mission statement defines the nonprofit's reasons for existence and guides how resources should be distributed. According to Starling (2010), "It creates an organization that is disciplined, and it helps avoid splintering of effort into unrelated and unproductive activities" (p. 233). The mission can also "help an organization foster innovation by creating clear criteria against which to evaluate new ideas" (p. 233).

Knowing the mission statement is not enough. Instead, grant professionals must also be familiar with their organizations' strategic plans. A strategic plan carves out program goals and outcomes that shape new and existing programs. Similarly, grant application guidelines frequently require a nonprofit to disclose projections of budgets and outcomes across multiple years. Significantly, "A nonprofit with clearly established priorities from its governing board and executive staff will have fewer difficulties in determining appropriate foundations to contact than will organizations without clear operational mandates and strategic plans in place" (Tempel, Seiler, & Aldrich, 2011, p. 157). Therefore, comprehensive strategic plans afford grant professionals road maps of how these programs will grow and change over time. They also offer foundations a glimpse of the expected return on investment resulting from grant awards. Grant professionals should question funding pursuits not aligned with the strategic plan.

Core competency

According to Collins (2001), "Every company would like to be the best at something, but few actually understand what they have the potential to be the best at and, just as important, what they cannot be the best at" (p. 98). As a grant professional, one must ask hard questions concerning the organization's expertise in meeting the goals of a proposed project. For example, if the nonprofit serves the homeless, having a shelter program coupled with an addiction recovery program makes sense given there are qualified counselors or a plan to hire staff with the skills necessary to administer the program. If the organization cannot afford to maintain the needed expertise after the life of the grant, rethink the program. In some instances, additional funding streams like individual giving, corporate sponsorships, and/or fundraisers may support program sustainability. For others, partnering with another community organization serving the same population with strong, complementary programming might be the answer.

Focusing on the organization's core competencies means consistently doing what the nonprofit is good at and avoiding distractions. Using the homeless shelter example again, if the organization not only serves the homeless but also provides after school and summer programs for children, a boys' home for orphans, an after-care recovery program, a medical clinic, computer education courses, and a church, it may prove difficult to identify its core competencies and build strong programs.

Capacity

Not only is it critical for a program to align with the organization's mission and strategic plan, but grant professionals must also understand their organizations' abilities to

deliver programs. Priority consideration must be placed on pursuing grants that “fit the organization’s mission and priorities, match the organization’s capacity, respond to important concerns in a well-conceived manner, and are well-planned with realistic timeframes and expectations” (Grantsmanship Center, 2010, p. 5).

For example, an organization with a \$200,000 budget that creates a new \$1 million program must carefully analyze its ability to meet the added demand. No doubt a program of that size will require extra staff, serve new clients, and create significant pressures on the organization. However, this does not mean an organization should immediately discard the notion that it will succeed. Instead, effective program expansion is possible through proper planning. According to Bryson (2004), “Leaders and organizations that have successfully advocated and implemented changes...are seen as having more legitimacy” (p. 243).

In successful organizations, grant professionals assist the nonprofits they serve in developing sound strategic plans that include tools such as programmatic logic models, evaluation methods, and sustainable fund development plans to increase the likelihood of success. Grant professionals may also recommend implementing various phases of the project over multiple grant reporting periods to both enhance organizational capacity and build legitimacy with the grantor(s). Such phases vary based on grantor requirements and organizational capacity, but may include planning, pilot, and implementation.

Conclusion

Before developing a grant proposal, grant professionals should analyze whether or not the proposed new or expanding program in need of funds aligns with the organization’s mission, core competencies, and capacity to deliver the work. If so, the program is more likely to strengthen the organization’s ability to serve its target population(s), acquire funding, and build sustainable programming.

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Biographical Information

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