

# Step 1

## Developing the Proposal Idea

NOW THAT AN INTRODUCTION to the process of preparing a proposal has been given, let's take that first step! This section of the workbook walks grantseekers through developing the proposal idea by answering some key questions. Before beginning to write a proposal to secure funds to address an unmet need, grantseekers must first determine which programs in the organization are the most "fundable." That is, which programs are most likely to garner the most interest from grantmakers?

Many funders have a fairly strong preference for investing in new programs and successful continuing programs that are expanding over general operating support or basic program continuation. Again, be sure to do a thorough job of researching prospective funders so that there is a sense of clarity specific to the audience with which the organization has to work. Funders might also have an interest in a special project, such as a new time-specific project, a capacity-building idea, a set of technology improvements, or technical assistance. This workbook uses the idea of expanding a successful pilot program as the model for developing a proposal.

To start developing a proposal idea, begin with the end in mind. The organization has identified an unmet need, or wants to expand on a program already in existence that is successfully meeting an unmet need. So sit down with everyone involved to begin to flesh out this program idea—how an organization is going to meet, or grow the existing program to continue meeting, that unmet need it has identified. Use a team approach in developing the plan and involve the appropriate staff, clients, and volunteers *from the very beginning*. The team can develop an initial program plan first or expansion plan, which then will become the basis of the entire proposal.

The importance of having the right people at the table when the program plan is developed cannot be emphasized enough. One of the worst things

### Helpful Hint

*General operating support.* While still not as available as is needed in the nonprofit arena, there is a growing movement on the part of some funders to invest in general operating support. Be diligent in the research phase of grantseeking to uncover those funders receptive to receiving a general operating proposal.

that can happen to a nonprofit is to be funded for a program that it then discovers it does not have the ability to successfully implement or, worse yet, a program that does not effectively meet the needs initially identified because it was developed in a vacuum—or in the development director's office—rather than with the individuals who will be responsible for implementing it.

When preparing a proposal, many writers start with the planning sections (problem statement, goals and objectives, methods, evaluation, program sustainability, and budget) because these sections form the core of the proposal. Then they write the organization background section, finishing with the summary and the cover letter. This workbook follows that format, which is easily adaptable to online proposal submissions as well.

The planning sections of the proposal deserve careful attention; without a clearly articulated program plan, it is nearly impossible to get funding. Writing a clear, goal-oriented, thoughtful proposal is crucial. If a grantseeker can't clearly and effectively explain what they're doing, why they're doing it, and how they're going to do it in a way that is easily understandable, staff at grantmaking institutions will not have what they need to advocate on the organization's behalf.

A guideline here is that nonprofits should expect to focus approximately 70 percent of their time on program planning; the other 30 percent can be dedicated to writing and packaging the proposal. Also, the tighter an organization's program plan, the easier the proposal will be to write. Go into this process knowing that even with all of the planning, fine-tuning of the plan will be necessary as the proposal is being developed—this is common practice.

## Logic Models in Program Design

What exactly is a logic model? A logic model is a valuable tool that produces a basic program picture that shows how the organization's program is intended to work. The tool also helps organizations outline the sequence of related events in their programs. These events provide a direct and visual connection between the need for the planned program and the desired results and outcomes expected from the program. A logic model can be particularly useful when it comes to designing the evaluation for a new program. More information on logic models, including examples and online tools, can be found on the website, including actual logic model building portals.

## Reality Check

*Check the fit.* When conducting prospect research, grantseekers are bound to come across many wonderful opportunities presented by grantmakers—special initiatives and pots of funding for specific programs and projects within defined fields of interest. And even though they might sound exciting and worthwhile, always measure every funding opportunity by the organization’s mission. Is there really a fit—a natural fit? Or is the organization “growing another foot” to fit the “shoe” the funder has to offer? Always, always use the organization’s mission and organizational purpose as the primary guide.

To get started on developing a compelling proposal idea, complete Worksheet 1.1. The more thorough the answers, the more helpful the worksheet will be. After answering the questions in Worksheet 1.1, use those answers to identify one specific idea to develop using the exercises in this book. To check the merit of the idea identified, ask the Proposal Development Review Questions at the end of this step. Then follow Steps Two through Twelve to create a well-planned proposal. Throughout these steps, this workbook will refer grantseekers to the accompanying website for worksheet examples and templates.

On the  
Web**WORKSHEET 1.1:  
Proposal Idea Questionnaire**

1. What new projects is your organization planning for the next two to three years?

Project A:

Project B:

Project C:

Project D:

2. Which of these projects are most compatible with your organization's current mission and purpose, and in what way?

Project	Compatibility
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A

B

C

D

3. What is unique about your organization's project?

Project	Uniqueness
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A

B

C

D

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## WORKSHEET 1.1: Proposal Idea Questionnaire (Continued)

On the  
Web

4. What other organizations are doing this project? Is there duplication of effort? Is there potential for collaboration?

Duplicate Project  
(with whom)

Possible Collaboration Project  
(with whom)

A

B

C

D

5. What community need does each of your organization's projects address?

Project

Need Addressed

A

B

C

D

6. What members of your community—including civic leaders, political figures, the media, your organization's clients or constituents, and other nonprofits—support each project?

Project

Supporters

A

B

C

D

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## WORKSHEET 1.1: Proposal Idea Questionnaire (Continued)

7. Does your organization currently have the expertise to undertake each project? If new staff is necessary, can the organization manage growth in infrastructure (HR, technology, supervisory oversight, and so forth) effectively? (Check each category that applies to each project.)

Project	Expertise	HR	Technology	Other (specify)
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A

B

C

D

8. Is there internal (board and staff) support for the project? External support (community leaders, clients, neighbors, and so forth)? (Check the category that applies to each project and specify the type of support.)

Project	Internal Support (specify)	External Support (specify)
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A

B

C

D

## Proposal Development Review Questions

To find out whether the proposal idea being presented has merit, answer the following six questions:

1. What community need does the program or service that the organization has identified address? (The answer to this question will become the framework for the proposal's need statement.)
2. What would an improved community situation look like? (This answer will become the basis of the proposal's goals and objectives.)
3. What can the organization do to improve this situation? (This answer will become the basis of the proposal's methods.)
4. How will the organization know if its program or service has succeeded? (This answer will become the basis of the proposal's program evaluation.)
5. How much will the organization's program or service cost, and what other sources of funding will it have? (This answer will become the basis of the proposal's program budget.)
6. How will the organization's program or service be funded in the future? (This answer will become the basis of the proposal's program sustainability.)

Now that the organization's proposal idea is successfully identified and framed, let's move on to Step Two, which addresses a critical part of winning grants: developing relationships with funders.

