10 Errors Proposal Teams Should Avoid

Whether you are employed at a large University or are volunteering to help start a fledgling non-profit, when it comes to writing a proposal for funding you will likely need the help and contributions from others. Hence, welcome to the “proposal team”. Working on a proposal is already stressful enough. A good team can cover gaps, speed the process, and increase your odds of winning. A poor team can not only jeopardize the potential win, but it can also derail the entire proposal to the point where you miss the deadline. Here are 10 statements that you DON’T want to hear from your proposal team members. Any of them can be a sign that your team is starting to skid off the tracks.

1) **“I skimmed it”**

They don’t give Pulitzer Prizes out to people for writing solicitations. No one really likes to read them from start to finish, so people tend to skim them. Hence, when the proposal team meets everyone understands what the solicitation is seeking, but no one knows if there are deal breakers inside of it. A deal breaker to your organization may be an eligibility requirement, matching funds requirement, limitations on use of funds, experience required, etc. Someone on the team needs to spend at least a couple of hours in prep time consisting of: reading the solicitation, doing some basic internet research on the opportunity, and possibly making some phone calls for clarification.

2) **“Let’s schedule about 5 more meetings before we decide to move forward”**

Someone found an opportunity months in advance of the deadline. The good news is your team has plenty of time to draft the proposal. However, since you have so much time and most people have only skimmed the solicitation (see point #1) you dedicate considerable extra time to analyzing the opportunity. This is further amplified by the fact that team members have differing opinions on whether to pursue the opportunity or not. Some say “full speed ahead”, some are cautious, and some never want to sign on to a project where their individual success is not 100% guaranteed. Hence, the team has numerous meetings trying to get a unanimous decision. Someone needs to make the final call and everyone on the team needs to give their best efforts from that decision point forward.

3) **“Getting a letter of support will be easy”**

We live in the age of collaboration. Most solicitations want you to demonstrate how you can leverage support beyond your existing organization. So, the proposal team quickly comes up with a list of people who they think will sign a generic letter that says “X is a great idea and we support it”. However, that type of letter is actually referred to as an endorsement letter and most solicitations do not want an endorsement letter. They want a support letter that spells out how the additional organization will specifically support the project via finances, resources, in-kind support, etc. Support can be small but it must be tangible.

4) **“We need partners, but let’s not show our hand”**

Sometimes your organization doesn’t have everything a solicitation requires and you need a partner or sub-contractor. Or, sometimes you want a partner that will help you blow the competition out of the water. The challenge becomes getting your proposal team to cut off a piece of the financial pie for another organization. No one wants to give away too much at the onset so the proposal team talks with potential partners about everything except money. What follows is a long-winded courtship that wastes time for both parties. At its worst, it can endanger a proposal because the planned partnerships might collapse near the deadline when money is finally discussed. This means having to
start the entire partner recruitment process over again. Instead, discuss money during the initial contact. Map out what services you need and simply ballpark what you think is fair in terms of compensation if the grant is won. You can always negotiate further, but at least the ball is rolling in terms of signing the partner or moving on quickly to a different one.

(5) “Let’s just push what we already do”
Many organizations simply seek funding for their existing activities and programs. However, most grants have very specific goals, objectives, and metrics they are seeking to meet. If your team is unwilling to modify, re-purpose, tweak, or expand a project, you should be commended for having such a defined vision. However, you probably shouldn’t expect too much in the way of outside funds either.

(6) “We are so awesome!”
Nobody knows the strength of your organization like your own proposal team. However, don’t fall into the trap of spending valuable internal meeting time paying lip service to how great your organization’s staff, experience, and achievements are. Those are the easy things to write about. The team needs to spend more time discussing how they will fill gaps and shortcomings.

(7) “I need a page to explain X”
If something is very complex and requires a great deal of explanation, upping the word count is not always the answer. Most people are better visual learners when it comes to understanding concepts. Hence, creating a chart, graph, or diagram (which is preceded by a couple of sentences) is probably much more effective and saves valuable proposal space.

(8) “That’s not a tough question. I can answer it in one sentence”
The proposal looks good, but the team is having a tough time addressing a specific issue. As an example - maybe the issue is how the project will be sustained beyond the grant period. So, after the team racks its collective brain on several different revenue models, someone on the team blurts out “Just tell them we’ll get corporate sponsorship!” The team is so tired they begin to convince themselves that “less is actually more”. Or, they convince themselves that they are better off being vague rather than running the risk of getting criticized for the details of the plan. However, this seldom works. Like my high school science teacher used to say – “I’d rather have a well thought out incorrect answer than an answer left blank or barely completed.” Even if the reviewers don’t agree with the details of the plan they do know that your organization respects and recognizes the importance of the issue raised in the solicitation.

(9) “We may be weak in this section, but we’ll make up for it in the other one”
Evaluation factors are almost always compartmentalized. Points are usually distributed based on specific criteria. It’s like the Olympic decathlon events. If you are really good at the shot put, it doesn’t mean that will help you in the points awarded for the 100 meter dash. So, if you are prepared to take a hit in a section make sure you analyze the true mathematical impacts of making that concession.

(10) “Everybody is Equally Responsible”
A good proposal requires a good team to write it. Accountability amongst team members is essential, but it sometimes gets twisted into a desire to portion all responsibilities into equal parts. The problem becomes when no one is verbally assigned as the team leader. Or just as bad, a team leader is
assigned from the lower ranks of the organization but not given any authority. If those in higher ranks don’t respect the deadlines, formatting, or the need to supply high quality content in a final format, you are probably destined to submit a poorly constructed proposal that was thrown together at the last minute.

http://stemgrants.com/10-errors-proposal-teams-should-avoid/