

High Performance Proposals

Five Components to Move from Ordinary to Extraordinary

Executive Summary

Although grant applications are often viewed as dry and formulaic, the application is actually your best opportunity to separate yourself from the other applicants vying for the same pool of grant funds. It is your chance to distinguish your proposed project as the best means of accomplishing the funding agency's goals. This publication outlines five components of a high performance proposal that will place you above other applicants.

Five High Performance Characteristics

The purpose of a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) is to provide guidelines on what to include in a grant proposal. Your application in response to a NOFA, however, is not just a mechanical statement of the facts of your project; it is your opportunity to shine and market your organization in a manner that will separate your project from the dozens or perhaps hundreds of other applicants that are responding to the same NOFA. Building on the effective grant application basics, proposals that are consistently successful typically have “high performance programming” characteristics. This means that the project has significant and measurable impact, is capable of “going to scale,” serves to grow the capacity of the organization being funded, is part of a sustainable program, and is cost-effective. Each of these aspects of high performance programming should be demonstrated in your project proposal and be readily apparent to the reviewer.

Five Components of High Performance Proposals

1. Impact
2. Scalability
3. Capacity building
4. Sustainability
5. Cost-effectiveness

As you develop your proposal, you have many opportunities to highlight high performance elements. Figure 1 below identifies where you can expect to apply the concept of high performance elements within a typical proposal.

Impact

Impact is the ability of a project to or program to achieve results or solve a problem. Demonstrating impact within a proposal can be illustrated through a number of aspects—

changed behavior, adoption of new policies, and/or improvement or increased efficiency. This can be illustrated within the identified need, program description, and/or monitoring and evaluation application elements. Funding agencies want to support projects that will have the broadest impact. This influence may be within a specific demographic, area of the community, or across the region. If a project can work only under very specific circumstances in a very limited area, then the idea may not be a prime candidate for funding. Ideally, of course, the project would have the power to change public policy and transform

Figure 1: High Performance Components of Proposal Development	
Typical Proposal Element	High Performance Elements
Need	Impact
Program Description	Scale, Impact, Capacity Building
Monitoring/Evaluation	Impact, Capacity Building
Budget	Sustainability, Cost-Effectiveness

major systems. At the very least, the project should have the potential to be duplicated in more than one place and for more than a few people. Impact can be illustrated through the use of quantitative and/or qualitative data such as statistics, polls, or surveys. Anecdotal information such as a news story can also support your claim of community need and your proposal to address this issue and generate results.

In the proposal stage, you are hypothesizing (based upon past performance or model programs) that by conducting certain activities, specific results will occur immediately, intermediately, and/or over the long-term. For instance, within the evaluation component of the proposal, the application may specify that as a result of conducting certain youth tobacco prevention workshops, it is expected that the target individuals and groups will experience changes in their knowledge about and commitment to adopt effective personal practices or participate in youth prevention activities. In turn, these short-term outcomes link to medium-term changes, including an increased number of effective programs adopted and increased participation in tobacco prevention programs by youth. These outcomes, in turn, link to the desired ultimate goals of a change in social norms, delayed average age of first use, and reduced initiation that leads to reduced morbidity and mortality and reduced health disparities. In other words, a behavioral change will allow the ultimate realization of broad, long-range goals.

Scalability

Within the program description, a proposal should clearly outline how the project can “go to scale.” Scalability represents the capacity of a project to reach a significant level of impact commensurate with the scope of the problem or opportunity being addressed. The proposed project should identify a clear roadmap for how goals will be accomplished and to what extent. An effective proposal describes a program for change, not a list of wants. The proposal must have a detailed plan that delineates a scale pathway of where you are going and exactly how you will get there. Demonstrate the scalability of your project by considering the following:

- The steps your project will take to reach scale
- Analogous scale-ups that have occurred in similar areas/projects
- Your scale indicators
- Evidence that could be cited to show availability of resources for going to scale

Capacity Building

Grant opportunities are shifting away from traditional programming and placing more emphasis on collaboration and regionalization to address public needs and get results. For a prospective award recipient, building capacity through partnerships must begin well before the grant proposal is due. To truly build effective partnerships that endure, organizations must cultivate strong relationships by working together on an ongoing basis to share ideas and

approaches to problems. Possible collaborators include any combination of cities, counties, state or federal governments, school districts, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and faith-based groups. Innovative partnerships get noticed. Within your proposal, it is critical to clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of each partner. When allowable, use tables and charts as appropriate to identify the

Partnership Innovation

Loudoun County received a \$160,000 grant from the state of Virginia to expand community services for children in or at risk of residential care. The grant is used for start-up funding to implement a “wraparound” initiative to serve the needs of youth and families.

“Wraparound” is an innovative approach to case management. It involves a collaborative community-based interagency team approach, which includes the child and family as well as community agencies, community services, and other resources working together to develop, implement, and evaluate an individualized service plan.

occasionally complex relationships. The purpose of building capacity through collaborations is not only to share resources, but also to generate results.

Sustainability

In addition to illustrating how your proposal will have the broadest impact with a clearly delineated scale pathway, the proposal should also identify plans for next steps once the funding ceases. Long-range funding strategies must be planned from the start. Funding agencies want to know that this is not a singular event. Once the original project period is complete, what are the plans for continuing to provide services? Sustainable institutions are characterized by the intrinsic qualities of organizational vision, institutional capacity, demand for services, and increased local institutional support. Sustainability may be illustrated through policy and/or organization reform, self-sufficient or surplus revenue generation, availability of investment capital, or partnership expansion. The bottom line is that if the project is funded, future activities should grow out of the initial success. To illustrate the sustainable qualities of your project, make sure to communicate answers to the following questions:

- What level of financial and other resources will be needed to continue?
- What capacity-building measures are needed to make this initiative sustainable, and how will those measures be implemented?
- What are the most likely sources of future funding?

Cost-Effectiveness

Not all grant programs require a formal demonstration of cost-effectiveness. However, winning proposals should always demonstrate an ability to achieve impact with a reasonable investment. For instance, FEMA uses the Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) as the method by which the future benefits of a mitigation project are determined and compared to its cost. The end result is a Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) that is derived from a project's total net benefits divided by its total cost. The BCR is a numerical expression of the cost-effectiveness of a project. BCRs of 1.0 or greater have more benefits than costs and are therefore cost-effective. At its most basic level, benefit-cost analysis determines whether the cost of investing in a disaster or hazard mitigation project today (the "cost") will result in sufficiently reduced damages in the future (the "benefits") to justify spending money on the project. If the benefit is greater than the cost, then the project is cost-effective; if the benefit is less than the cost, then the project is not cost-effective. Although your targeted funding opportunity may not require such a formal demonstration of cost-effectiveness, you should always provide a strong indication that the funding agency is making a financially worthwhile investment.

By incorporating elements of high performance in a proposal, an application goes from ordinary to extraordinary. Emphasizing impact, scale, capacity building, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness will separate your proposal apart from other applications. Learning to construct your proposals in this manner will have a significant impact on your funding success.

Keywords:

sustainability, sustainable, successful proposal, scalability, scale, capacity building, need, impact, cost-effectiveness, cost effective, target population, replicability, replicable, model program, past performance, scope, roadmap, scale indicator, collaboration, regionalization, partner, partnership, funding strategy, cost-benefit ration, grant development, proposal development