Establishing Your Qualifications

This chapter discusses how to assure funders that your organization has the experience, the people, and the systems in place to successfully implement the plans and projects you propose.

Grant makers want assurances that if they fund a proposal, they can count on the recipient organizations to follow through on their promises. You can demonstrate evidence of your organization's capability and credibility in several different sections of your proposal, including organizational background (if funders ask for this section), project description, and qualifications. Wherever you put it, include sufficient detail to help the funder's reviewer or review panel understand your competitive advantage: the reason your organization, compared to others, is in an excellent position to tackle this problem.

Highlight Organizational Strengths

To highlight your organization's qualifications, include this information:

- ✦ how your organization's history, mission, and prior experience uniquely qualify it to address this problem for this project

- ✦ what staff, whether permanent, temporary, or consulting, are needed for the project; in what roles; and what relevant experience and professional backgrounds they have (If not all staff have yet been chosen, describe your planned selection process.)

- ✦ what services or activities, if any, will be subcontracted, why, and to whom (Include the criteria used to choose the subcontractors, or the process you will use to select those not yet identified.)

- ✦ what facilities and equipment will be needed for the project (include those already possessed by the organization together with your plans for securing the remainder.)

- ✦ what organizational relationships, for example, advisory bodies, collaborators, elected officials, vendors, or consortium members, will enhance the project

- ✦ what level of belief in the project's importance has been demonstrated by other community stakeholders, for example, other funders, contributors of in-kind goods or services, volunteers, and endorsers (Include proof of funding and letters of endorsement.)

- ✦ what internal systems are in place for administering the funds, once granted

- ✦ how unique or special administrative issues will be resolved, for example, decisions on copyright, patent, or ownership of items produced or purchased with grant funds

History and Accomplishments

Most funders like to know about an organization's history and track record. However, including some distinctions along with your history as a long track record does not necessarily make your organization qualified to manage the proposed project. Any of the following might be a useful distinction to include:

- ✦ **Origins:** Perhaps your organization emerged from a unique set of circumstances that make it distinct from others. Perhaps it grew out of an incident, such as a pipeline explosion, the cruel killing of an animal, or the death of a child to drunk driving or anorexia. Perhaps all the founders had family members with the same health or mental health challenge, or two nonprofits merged, or state legislation called for the organization's creation.

- ✦ **Experience:** Perhaps your organization has tried related projects in the past, whether successful or not, that taught you lessons about how to improve your efforts.

- ✦ **Support:** Perhaps you've received financial support from multiple types of sources, in-kind contributions of goods or services, or significant commitments of time or advice from volunteers or experts.

✦ **Partnerships:** Perhaps your organization has invested the time necessary to build cooperative relationships with other organizations, agencies, or community groups.

✦ **Reputation:** Perhaps your organization has gained the respect of certain colleagues and associates, lawmakers, or the media.

Leadership

The importance of your organization's leadership may vary from one funder to the next. Many funders want to see diverse representations of demographics in your leadership that look like a democracy—different skill sets and backgrounds to give a balanced decision outcome. Long-established funders may prefer to fund organizations with a solid history and long list of accomplishments, organizations run by long-time staff and supported by carefully built alliances. But newer foundations, especially those created or led by entrepreneurs, may be more impressed by a founder with a vision and a handful of well-placed board members. A giving circle may put more value on a nonprofit organization's governance model than its history, or may be more impressed by a board made up of those being served than by a board of wealthy civic leaders. Federal funders of research grants may want to know only who the principal investigator is. The more you know about the funder and the funder's values, the easier it will be to establish credibility in your proposal.

Some funders ask pointed questions about an organization's leaders. Questions might include the following:

✦ Have they crafted a long-range or strategic plan for the organization?

✦ Were they instrumental in determining that this project was an organizational priority?

✦ Are they aware that this funding request is being submitted?

✦ Does the board for a nonprofit reflect the community or constituency served by the organization?

✦ How often does the board meet, and what percentage of members attend those meetings?

✦ Are board members genuinely engaged in the organization's governance?

Most funders insist that for an organization to qualify for funding, every board member must be a financial contributor. Many funders have

realized that the questions they pose in their grant application forms or requests for proposal (RFPs) help drive organization's behavior. By requiring organizations to jump through certain hoops to receive support, these funders help grant-seeking organizations strengthen their infrastructure at both the organization and the project level. The effort you expend to adequately answer questions about leadership is likely to help make your organization more competitive and more qualified for funding from all types of supporters.

Personnel

Review the funder's instructions to see what information is requested about personnel. Usually, these instructions are fairly general. If so, the following specific Dos and Don'ts listed may help.

Dos

✦ Do include the title, responsibilities, and percentage of time assigned to the project for each type of staff person. Sometimes this information can best be displayed in a table or organization chart. Some funders may require that the demographics broken down as well.

✦ Do provide names and biographical sketches for all key staff. Proposals for large or complex projects or for research funding should include a full biography for the project director or principal investigator, including prior research and publications.

✦ Do tailor the biographies of key staff to emphasize experiences relevant to this project.

✦ Do briefly describe the selection process and criteria for key project positions that have not yet been filled.

✦ Do include ample justification for the use of consultants. Indicate the number of consultants and their responsibilities, and explain why these roles will not be filled through regular staff appointments. Include a background sketch for consultants who have already been identified.

✦ Do include, or be prepared to provide, letters agreeing to participation from any consultants or significant advisors mentioned by name in the proposal.

✦ Do mention the source of other compensation for key staff members who will not be assigned full time to the project. Funders are wary of projects headed by part-time staff whose other sources of support are unknown.

✦ Do give a brief overview of the organizational and management structure of the project.

✦ Do include a description of any advisory bodies and the roles of their members.

Don'ts

✦ Don't include the names of well-known experts in the field and indicate that "they will be asked to participate once the project is funded."

✦ Don't pad biographies by referring to a "manuscript in progress."

✦ Don't request salaries for project directors who, when added to their other sources of compensation, total more than 100 percent of their salaries, unless you make this clear and explain it in the proposal. Most federal agencies simply do not allow this. Federal agencies demand documentation of other sources of income for key project staff, and increasingly, private foundations and corporations are also asking for written income verification.

✦ Don't propose inflated salaries for upper-echelon staff. The IRS Form 990, which itemizes your organization's current salary levels, is public information, accessible online for funders to check.

Infrastructure

Funders check to see that your organization is structurally able to support the proposed work. Aspects that might distinguish a strong organization from a less competitive one include the following:

Policies and procedures: Funders look for organizations that are prepared for issues that emerge in the middle of a project. Strong organizations have created standard processes for resolving such issues or have defined criteria, standards, or best practices that will help. You can demonstrate organizational strength if your organization has determined in advance what the chain of command is in case of an emergency, including who will speak to the press if the project makes the news, or how the project will proceed in the event of a natural or human disaster such as fire, theft, or embezzlement of funds.

Accounting systems: Funders look favorably on organizations that can manage money well. Nonprofits new to grant seeking may be unprepared to account for grant funds separately from other funds, or may not have

data management systems sophisticated enough to track expenditures as precisely as a funder would wish. To strengthen your proposal, you can describe the capabilities of your current system, including the most recent upgrades.

Evaluation systems: You will be more competitive if you can prove that your proposed process for gathering statistical results has been agreed to by all parties who must participate, and that the proposed systems are feasible and cost-effective. Funders know that sometimes, especially among organizations, the people delivering the project's services may be reluctant to measure their work.

Communications systems: Funders appreciate knowing there is a written plan for disseminating (sharing) periodic reports, with anticipated dates, expected information, and methods for communicating (e.g., phone, mail, or email). Indicating where else your organization plans to share reports, such as to collaborators, other funders, elected officials, appropriate agencies, appropriate media, or professional associations, also shows forethought.

Prior work: One way to demonstrate capability to a funder is to show prior success. An organization that has curriculum developed or collaborators in place will be more appealing than one that's starting from scratch. If your organization is seeking grant money to expand a current program, show the funder how solid the current program is. If you seek support to expand your prevention education program from regional to national, let the funder know you've already developed materials and a geographic distribution map with contacts in your major markets.

> *With the emergence of several new, large private foundations in recent years, some nonprofits, lured by the promise of enormous grant awards, have discovered that they were structurally ill-equipped to absorb the large gifts they received. Trying to administer programs that suddenly tripled the size of their organizations resulted in unhealthy growth. They hired more staff than they could support with the current management, or didn't have systems in place to account for the money in a seamless way. When the grant funds ran out, they had to let go of staff, resulting in too much empty office space and the elimination of programs people had grown to count on.*

Organizations must have a firm foundation beneath them to sustain the culture shift that is likely to accompany a major new program or project. If your organization is stable, let the funder know.

Facilities and Equipment

Provide in your proposal an adequate description in your proposal of the facilities and major equipment needed for the project, identifying what your organization already has, and what it is requesting funds to purchase, rent, or renovate. Funders prefer to see that an organization is trying to build on existing facilities. Otherwise, the funder may have concerns about the time and cost that may be involved with arranging for the necessary facilities and equipment.

Other Assets

Whenever possible, emphasize in the qualifications section any unusual or outstanding facilities or equipment your organization already has, such as the following examples:

- ✦ particularly well-equipped laboratories
- ✦ a large number of, or specialized, types of computers
- ✦ a large library, or unusual materials collections
- ✦ sophisticated, or hard-to-secure, laboratory equipment
- ✦ outstanding materials production capabilities
- ✦ advisory or consultative services, for example, university-based evaluators or a survey research center
- ✦ ready access to other organizations with unusual capabilities
- ✦ research resources accessible to project staff

If facilities or equipment from other organizations are essential elements of the proposal, provide documentation that these will be made available. If any unusual facilities or equipment are to be used in the project, provide sufficient information to justify why they are being tried. Funders will want to know about equipment development and evaluation, and the alternatives if they are necessary to complete the project.

Address Weaknesses in Qualifications

Many proposals must find a way to demonstrate that the organization is capable and competitive while admitting to weaknesses in project design. Two common difficulties are addressed here.

Unfilled Project Leadership Positions

Most organizations must follow some type of open competition process when hiring staff for project positions, often in order to meet nondiscrimination and transparency requirements. This takes time. What to do if a funder's application requests that you enclose résumés for all project staff, when they haven't even been hired yet?

There are several ways that this problem has been handled by other grant seekers.

The following examples describe some options. However, remember to seek the advice of your human resources staff whenever you're planning a project that will involve hiring.

Example 1: You can name a project director or principal investigator from among those staff members in the organization who will be expected to have some responsibility for the funded project anyway. Most projects are designed with the expectation that a senior member of the organization's faculty or staff will provide informal supervision, even though this person's salary will not be charged to the project budget. You can avoid the problem of having to submit a proposal that includes none of the names or backgrounds of key project staff by formally recognizing this already-presumed responsibility in your proposal, or application, and include a percentage of the person's time in the salary requests. A second leadership position, such as a co-director, assistant director, or senior research or development associate, may be hired to share administrative duties once the funds are committed.

Example 2: An existing staff member can be designated as a temporary or acting project director. You can present that person as the one responsible for the project until staff are found who meet the qualifications listed in the proposal. In some cases, the funder may want to approve your organization's selection of permanent project director before the project continues past this initial phase. The person designated acting project director may, at a later point, move to another position within the project or may become designated as the person in the organization to whom the permanent project director will report. In either case, the résumé and experience of this existing staff member can be included in the proposal to demonstrate project staff capability.

Example 3: If you know whom you wish to hire, but you cannot hire this person until funds are released upon approval of your project, make sure

this is clearly specified in your proposal. Provide evidence that the individual in question is willing to accept the position if the funds are received. It is also acceptable to employ someone as a consultant while writing a proposal to make certain that they will be satisfied with the role and responsibilities once an award is made.

You can adapt these same approaches to filling project positions other than that of the director. It's a good idea, when possible however, to identify as many of the project staff as possible prior to submitting your proposal. Not only will the funder consider it a plus if your project will not be delayed by hiring procedures, but demonstrating the existing capability and the prior experience in the field that is already available to your organization is an important selling point.

Early Career Project Leaders

Some grant seekers know in advance that the project director's age, status in the organization, or lack of prior project management experience may place a proposal at a disadvantage. What can be done to increase your project's competitiveness in this case?

Again, there are several ways that this has been handled by others. Before implementing any of the ideas that follow, check with key leaders in your organization to confirm that the idea is legal and applicable to your situation.

Example 1: Submit your proposal to a funder that limits its awards to junior faculty members or beginning professionals. Some federal agencies and private foundations have "small grants" or "young investigators" programs explicitly designed for those who are not yet ready to apply for funds in direct competition with more experienced grant seekers.

Example 2: Send your proposal to funders that are more interested in the quality of the idea and the proposal than in the prior reputation of project staff. All funders want some assurance that the people doing the project are capable of doing what is proposed. But some funders are more likely than others to base their judgments more on personal impressions of the quality of the director and the proposal than on the extent and success of prior activities.

Example 3: Ask an experienced colleague to serve as project director or principal investigator, and ask the initiator of the project idea to take a

less senior position. This is a time-honored approach used particularly in research proposals originated by junior faculty members. And it is an accepted practice as long as the person designated as project director has agreed to participate, is willing to assume the administrative and legal responsibilities, will actually play the role described in the proposal, and is not overburdened with other assignments. A variation on this approach is to have the more experienced person serve as co-director or co-investigator.

Example 4: Have a more experienced person serve as an active consultant to the project. Again, as long as the person named truly intends to play this role, most funders are willing to accept this practice.

Example 5: For beginning investigators with research proposals, include a brief biographical sketch of those who serve or served on your doctoral committee or supervised your postdoctoral research. Funders can judge the likely capability of a new investigator in part by the quality of his or her mentors. This same approach can be used by early career applicants in other fields who have previous experience working under someone well known in the profession.

Summary

Present your organizational capability as if it were a résumé for the job that the grant maker would, in essence, be hiring your organization to do by funding you. Illustrate clear alignment between the grant maker's interests and your organization's skills, capacity, track record, and experience with the proposed work. Present clearly, honestly, and confidently you and your organization's ability to solve the problem identified in your need statement.