

Death of a grant proposal: Six lessons learned in post-mortem

By Deborah Ward

[Grants and Funding](#)

Apr 1st, 2010

Please [Log in](#) to print the full article

[Email This Article](#)



Following certain steps can help grant seekers complete grant proposals.

As I write this column, I'm mourning the death of a grant proposal that, after many weeks of discussion and hard work, did not get submitted. I'm conducting a post-mortem examination to determine what went wrong, in hopes of identifying these potential red flags in the future before it's too late. I hope my analysis will help you recognize these warning signs, too, so you can get your proposal back on track before the deadline if you find yourself in a similar situation.

I've compiled a list of some of the biggest mistakes the project's collaborative partners made over the past five to six weeks, when we were meeting to develop the project and work on the proposal. I should explain that this was a large federal grant project we were working on, and I was not the lead grant writer on the proposal. Although we met weekly, there was little or no contact among partners outside of these meetings.

Here are the major mistakes that I believe led to the proposal's demise:

1. The lead grant writer did not create a master checklist of what was needed in the proposal, who was going to provide this information, and what the deadlines were for completing these tasks at the very outset of the process. Without such a checklist, we couldn't review our progress on an ongoing basis to make sure we were on track and that the necessary items were being given to the lead grant writer on time.
2. We spent far too much time discussing the project's goals and objectives, which took time away from discussing and making decisions about other key aspects of the project. Defining goals and objectives is certainly a critical part of the process; however, it's important to keep in mind that it's just one part of the process, and there are other sections of the proposal that are just as important to discuss. An appropriate

amount of time must be budgeted to discuss all aspects of a project during the proposal development phase.

3. We didn't start talking about the project's budget early enough in the process. In fact, we had not had a single budget conversation until just a week before the lead grant writer said she would submit the proposal. This project involved several collaborative partners and required the sharing of confidential budget information (such as wages and benefits), which should have begun as early as possible in the process.

4. There was no conversation about the sustainability of the grant project after funding runs out until just a week before the grant was to be submitted. Some funders don't require proposals to address sustainability, but this one did—and it required this to be addressed in a letter of support from the lead applicant. If sustainability is a required part of the proposal, it's a good idea to discuss this in advance, so you can include specific information in the proposal. If a project cannot be sustained with relative certainty after the funding period ends, it probably isn't a good idea to apply.

5. The lead grant writer saw her role as what I would call a "collector." This is a person who has no intention of actually writing parts of the proposal, but will wait for everyone else to write the various sections and send them along. Then, the collector jumps into action, assembles the application package, and submits it. However, there's a major flaw with this approach. People tend to write in very different styles, and when you have several people writing different sections of a proposal, you often end up with a proposal that is disjointed. As seasoned grant writers know, proposals should flow from one section to another, and it's critical to make sure that information is consistent throughout the document. What's more, some people are not good writers or they send along a bullet list as opposed to narrative, so there is often some writing that needs to be done to tie the proposal together.

6. Standard forms were not completed in advance. There are some forms that take relatively little time to complete, and I tend to get those out of the way early in the process. If I don't have all the information I need, I fill in what I do have so I can spend my final days leading up to the deadline focusing on the larger work that must be done.

The major lesson that I learned from this experience was that grant professionals need to function as leaders, facilitators, and—dare I say it—writers during the proposal development phase. Without the right combination of these three approaches, your proposal might die a slow death—and no one likes to see that happen.