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5 Steps to Take When Your Grant Proposal Fails

By Tobi Printz-Platnick

During my first week at the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the executive director put a file on my desk and said, “This group is going to be declined this round.”

The organization had received funding several times — sporadically — and she knew the head of the organization would be upset by the news. As a courtesy, she wanted me to phone him to tell him. After sharing a few details about the group and its work, she left me alone to make the call.

I dialed the number, introduced myself, and delivered the message. He started to scream at me. He told me I clearly did not know what I was talking about, who I was dealing with, or what this would mean to his staff or the people they served. I apologized profusely and tried to share some feedback before ending the call. I managed to put the receiver back in the cradle before breaking down in tears.

I asked my boss why she had given me such a task; I had only been on the job a few days! She apologized but stressed the need for me to understand that philanthropy is not just about the happy moments when people get checks in the mail. Sadly, we have to say “no” as much as we get to say “yes.” The measure of the foundation’s success, she said, is determined in part by how we treat, and are viewed by, the organizations that do *not* receive award letters and grants.

As an aside, my beloved former boss and mentor trained us program officers with a “tough love” approach. While that might have been

unorthodox, I credit her tutelage, compassion, wisdom, keen analytical skills, and obsession with details for making me the grant maker I am today.

The Cafritz Foundation has a longstanding practice of responding to organizations that do not receive grants and subsequently request feedback. Every grant maker—public or private, corporation or foundation—has its own rules for communicating with groups that do not receive grants. The message can take many forms: a brief email; an official-sounding voice mail; the dreaded "skinny envelope." In any form, news of a rejected proposal is upsetting, to say the least. However, the reason behind the rejection may be simple, complex, or somewhere in between. It pays to find out why your proposal did not make the cut. Here are a few tips for how to react when your proposal fails.

- **Remember: What you don't know *can* hurt you.** If you do not reach out to a grant maker, you will never know why your proposal was declined. Sometimes the explanation is as basic as "it doesn't fit with our current priorities." Other times, there are questions about the proposal itself, the budget, leadership, or myriad other things. Whatever the reason, the best advice I can provide is that you will benefit the most if you *look at the feedback as a learning experience.*

- **Contact the foundation; ask for feedback.** I have many grantees that, over the years, applied numerous times unsuccessfully. One organization applied five years in a row without getting a grant. Each time the executive director/founder called, seeking feedback. In those first conversations, when the organization was very young, a lot of the discussion revolved around governance and infrastructure. As time passed, and additional rejections were received, our talks focused more on programming. I shared with her best practices used by similar organizations, including key data points that she and her team could be tracking.

I do not imagine that this executive director was looking forward to talking to me the first time she called me. As a former development officer myself, I received rejection letters. I never contacted any of those grant makers to seek feedback. I licked my wounds and moved on to another foundation. Looking back, I am embarrassed by my lack of follow-through.

- **If you can make changes, report back informally**. The proposal debriefs with the above organization were not the only times I heard

from this executive director. She would call a few months after these conversations and tell me what she had learned, or how some of my suggestions had played out. Many of my ideas bore fruit; others did not. Yet this executive director stayed in touch. And, without question, each year, as the organization evolved, the funding requests got stronger and stronger.

After six years, the organization was ready for a grant. I called the executive director and excitedly told her I wanted to arrange a site visit. When we finally met face to face, we both agreed it felt like seeing a pen pal for the first time.

- **Tap into program offciers' knowledge of the nonprofit sector**. Foundation program officers are most likely interested in the cause you support. Chances are also good that they know some of the organizational partners you work with. Since they are not currently supporting your work, they can be objective in explaining what worked in your submission and what did not.

- **Be courteous.** In closing, and this probably sounds obvious, when you make that phone call, be nice to the person on the other end of the line. Program officers want to *help you make your best case*. Our job is to present your organization to the board of directors, to answer questions, and to inform their decisions. So please, be professional in your approach. Do not cry, curse, heckle, scream at, or be rude to us. We want to have productive interactions with our applicants and grantees.

  Remember: Don't shoot the messenger. Help us have an honest and useful conversation with you.

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