

Step 1

Developing the Proposal Idea

I often have people call or e-mail me asking if they can tell me about their work and apply for a grant. If I know the work is not a fit at all, I'm honest. It's important to hear when a funder is telling you this. Even if you think you are a perfect fit, you may not be. Trying to coax a funder into thinking you are can often-times backfire.

—DESIREE FLORES

Program Officer, Health

Ms. Foundation for Women (a national operating foundation in New York City)

NOW THAT YOU have had an introduction to the process of preparing a proposal, let's take that first step! This section of the workbook will walk you through developing your proposal idea by answering some key questions. Before you can begin writing a proposal, you must first determine which projects in your organization are the most "fundable." That is, which programs are most likely to be attractive to grantmakers as an investment and are in need of funding? Most funders have a fairly strong preference for investing in new and expanding programs over general operating support or basic program continuation. Again, be sure to do a thorough job of researching your prospective funders (refer to Resource B) so that you are clear on the audience with which you have to work. Funders might also have an interest in a special project, such as a new time-specific project, a capacity-building idea, a set of technology improvements, or technical assistance. However, because general funder preference is for new and expanding programs, this workbook uses the idea of launching a new program as the model for developing a proposal.

To start developing your proposal idea, begin with the end in mind. Your organization has identified an unmet need, which is why it wants to develop a program to address that need. So sit down with everyone

Helpful Hint

General operating support. Take note: some funders are currently displaying a slow but growing interest in general operating and ongoing program support, so the CD that accompanies this workbook includes a sample funded proposal to help grantseekers in approaching sources for these funds as well.

involved to begin to flesh out this program idea—how your organization is going to meet that unmet need it has identified. Use a team approach in developing the plan and involve the appropriate staff, clients, and volunteers *from the very beginning*. Your team can develop an initial program plan first, which then will become the basis of the entire proposal. The importance of having the right people at the table when the program plan is developed cannot be emphasized enough. One of the worst things that can happen to a nonprofit is to be funded for a program that it then discovers it does not have the ability to successfully implement or, worse yet, a program that does *not* effectively meet the needs initially identified because it was developed in a vacuum—or in the development director’s office—rather than with the individuals who will be responsible for implementing it. In addition, securing grant funding usually means a change will take place within the organization. That means another important reason to involve people in the organization with the planning is so they will be more enthusiastic about implementing the change.

When preparing a proposal, many writers start with the planning sections (need statement, objectives, methods, evaluation, program sustainability, and budget) because these sections form the core of the proposal. Then they write the organization background section, finishing with the summary and the cover letter. This workbook follows that format.

The planning sections of the proposal deserve careful attention; without a clearly articulated program plan, it is nearly impossible to get funding. (Refer to number two of the top five grantseeking mistakes, outlined in the Introduction.) As one funder we talked to told us, “Writing a clear, goal-oriented, thoughtful proposal is crucial. If you can’t explain what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, how you’re going to do it, in a way that is easily understandable, no program officer in the world will be able to advocate for you.”

A guideline here is that nonprofits should expect to focus approximately 80 percent of their time on program planning; the other 20 percent can be dedicated to writing and packaging the proposal. Also, the “tighter” your program plan, the easier the proposal will be to write. Go into this process knowing that even with all of your planning, you will be fine-tuning your plan as the proposal is being developed—this is common practice.

Logic Models in Program Design

What exactly is a *logic model*? In a nutshell, a logic model is a valuable tool that produces a basic program “picture” that shows how the organization’s program is intended to work. The tool also helps you outline the sequence of related events in your program. These events provide a direct and visual connection between the need for the planned program and the desired results and outcomes expected from the program. A logic model can be particularly useful when it comes to designing the evaluation for your new program. Funders are beginning to use logic modeling more and more as the competition for their limited grant funding continues to grow. (Some funders use terms such as *theory of change* to describe this type of analysis; for example, you will hear a funder speak of theory of change in Step Two of this book. For other funders these ideas are distinct.) The W. K. Kellogg Foundation has an excellent free publication, the *Logic Model Development Guide*, that provides numerous examples of types and styles of logic models. Several funders participating in this workbook indicated that they direct their potential grantees to this resource as a reference. (To view this guide, go to <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf>.) In addition, Resource C in this workbook displays an example of a basic logic model taken from the Kellogg guide.

Reality Check

Check the fit. When conducting prospect research, you will come across many wonderful opportunities presented by grantmakers—special initiatives, and pots of funding for specific programs and projects within defined fields of interest. And even though they might sound exciting and worthwhile, always measure every funding opportunity by your organization’s mission. Is there really a fit—a natural, organic fit? Or is your organization “growing another foot” to fit the “shoe” the funder has to offer? Always, always use your organization’s mission and organizational purpose as your guide.

To get started on developing a fundable proposal idea, complete Worksheet 1.1. The more thorough you can be with your answers, the more helpful the worksheet will be to you. After answering the questions in Worksheet 1.1 use those answers to identify one specific idea to develop using the exercises in this book. To check the merit of the idea you have identified, ask the Proposal Development Review Questions at the end of this step. Then follow Steps Two through Twelve to create your own, well-planned proposal. Throughout these steps, this workbook will provide examples and worksheets to assist you.



WORKSHEET 1.1: Proposal Idea Questionnaire

1. What new projects is your organization planning for the next two to three years?

Project A:

Project B:

Project C:

Project D:

2. Which of these projects are most compatible with your organization's current mission and purpose, and in what way?

Project	Compatibility
---------	---------------

A

B

C

D

3. What is unique about your organization's project?

Project	Uniqueness
---------	------------

A

B

C

D

4. Who else is doing this project? Is there duplication of effort? Is there potential for collaboration?

Project	Duplicate Project (with whom)	Possible Collaboration (with whom)
---------	----------------------------------	---------------------------------------

A

B

C

D

WORKSHEET 1.1: Proposal Idea Questionnaire (Continued)



5. What community need does each of your organization's projects address?

Project	Need Addressed
A	
B	
C	
D	

6. What members of your community—including civic leaders, political figures, the media, your organization's clients or constituents, and other nonprofits—support each project?

Project	Supporters
A	
B	
C	
D	

7. Does your organization currently have the expertise to undertake each project? If new staff are necessary, can the organization manage growth in infrastructure (HR, technology, supervisory oversight, and so forth) effectively? (Check each category that applies to each project.)

Project	Expertise	HR	Technology	Other (specify)
A				
B				
C				
D				

8. Is there internal (board and staff) support for the project? External support (community leaders, clients, neighbors, and so forth)? (Check the category that applies to each project and specify the type of support.)

Project	Internal Support (specify)	External Support (specify)
A		
B		
C		
D		

Proposal Development Review Questions

To find out whether the proposal idea you have developed has merit, answer the following six questions:

1. What community need does the program or service your organization has identified address? (The answer to this question will become the basis of your proposal's *need statement*.)
2. What would an improved community situation look like? (This answer will become the basis of your proposal's *goals and objectives*.)
3. What can your organization do to improve this situation? (This answer will become the basis of your proposal's *methods*.)
4. How will you know if your organization's program or service has succeeded? (This answer will become the basis of your proposal's *program evaluation*.)
5. How much will your organization's program or service cost, and what other sources of funding will it have? (This answer will become the basis of your proposal's *program budget*.)
6. How will your organization's program or service be funded in the future? (This answer will become the basis of your proposal's *program sustainability*.)

Now that you have successfully identified your organization's proposal idea, let's move on to Step Two, which will address a critical part of winning grants: developing relationships with funders.