chapter
ONE

First Steps

Getting Ready for Grantseeking

As any writer will tell you, a lot of preparation usually takes place before any words are actually written. This is also true for grantseekers. First comes the idea, the inspiration. For storytellers, ideas are sparked in their rich imaginations. With nonprofit agencies, ideas can be generated by a variety of people working for or with the agency. Most frequently, it is the executive director or program director who initially conceives an idea for a new program or project that will need new funding in order to be implemented. Or the plan may be simply to keep an existing program going. In either case, the nonprofit agency needs money, and it is decided (generally by the executive director or development director) that approaching grantmakers is a good strategy for securing the necessary funding. But before you or anyone else in your agency begins to draft a grant proposal, additional steps must be taken.

GET PREPARED

It is not unusual for storytellers, and specifically writers, to conduct extensive research before they begin to draft their stories. Some retreat to the library, where they read everything they can about a particular topic. Others try to get

firsthand experience. Authors have been known to take flying lessons, spend a season working on a fishing vessel, or volunteer at a dude ranch in order to prepare for writing their stories.

Grantwriters should be equally prepared. Before attempting to write a proposal, learn as much about your agency as you possibly can. True, we all get busy and overcommitted in our work and daily lives, but spending a day out in the field is priceless. Observe or experience your agency's work firsthand. Talk to the clients your agency helps. Spend a day shadowing your agency's program director, social worker, artistic director, or education coordinator. I guarantee that you will soak up more information than you ever would by visiting your agency's Web site or reading your agency's annual report. Nothing substitutes for being in the field—nothing.

IS THE PROJECT FUNDABLE?

After a program idea has been formulated, the next step is to assess whether the proposed program or project is fundable. The reality is that not all ideas will germinate into fundable programs or projects. It's a bit of a jungle out there in the grantseeking world. Only the fittest survive. So how does an agency determine whether a proposed program or project is likely to be funded? Consider the following questions:

- Is the program or project compatible with the agency's central mission or purpose? (I've seen too many nonprofit agencies chase potential grant dollars by developing programs that were not aligned with their core mission simply to apply for available grant funding. This is letting the tail wag the dog. Do not be tempted to do that. Rather, create only programs that further your agency's mission. Then seek grant funding for those programs. Be assured that if your agency's work serves a critical need, there are foundations and corporations out there willing to provide funds.)
- Does your agency have the expertise and staff resources to carry out the program?
- Can your agency manage the proposed expansion of services?
- Is the proposed program distinguishable from other similar programs in the community? If so, what specific niche will this program or project fill?

- If other agencies are doing similar work, has your agency explored opportunities for collaboration?
- Is there internal support from the board of directors and senior staff for the proposed program?

If your agency can answer yes to each of these questions, then it is well on its way to developing a fundable program. If any answer is no, then perhaps your agency is heading down the wrong path—a road not likely to lead to grant funding.

For example, if your agency does not have the necessary staff expertise to launch a new initiative, it should not pursue grant funding until it has addressed this issue. Consider what could be done to acquire people with the necessary experience and qualifications. This may mean increasing the new program's budget, thereby enabling the agency to hire the additional staff needed. Or it may mean recruiting unpaid volunteers who can be trained to do the work. Another possible alternative is for the agency to explore collaborating with another nonprofit organization that has the appropriate staff expertise.

The point I want to make is that nonprofit agencies are most likely to secure grants when they develop fundable programs. From ideas spring new programs, new initiatives, and these can be bold and inventive, yet they must also present the likelihood of success. If a program seems doomed to failure from its inception, no funder is likely to want to invest in it.

DON'T LET A BAD PROPOSAL DISGUISE A GOOD IDEA

Our challenge is to present to potential funders the most persuasive, creative, and well-written grant proposals that describe the very best programs and initiatives—that is, the ones most likely to succeed in efficiently and effectively delivering valuable services to agency clients. Unfortunately, just as some literary rubbish ends up in the bookstores (and even on the best-sellers list), bad proposals describing bad ideas arrive in the in-boxes of foundation program officers every single day. A veteran program officer, much like a seasoned literary agent, has seen it all—from the very best to the very worst. In fact, most program officers can classify a proposal into one of four basic categories, as Joel Orosz does in his book *The Insider's Guide to Grantmaking* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

First, there's the bad idea–bad proposal, which is a deadly combination. It's the proposal that presents an idea that is ill conceived, underdeveloped, or just plain unworkable. The proposal isn't even well written, making it all the easier for the program officer to toss the submission into the reject pile. These are easy ones for the program officer to dispense with.

The second type of proposal is the devious bad idea–good proposal. Narratives like this are often the products of professional grantwriters, masters of the fine art of spinning golden words. Masquerading under slick, sophisticated writing lurks a really bad or weak program idea. But with a smoothly crafted proposal, it's harder to recognize it. Yet don't kid yourself—the vast majority of program officers are going to see right through the veil of crafty wordplay. A proposal that falls into this category is not likely to get funded either.

More frustrating are submissions that fall into the good idea–bad proposal category. With these proposals, the gem of an idea truly worthy of funding lies buried under disorganized, sloppy, or terrible writing. Most program officers are willing to make the journey and try to find the treasure, provided they see a flicker of a good, or even brilliant, idea. Sadly, a few won't bother, and thus some truly wonderful programs or projects won't get funded.

Proposal submissions in the final category are of course a joy to behold and read. These are the ones that present a well-developed idea by telling a good story. These are the "10s," the ones that get four stars, the ones that should win the Pulitzer Prize. It should be no surprise that these are the grant proposals that have the best chance of being funded. In a philanthropic environment where the ratio of submitted to funded proposals is often ten to one or twelve to one (with some funders it can even be as daunting as twenty to one), excellence is what you should be striving for.

IS YOUR STORY READY TO BE TOLD?

Not all stories are ready to be told. Grantwriters have to know when they have a compelling, urgent story to tell and when there are serious loose ends to tidy up before pen should be put to paper (or, in today's nonprofit office, before the computer should be turned on). I am talking about those unusual circumstances when the grantseeking process (and, for that matter, possibly all fundraising activities) should be temporarily halted. For in a nonprofit agency's life, there may be times when it is prudent to stop fundraising until the crisis has passed.

What times are these? Whenever the agency's credibility is in doubt and its ability to do its work is called into question. For example, the following situations may require a pause in grantseeking:

- When there is extremely high turnover on the board of directors
- When a seriously difficult executive director transition is occurring
- When the agency has been rocked by public scandal or has received extremely negative press
- When there is inadequate staff to plan and implement the program for which funding is sought

In each of the situations just described (or other such extenuating circumstances that merit a temporary suspension of fundraising activities, including grantseeking), the agency needs to get its house in order before fundraising can proceed. There is a simple reason for this. When making funding decisions, grantmakers look for agencies that are fiscally stable, that demonstrate competence and the ability to do good, solid work, that have steady internal leadership (for example, from the board of directors and chief executive officer), that are respected in the community, and that are trustworthy. Agencies experiencing one or more of the challenges just listed are therefore at an extreme disadvantage when seeking grant funding. Other agencies without these troubling issues present a stronger case for support. And although it is precisely during such trying times that a nonprofit agency is most likely to be in need of contributed dollars, asking for grant support is likely to be frustrating or even futile, and it may even jeopardize future opportunities for funding.

To be successful at grantseeking, you must tell your agency's story from a position of organizational strength.

KNOW WHAT YOU'RE RAISING MONEY FOR

In grantseeking, as with all fundraising activities, it is critical for anyone working on a proposal to know specifically what the agency is raising money for. The financial needs of a nonprofit agency fall into six broad categories. So far, I have referred to only one of those six, which is program or project support. (Note that a *project* is a task—something of limited duration—whereas a

program is something likely to continue indefinitely.) The other five categories of financial needs are the following:

- *Funds for capital or equipment purchases.* This is so-called bricks-and-sticks or bricks-and-mortar funding, which includes funding for things like building or renovating facilities, acquiring raw land, or purchasing large pieces of equipment, such as vehicles, computers, telephone systems, or medical testing devices.
- *Endowment funds.* Think of these as an agency's piggy bank. They're like savings or retirement accounts. Money is prudently invested, and the interest earned is used to support the agency's programs, projects, and general operations.
- *Funds for technical development or capacity building.* Such funds help an agency gain expertise that will enable it to move to the next level. This includes, for example, management, financial, and fundraising training.
- *Seed funding.* These are funds for brand-new start-up agencies. This is crucial incubation money that helps an agency get established.
- *General operating funds.* These are funds that cannot otherwise be placed in a program or project budget and that cover all of an agency's day-to-day expenses, such as salaries, rent, insurance, and supplies.

Grantmakers frequently limit their funding to one or two specific financial needs. A great number fund new or continuing programs or projects. Other foundations award grants only for capital projects. Some prefer to assist fledgling organizations by providing seed funding. A significant number help nonprofits, frequently those they already support with program or operating grants, from the inside by giving technical assistance and capacity-building grants. A few make gifts to establish or increase endowments. And finally, there are those cherished foundations that make unrestricted grants, which can be used to support an agency's general operations.

Be aware that your agency is likely to have multiple financial needs at any given time. Certainly, every nonprofit agency has an ongoing need for general operating support in order to pay its basic bills and to make its payroll. The vast majority of nonprofit agencies will also need funds to support services and programs. From time to time, many agencies will have capital or equipment needs. Matching the right funder with your agency's specific financial needs is extremely important and is discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

The fact that every nonprofit I know needs funding is not surprising. The fact that some nonprofits don't have a clear understanding of what they need funding *for* is. I occasionally get phone calls that go something like this:

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Hi. I'm calling because we need a grant.
ME: For what?
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Money.
ME: For what?
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Money.

You get the point. Executive directors and nonprofit staff generally know they need funding, but they can't always articulate what they need the funds for. And if they can't express the need to you or me, we won't be able to do a very good job telling a prospective funder. When approaching grantmakers, it is essential that we clearly state what the grant, if awarded, will fund.

GET READY TO TELL YOUR STORY

If your agency has a fundable idea to present to potential grantmakers, then the next question to address is whether you are well prepared and personally ready to tell your agency's story.

No matter whether you're an old-timer or a brand-new employee, you should not begin to write a grant proposal until you are adequately prepared. And all grantseekers are better prepared if they know as much as possible about the nonprofit agency they work for and the field the agency works in (such as education, social justice, health care, or the visual arts). As previously noted, I recommend that from time to time you get out of your office to see and experience the actual work your agency does. You may have worked for the same organization for several years, perhaps having held several different positions in the agency, and may already be very knowledgeable. Or you may be new to your agency and perhaps even to the nonprofit sector. If that is the case, preparing a grant proposal is a great way for you to become well acquainted with your agency and the field in general.

This is one of the things I love most about grantwriting: you get to wear many hats! In addition to writer, you are also a reporter and a researcher.

Be a Reporter

To tell your agency's story effectively, you first need information, and to get information, you must often play the role of reporter. In this capacity, you will

frequently find it necessary and appropriate to interview various staff members at your agency, such as the program director, finance director, personnel director, and executive director. Armed with a reporter's notepad, you must get the specifics from these individuals before you can begin to prepare a grant proposal.

For example, suppose that you are a grantwriter working for a nonprofit blood bank in a major urban area; the blood bank is having difficulty recruiting blood donors from the city's largest ethnic population. The blood bank's executive director thinks that to increase blood donations, it would be a good idea for the center to hire an outreach coordinator who can focus recruitment efforts on this ethnic community. The executive director hopes this program will be funded through grants from foundations in the community and asks you to draft the proposal. As a resourceful reporter, what do you need to do?

Well, you'd probably want to begin by interviewing the head of donor recruitment at the blood bank, especially because the proposed outreach coordinator would report to her. You would want to know why it is important for the blood bank to increase blood donations from this ethnic group. Are there cultural barriers that prevent people in this ethnic community from giving blood? You would also want to learn what vision the head of donor recruitment has for the proposed program. With whom in the ethnic community would the outreach coordinator forge relationships, and how? What kinds of written and online recruitment materials may need to be developed? Would these materials need to be translated into another language? How and to whom would such materials be distributed?

These are the types of questions that can best be answered by interviewing agency staff in your role as reporter.

When talking with staff, don't forget those folks in the finance department. You'll need to work with them on the budget that will accompany the proposal. In some situations, the finance department will prepare the budget, which you will then need to review carefully. In others, you will work closely with the finance department in building a budget together. A full discussion of budgets is found in Chapter Eight.

If you worked at the blood center, you would likely first talk with either the center's finance director or the personnel director in order to determine a salary range for the new outreach coordinator and other related program expenses.

In addition to interviewing agency personnel, you might also find it worthwhile to talk with one or more clients of your agency, especially if you are

gathering quotes or testimonials. Often there is no substitute for words spoken from the heart by people who have been helped by your agency. As discussed in Chapter Five, client quotes become the rich dialogue in your proposal story.

Be a Researcher

In addition to functioning as an ace reporter, you also get an opportunity to be a crackerjack researcher. Key facts and figures that will strengthen your case for support do not fall from the sky. Sometimes they are provided to you by a program director or can be found in agency documents (such as prior evaluation reports), but often you must do independent research to find the data you'll need to write a strong proposal. To be an effective and efficient researcher, you should become familiar with online resources that are relevant to your agency's field of work. U.S. Census, county, local government, and chamber of commerce Web sites are good places to start. Googling relevant key words will frequently lead you to other helpful sources.

Returning to our blood bank example, your proposal narrative would be even more persuasive if it included statistics to show the low percentage of blood donations from the targeted ethnic population. Therefore, you may need to do some independent research if this information is not readily available from internal sources at the blood bank. Perhaps your agency's case would be further enhanced if you were able to frame it within a broader geographic context, demonstrating that this is a statewide or even national issue. Additional research may reveal how other blood centers around the country have dealt with the challenge of recruiting more blood donors from specific ethnic groups.

As you can see, being a grantwriter is not one-dimensional. At any given time, you may be a writer, an intrepid reporter, or a thorough researcher. The job of grantwriting will certainly keep you busy!

"TALK" YOUR STORY

As I've already said, I believe that each of us is a competent storyteller. Telling stories is an integral part of our daily lives. And yet telling an agency's story in a grant proposal can seem so daunting. Why? One of the obvious reasons is that most of our daily storytelling is verbal. Frequently, it is the act of writing the story down that freezes us. So how can you take the spoken word and get it written down?

First, turn off that editor's voice in your head. Too often we believe that the written word needs to be more formal or perfect than the way we speak. We begin to write, yet find ourselves saying, "That doesn't sound right." So we stop. We delete. We labor over the same sentence for hours.

May I make a suggestion? To use a popular slogan: just do it. Just write. I call it the "dirty draft." It isn't pretty, but it gets the job done. I put words and thoughts on paper. I write quickly, not pausing to parse every word or mull over each phrase. Sometimes I leave blanks or mark where I want to find a more descriptive or precise word. Sooner rather than later, I have a first draft. Once I do, I can go back and edit, revise, and move copy around, polishing my rough draft into a smooth gem. And that's so much easier than facing the terror of a blank page.

Second, aim to write the way you speak rather than the way you think you should write. We know what we want to say, but too often we feel the overwhelming need to write in a formal, frequently stilted, manner. We choose big words instead of short ones because we believe that they make us sound smarter. We write long, complex sentences for the same reason. In doing so, we run the risk of losing clarity. In my experience, writing more like the way we speak helps keep proposal narratives clear, concise, and to the point. And they will read as if written by a passionate human being rather than a computer thesaurus.

If you still have trouble getting started, try thinking about why you chose to work for this particular agency and about the clients it serves, the work it does, and the difference it makes in the life of the community. Write down your thoughts, your answers. You may be surprised by how passionate you are about the cause, and this is most likely to be conveyed on paper. This is a terrific warm-up exercise before beginning to draft that otherwise daunting proposal.

I suggest that once you have a draft that you are satisfied with, put it aside for several days. Then go back over the copy one more time. Does the proposal answer the questions asked by the funder? Does it flow like a well-written story? Is it well organized? Does the narrative contain drama and excitement? Does it grab the reader's attention with the first sentence and hold it throughout? Until you can answer yes to each of these questions, you have more work to do.

Always make certain that you give yourself enough time to edit and revise. I cannot emphasize this point enough. The preparation (research and fact gathering) that goes into getting ready to write a proposal takes time. The actual writing of a grant proposal takes time. Usually lots of time. Successful grant proposals typically are not prepared in a few hours, days, or even a week. Schedule

Time to Write!

This is a book about writing. It's time for you to do just that, so take out a pen or turn on your computer. This is an exercise I frequently use to open my grantwriting workshops.

I like adjectives and adverbs. By definition, they are descriptive words that give color and texture to our writing. Like seasonings, a few well-chosen words will come together to create a delicious dish (or nicely crafted proposal). Use too many, and you ruin the soup. I like using adjectives and adverbs in grant proposals because they force us to be precise with language.

Here's what I want you to do:

- Using only five to seven adverbs and adjectives, describe your agency.
- No nouns, pronouns, verbs, or articles are allowed.
- You may not use the adjectives "unique" and "innovative." (Every nonprofit agency can lay claim to those descriptors, and they have therefore lost their meaning.)

Think it can't be done? What type of nonprofit organization am I describing with these few carefully chosen words?

- Historical
- Archival
- Educational
- Local
- Kid-friendly
- Acclaimed

What do you think this agency is? (See the footnote at the end of the chapter for the answer.)

Now it is your turn. Time to start flexing that writing muscle.

sufficient time to research and gather information, then schedule even more time to write and revise. In the best-case scenario, allow yourself at least three to four weeks for the whole process.

I've received many calls from frantic executive directors and development professionals asking for help in preparing a grant proposal when the submission deadline is only days away. Under such constraints, there isn't enough time to do the job right. Sadly, I have to turn them down. I won't be able to do a good job, and they won't be satisfied with the outcome when they hear from the grantmaker. So my advice is to plan ahead and give yourself sufficient time for any unexpected delays or problems.

SUMMARY

As anyone who has ever painted a room knows, at least 80 percent of the job is in the preparation. The same can be said for grantseeking, as well as for all fundraising activities. Success is achieved through adequate preparation. Here are the key points on grantseeking preparation that have been covered in this chapter:

- Spend time out of your office and in the field in order to witness firsthand the programs and services offered by your nonprofit agency and to meet the clients being served.
- Determine whether new ideas for programs and projects are fundable.
- Understand what specifically you're raising money for.
- Assume the roles of reporter and researcher when gathering information to be included in a proposal.
- Consider *talking* instead of *writing* your story.

Time to Write! answer: a county history museum