

Chapter 1

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.

Grantseekers 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

2 Storytelling for Grantseekers

day out in the field is priceless. Observe or experience your agency's work firsthand. See 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 reading your agency's annual report, brochure, or any other written material describing its services. Nothing substitutes for being in the field—nothing.

Is the Project Fundable?

After a program idea has been hatched, 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 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.)
- 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 file the submission in 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 the reality of 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. Therefore a proposal that falls into this category is not likely to get funded either.

4 Storytelling for Grantseekers

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 therefore 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 may be 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. Therefore agencies experiencing one or more of the challenges just listed are 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 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 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 to 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, supplies, and the like.

6 Storytelling for Grantseekers

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 for only capital projects. Some prefer to assist fledgling organizations by providing seed funding. More and more foundations are choosing to help nonprofits from the inside by giving technical 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.

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 personally ready to tell your agency's story.

No matter whether you're an old-timer or a brand-new employee, you're not ready 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. As previously noted, I recommend that from time to time you get out in the field 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 so, preparing a grant proposal is a great way for you to become well acquainted with your agency.

To tell your agency's story effectively, you first need information (for example, data, statistics, and quite possibly anecdotes or quotes), and to get this information a grantseeker must 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 that 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 population. 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 and how would the outreach coordinator forge relationships with the ethnic community? What kinds of 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?

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 data 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 this challenge.

Finally, to develop a program budget, you would likely need to talk with the blood center's personnel director or finance director in order to determine a salary range for the new outreach coordinator and the amount of 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 dialogue in your story.

As you can see, being an intrepid reporter will keep you busy!

Use Technology to Help You Tell 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 it down that freezes us. So how can you take the spoken word and get it written down?

Given today's technology, it's never been easier. If you are a person who is more comfortable speaking than writing your agency's story, then do so. I recommend that you simply use a tape recorder, Dictaphone, or voice recognition software. Why struggle at a computer keyboard when these relatively inexpensive office tools are available?

Before you begin talking, you may want to prepare an outline that will help keep you focused as you tell your tale. Or you may want to just sit down and do it, talking in free form. Everyone has his or her own style. Use what is most comfortable for you. So when you're ready, get seated in a comfortable chair, close the door, and turn off the phone so you won't have any interruptions—and start talking.

If you have trouble getting started, try talking informally about why you chose to work for this particular agency and about the people it serves, the work it does, and the difference it makes in the life of the community. Sooner than you realize, you'll be telling an effective story.

In contrast to a tape recorder or Dictaphone, voice recognition software allows your spoken words to be captured immediately by computer and to be printed out within seconds of being spoken. As of this writing, voice recognition software is still relatively new, and like most consumer products, some programs are better than others. Before you purchase such software, I strongly suggest that you research what product will best suit your specific needs at a price you can afford. Ask your colleagues and friends for their recommendations, and if you can, sample the product before you buy.

If you use a tape recorder or Dictaphone, you will need to allow sufficient time for your words to be transcribed and put on paper. Once you have a transcription of the recorded oral story, you will also need adequate time to edit and make corrections.

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 story answer the key questions listed earlier? Does it flow? Does it have 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. So make certain that you give yourself enough time. I cannot emphasize this point enough. The actual writing of a grant proposal takes time. Usually lots of time. Successful grant proposals are not often written in a few days or even a week. Schedule sufficient time to research and gather information and to write. In the best-case scenario, allow yourself at least three to four weeks for the whole process.

I've been called many times by 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. So my advice is to plan ahead, build in a time cushion for unexpected delays or problems, and give yourself sufficient time.

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 in the field in order to see firsthand the programs and services offered by your nonprofit agency.
- Question whether new ideas for programs and projects are fundable.
- Understand what you're raising money for.
- Assume the role of a reporter to research supporting data and to interview both staff members and clients.
- Consider "talking your story" by using a tape recorder, Dictaphone, or voice recognition software.