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Twelve Characteristics of a Good Proposal

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Proposals come in all shapes, lengths, and sizes; as program officer, you can review them according to any number of criteria.

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some generic characteristics that are hallmarks of a good proposal that contains a good idea. Although it is unlikely that any proposal will include all twelve of these characteristics, better ones should contain more than half of them. These characteristics are listed here in particular order of priority.

1. The applicant's idea is innovative.

Because most foundations aspire to be explicitly in the business of funding innovations, this characteristic should be front and center. Depending on how the foundation defines innovative, the idea can range from something that has never been attempted anywhere before, to something that has been tried in only a few other places, to something that has been thoroughly piloted and now needs to be brought to wider scale. But whereas what an innovation *is* admits of many different interpretations, most foundations are agreed on what it is *not*: support for an organization's ongoing programs, or the "franchising" of a tried-and-true system. As mentioned earlier, if the proposal describes an idea that is just more of the same, then it cannot make the cut as innovative. A good proposal describes an idea that will solve problems in new ways and create new hope.

2. The applicant has expertise, but also an understanding of its weakness.

There are two types of applicants a foundation should not fund: know-nothings and know-it-alls. A foundation must rely on the expertise of its grantees – they must have the experience and the smarts to operate a successful project. At the same time, issues that applicants tackle are likely to be so complex that no one organization will have on staff all of the needed expertise. A good proposal describes an idea about which the applicant's staff are experienced and capable, but it also demonstrates that the staff recognize their own shortcomings and know how to get consulting help.

3. The applicant has done the needed homework.

There are always two kinds of homework that an applicant must do before writing a proposal: homework about the project and homework about the foundation to which the proposal will be

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submitted. The homework about the project is quite important: Has anyone else tried something similar? If so, what were the results? Are there any potential partners for this work? Are they interested in becoming partners? What other funders might support the project? All this information is necessary in order to place the request into a context. The homework regarding the foundation is less important, but still not trivial. Is the foundation interested in this topic? Has it funded similar projects in the past? Might the proposed project be improved by lessons from those past efforts? It is discouraging to receive proposals that make empty claims about their “uniqueness” yet were clearly written as generic requests sent on spec to many possible founders. A good proposal describes the context of the idea and directly relates the idea and its context to the foundation’s programming interests.

4. The applicant is doing the project with, not to, those it is trying to help.

If grantmakers have proved anything conclusively, it is that projects designed by “experts” work if – and only if – those experts have devised the projects with the advice and consent of the people whom the project is meant to help. Another way to state this is to ask whether the idea described in the project is being driven by demand welling up from the community or by plans being pushed down by elites. Over the years, the academy and the professions have grown ever more esoteric; they have become ever more remote from the people in general, and from the people whom foundations are most interested in helping, in particular. Many scholars and professionals have come to regard people largely as data to be studied or as problems to be solved, rather than as stakeholders to be consulted and as experts on their own lives, needs, and aspirations. Projects that work are partnerships among all of those who have a stake in the project’s success. That partnership should have begun before the proposal was conceived, and all the stakeholders should have a significant role in writing the proposal, responding to the program officer’s question about it, and managing the project once it is funded. A good proposal describes an idea that has been formed in full partnership between the applicant and the people the applicant is trying to help.

5. The applicant is other-centered, not self-centered.

Many proposals purport to benefit an external population but, curiously, request only those things that would directly benefit the organization doing the asking. For example, the title of the proposal may be something like “A Project to Facilitate the Positive Development of Migrant Youth,” but the text of the proposal hardly mentions migrant youth. Instead, it eloquently discusses the applying organization’s need for an upgraded computer system, new office furniture, a reliable van, and repairs to its headquarters building. Presumably the new equipment, furniture, vehicles, and capital investment would allow the staff to serve migrant youth more effectively, but because the proposal does not mention such service, perhaps not. An old but effective maxim states that applicants tend to write in the proposal about those things that matter most to them. In this example, what matters most is probably the computer, not the kids. A good proposal will describe an idea that clearly focuses on the audience that the organization purports to help- and mentions organizational concerns only in the context of serving the audience.

6. The applicant will invest its own money in the project.

This characteristic seems counterintuitive on first glance; after all, if the grantseeking organization had enough money to do the project, it would not need to ask a foundation for grants. On closer

examination, however, the logic is compelling. Money is obviously one of the most precious resources for any applicant organization. An applicant's willingness to invest a significant amount of that precious resource in the requested project bespeaks real commitment to the success of the project. Conversely, an applicant's unwillingness to invest suggests that the organization has no real attachment to the project and may be merely chasing grant dollars.

How much the applicant should invest depends very much on the size of the organization. A large and well-endowed institution, such as a university or a hospital, might be expected to commit to the project cash and in-kind resources of at least 50 percent of the amount requested from the foundation. A small and unendowed community-based organization, in contrast, might be doing well to commit 10 percent of the amount requested. A good proposal will describe an idea that includes a significant commitment of the grantseeking organization's own financial wherewithal to the idea's success.

7. The applicant is determined to do the project, no matter what.

Perhaps the most chilling words you can hear from a grantseeker are "If your foundation won't fund this, the project will die." This sentiment may be meant to flatter you with a sense of indispensability, but if it is literally true, then declining the request will be a salutary from euthanasia. Why is it, you might ask, when there are more than fifty-eight thousand other foundations in the United States, plus thousands of corporate giving programs that a no answer from this particular foundation will prove fatal? Leaders of successful projects invariably have a never-say-die attitude that will not allow them to consider a rebuff, or even multiple rebuffs, as a death sentence. The founder of a prominent curriculum-support organization endured 156 consecutive refusals by foundations to fund the proposal to establish his organization before he finally succeeded in getting a grant to do so. One foundation program officer notes, perhaps only half-facetiously, "I like to support people who would keep seeking funds if I turned them down; who if all else failed, would shake down kids for their lunch money." A good proposal describes an idea that the applicant is completely committed to seeking through to success.

8. The applicant has devised a comprehensive approach.

The twentieth century has been characterized by two important social trends moving in precisely opposite directions. The problems of people have been growing ever more complex and interconnected, while the scope of the academic disciplines and the professions has grown ever more narrowly differentiated. People have problems, goes the saying, but institutions have departments. The melancholy results are a number of proposals from very specialized perspectives that purport to solve multifaceted problems.

For example, young people leave school at an early age because of a complex web of issues, which for any individual may include such problems as poor nutrition, inadequate early education, nonexistent after-school options, unsafe neighborhoods, poorly funded schools, economic necessity, insufficient remedial opportunities, and teen parenthood. Obviously, these problems cross-disciplinary and professional lines and connect with each other in overlapping and interlocking ways. Yet proposals will arrive that claim to "solve" the problem solely by offering improved remedial opportunities. No matter how well remediated, young people who are hungry or pregnant or who fear for their lives in the schoolyard are still not going to finish school. The problem lies in the way in which specialized

training eradicates any sense of the bigger picture. As the old Hungarian proverb has it, “When your only tool is a hammer, all problems will look like nails.” A good proposal describes an idea that advances solutions that are at least as comprehensive as the problems they are trying to solve, or at minimum conveys an understanding of its part in a complex and comprehensive social context.

9. The applicant will work collaboratively with others who can help.

Precisely because social problems are so complex and cross so many disciplinary lines, it is unlikely that any one organization, operating in magnificent isolation, can solve such problems by itself. It will need to turn to consultants, of course, but it will also need to partner with other organizations that can bring needed skills to the table. Ideally, the partners can be true collaborators: sharing the funds, the leadership, and the credit for success. A good proposal will describe an idea that mobilizes many different players to meet the complex challenges posed by modern problems.

10. The applicant is willing to have an evaluator assess the project.

Both the grantmaker and the grantseeker need to learn from the successes and the failures of a project in order to improve their performance in the future. And both need to be able to demonstrate that their work produces tangible results in the real world. Neither is in a position to do this work itself, due to its obvious self-interest. Both need the services of an observer to study the project’s process and assess its outcomes at the end. Many grantseekers are reluctant to request evaluation, for fear that grantmakers will be unwilling to pay for it or that a critical report will doom their chances for future funding. You must reassure the grantseeker that the foundation is indeed willing to pay all reasonable costs for an evaluation and that the foundation will not automatically cease funding on receipt of a critical evaluation report. A good proposal will describe an idea that is openly evaluated by a knowledgeable observer.

11. The applicant will continue the project after foundation funding ceases.

One ancient piece of grantmaking wisdom holds that foundations should not fund any project or organization forever. After all, if a foundation’s budget is encumbered by multiple ongoing commitments to past grantees, it will lack the flexibility to respond to new opportunities. As a practical matter, though there are exceptions to every rule. On rare occasions, a foundation may wish to take on a “signature” project that it expects to support indefinitely. For instance, the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation of Kalamazoo, Michigan, provides ongoing support for the Irving S. Gilmore International Keyboard Festival. There is also no wisdom in arbitrarily setting deadlines for ceasing to fund a project. A few may need only a year or two of support to take root; many may require a decade or even more to demonstrate their value to others. It makes sense, therefore, to emphasize continuation from the beginning of a project. Other funders should be on board, or at least interested. (Another piece of received wisdom in the foundation field is to avoid funding anything in 100 percent: “to assist, but rarely or never to do all” was one of Andrew Carnegie’s rules [Hendrick, 1932].) The proposal should contain a plan for gradually weaning the applying organization from foundation support, and a blue print for securing funding from other sources. A good proposal will describe an idea that has multiple funders and a realistic plan to secure ongoing support for the project from a variety of sources.

12. The applicant’s project has the potential for broader impact.

A demonstration project, if done right, will have a positive impact on the small part of the world that it touches directly. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is highly desirable to expand the project's influence more broadly. Although successful pilot projects cannot be replicated like so many photocopies, it is possible, with careful execution, for a foundation to bring a project to scale by adapting it to other situations in other places. For instance, the Local Initiative Support Corporation, originally funded as a pilot program by the Ford Foundation, has now spread its residential and commercial development activities around the nation and has broadly diversified its funding base. It is also possible for the applicant- or the foundation – to use lessons learned in projects to affect the way that laws and regulations bearing on the subject are written or rewritten. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Kaiser Family Foundation, to take only two examples, have had great success in mobilizing lessons learned from their projects to encourage desirable reforms in national and state health policy. A good proposal describes an idea that, when implemented, could have broader than local impact, whether by bringing projects to scale or by working to effect changes in the policy arena.

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