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*UNDERSTANDING
THE AGENCY, THE COMMUNITY,
AND THE FUNDER*

Chapter topics:

- Understanding the agency
- Understanding the community
- Understanding the funder

It is helpful to think of the agency, the community, and the funder as each being a mirror. As you hold the proposal up to each of these sectors, different aspects of the mandates of each will be reflected back to you, influencing and shaping the proposal as it unfolds. This chapter will provide a framework for understanding the interrelationship of these three dimensions in conceptualizing your proposal.

UNDERSTANDING THE AGENCY

In most cases, when you receive an RFA/RFP, the funder has stated goals and objectives, or a rationale for funding, which articulates the type of outcomes wanted as a result of the funding. The agency/organization, on the other hand, is seeking funding that matches its mission and services and the needs or problems to be addressed. The better the match between the funder's rationale for funding and the agency's mission and programs, the more likely the project will be funded and the more likely it will be successful.

Every agency's purpose is expressed in a mission statement and reflected back into the community through its programs. Usually, the mission statement is fairly broad or global in nature, identifying the major issue on which the agency focuses and a basic philosophy of how it addresses that issue. The mission statement is dynamic, changing over time to adapt to emerging needs in the community. The mission statement is developed by the board of directors of the agency (in voluntary agencies) or by other governing bodies (in public agencies), which creates policy statements framing the agency's scope and its general approach to a broad problem.

Most agencies have paid staff who turn the legislative body's or the board's vision and less concrete ideas into viable programs that accomplish the mission. In the case of a nonprofit agency, the executive director is responsible for developing the agency's services and implementing them in the community. The executive director is also the link between the board and the staff; therefore, it is vitally important that you work closely with this person or designated administrative staff to develop the proposal.

Reviewing the agency's purpose, its past and current programs, and its future directions is a useful process. The following *survey of the agency* provides a format for examining the agency, for knowing what currently exists, and assessing strengths and weaknesses. The information you obtain through this process will help you to develop a proposal that will move the agency forward with consistency and balance.

Survey of the Agency

- History and mission statement of the agency
- Service area of the agency (geographic area)
- Population served by the agency (program recipients)
- Current programs
- Current staffing of the agency: What is the educational background and experience of key staff? What skill sets are required of staff now?
- Future plans for the agency: Where does the agency see itself in five years?
- Funding sources: Is a variety of funding coming into the agency?
- Other agencies providing similar services: What does the competition look like, and what potential can be found for partnerships or collaboration?
- Capacity to run the new or expanded program: Does existing staff have the knowledge and expertise to manage the new program? Will this program enhance other program offerings in a synergistic manner, or will it compete for resources? Will this program fit within existing management systems?

- **Contacts and connections:** Do any board members or staff have relationships with potential funders or with political leaders who will support these new services and/or put in a good word for the submission of the application? These relationships may give you access to your audience to talk about your proposal in advance and receive feedback.

After completing this survey, you will have a better understanding of your agency, and you will be able to use this analysis to develop a new or expanded program that provides services in a realistic and manageable manner. Agencies are all at various levels of sophistication, and your proposal must demonstrate an ability to reach a new level of service. Agencies, like any business, can overreach and develop too many products. Too much diversity can lead to system overload and program failure. Consider the following example:

An agency has been providing educational programs to youth in schools and now wants to develop after-school programs for teens. The agency does not have community contacts with youth-serving providers and is, therefore, missing a major resource needed to implement a new program in a new environment. The proposal must allow for the development of this network for the program to be successful.

Finally, the agency staff needs to support the new program idea and want to see the program become a reality. We can all draw upon examples of programs that were sabotaged from within. The staff may need to learn more about the project, be involved in the development of the proposal, and actively engage in the implementation of the program in order to “own” it with enthusiasm.

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

Along with assessing the capacity of your agency/organization to achieve the goals and objectives of a new or expanded initiative, you also must demonstrate an understanding of the community in which you will be operating. Programs are usually designed to meet community needs or at least our understanding of those needs. There must be a good fit between program and community for the community to desire and embrace the proposed services. If there is not a good fit, community members will not participate in your program, or they will even fight its implementation until it fails. An awareness of the political and social climate; the issues, needs, and problems faced; and the gaps that exist in addressing them is critical to determining the nature and suitability of your proposed project.

Moreover, the funder will want to know how clear you are about the needs of the community and the target populations and their characteristics. It will want to know whether you can navigate effectively within the community to achieve the stated outcomes. Often, agency/organization directors will test out their ideas with their boards or other community contacts as they conceptualize the needs/problems and shape the proposed project. Chapter 4 will provide a more detailed discussion on understanding the community and conducting a needs assessment

UNDERSTANDING THE FUNDER

Most funding sources also have missions or mandates to follow. In the case of governmental entities, mandates are developed through a legislative process, which also allocates funding to address the need. Corporations and foundations may exist to meet certain needs (e.g., health foundations that came out of the transition from nonprofit to for-profit status). Other corporations may target particular issue areas they want to address such as youth, education, and domestic violence.

Most funders want something in return for their giving. In some cases, their return may be increased visibility and goodwill in a local community; in others, perhaps increased revenue. An example of the latter strategy can be seen in credit card use linked to charitable giving. If you use X card, the charity will receive a percentage of your total purchase. Corporations are likely to view proposals favorably that meet their own internal needs or promote the corporate image in the community. When writing these proposals, be aware of the *WIFM rule* (What's In it For Me?). Design a program showing clear benefits to the corporation as well as the agency/organization but, most importantly, those whom you serve.

Other Funding Considerations

In some cases, foundations may not issue formal RFA/RFAs; instead, they use descriptions of program thrusts for funding consideration and identify those eligible for funding. Foundations give consideration to a well-written proposal but also to other factors in their decision-making processes. We surveyed 164 foundations, and they ranked the following characteristics as the top factors affecting whether an agency gets funded:

- Demonstrates a positive and measurable impact on those being served
- Submits a proposal from a collaborative or partnership
- Indicates a cost-effective operation
- Supports other organizations in the community
- Reflects cultural sensitivity and diversity
- Focuses on primary prevention of the problem
- Has a proven track record
- Establishes new, innovative programs
- Receives funding from other sources
- Has a previous relationship with the foundation
- The reputation of the organization is not too radical
- Has competent, professionally trained staff

In addition, the foundations revealed that two of the most common weaknesses in proposals are (a) not clearly identifying and substantiating a significant problem and (b) a lack of clarity as to how funds will be expended for project activities.

Proposal Scoring

No single approach is used for proposal scoring. Typically, government agencies use a weighting system when reviewing proposals, with various weights or points assigned to each section of the proposal. The review criteria and the weighting system are sometimes described in the agency's program announcements or application packets. Foundations and corporations identify their proposal evaluation criteria through funding announcements but are less likely to indicate the point values assigned to specific proposal sections.

In reviewing the proposal-scoring criteria used by public and private funders supporting human service programs, we found that they generally weighted the proposal sections in the following order:

1. Project approach, including goals, outcomes, and project activities
2. Needs/problem statement
3. Budget
4. Agency capability
5. Evaluation methods

Funders are looking for projects that are realistic, have measurable outcomes with a good chance for success, and are ambitious. It is always

attractive if the program reaches beyond known boundaries into unknown or untried arenas, which, if successful, will be a step into the future for the organization (and a nice feather in the cap of the funder).

Many times, one well-placed proposal has a greater possibility of being funded than one scattered indiscriminately to a variety of funders (also known as “shotgunning”). Foundation and corporate development consultants are in contact with one another and are aware of proposals that have been circulated in this manner.