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What is a Grant Proposal?

Grants as Advocacy, Not Just Asking

By Barbara Floersch, Executive Director

Most staff members in nonprofit organizations define a grant proposal as a request for money. But that definition is only superficially correct. To achieve the best results for their constituents and move more surely toward their missions, nonprofits need to think of grants in a different way.

First, nonprofits must consider grants from a funder's point of view. For funders, a grant award is an investment in positive change. It's a tool they use for having an impact on issues they care about.

Next, nonprofits must consider grants from a mission-focused perspective. Since the point of a grant award is impact rather than money, the real point of a grant proposal is to rally the necessary resources to help the nonprofit fulfill its purpose. A grant is a tool nonprofits use to address important issues within their communities.

Definitions matter, and defining grant proposals accurately can help both funders and nonprofits work together more productively. A grant proposal is actually a call to action. It's a request that a funder join the nonprofit as a partner in achieving specific results. At its best, a grant proposal is a cogent, persuasive, well-supported argument for change.

This definition moves the work of grantseekers well beyond reactive, dollar-chasing and into the realm of social activism. It's no longer about supporting "our organization." It's about linking arms with colleague organizations, beneficiaries, community members, and funders to embrace a mission and confront the dragons.

Focusing on the articulation of a logical argument for action also means that the document you produce when seeking grant funds can be sliced and diced and used in numerous ways. You can use the proposal to educate staff and board members so that they'll be better prepared to rally community support, engage with other organizations, and convince funders to come onboard as partners.

You can also use the proposal as the basis for editorials, blogs, presentations, and public testimony. By disseminating solid information widely you're laying the groundwork for progress. When the community understands the significance of the issue you're working on, you're more likely to get the cash, in-kind donations, and volunteers you need to do your work.

You can edit the proposal into a briefing document and share it with those who are concerned about the issue or who should be. The list may include politicians, local officials, targeted community members and colleague organizations.

Embracing grant proposal development as a form of advocacy challenges the resource development team to impose standards on its work that may be higher than those demanded by funders. This includes:

- Deeply studying the issue you're concerned about, hearing various and sometimes dissenting voices, looking at it through different lenses, and then digesting it all until you can concisely and precisely explain what concerns you, why it needs to be changed, and what's causing the situation.
- Specifically defining what changes your organization plans to achieve, the degree of change you expect, and how you'll track progress.
- Identifying the actions that have the highest likelihood of producing the desired change, documenting why you expect the approach to succeed, and committing to exactly what your organization will deliver within a set time frame.
- Imposing accountability on yourself rather than expecting some outside watchdog to do it.
- Communicating fully and honestly with staff members, beneficiaries, board members, the community, contributors, major donors, and grantmakers. Claiming and celebrating successes, and acknowledging, examining and learning from failures.

A top-quality grants professional is not just a seeker of dollars, a writer, a completer of forms, a person who answers the funders' questions, or a person who regurgitates information. That professional is a rain-maker, a change-maker, and a social activist. He or she finds the sweet spot where the needs of the community, the commitment of the funders, and the mission and capacity of the nonprofit organization align.

A grant proposal is not really a request for money. It's much more than that. And a grant award is not just funding. It's a tool, a means to an end, an investment in change.