

Contributions

The "How-to" Source for Nonprofit Professionals

E-Mail your questions
and comments to
Contrib@ziplink.net



Grant Smarts

Viagra for grant seekers: how to survive the power imbalance

By Susan L. Golden

November • December 1998
Vol. 12 - No. 6

Anyone who's ever sought a grant knows that the relationship between a grant-maker and a grant-seeker is skewed in terms of the distribution of power: all of the power resides on the side of the grant-maker. Impotence is frustrating, to put it mildly, and grant-seekers face the challenge of developing appropriate responses which are positive alternatives to kicking the dog, yelling at the kids, or driving with "road rage."

This power imbalance rears its head instantly—as grant-makers dictate whether, when, and under what circumstances they will meet with you...which can often translate into hours of wasted effort on your part.

As a grant-seeker, you often don't know if it's worthwhile to invest the time and resources preparing a formal proposal, and may wish to discuss this prior to starting the process. But such a discussion may elude you, as the grant-maker has total discretion over whether she's willing to meet with you prior to receiving a formal request. Similarly, once you submit your proposal, you may wish to discuss complex issues in your project face-to-face, in order to answer questions promptly and clarify any difficult issues. But, again, grantmakers can deny you the opportunity to have such a meeting.

As for site visits and their timing, these too are dictated by the grantmaker. Following Murphy's Law, when you're most eager for a grantmaker to come out to see

your project in action, she's not interested, available, or willing. Likewise, when you would just as soon she didn't come, she usually invites herself, and often at a time inconvenient for you.

Grant-makers not only dictate the time and place of all meetings, they also have total license as to who will participate in meetings. For instance, recently I was struck by the painful consequences of the power imbalance when a grant-maker from one foundation invited a colleague from another foundation to sit in on a meeting without even telling the grant-seeker in advance about the addition!

Having submitted requests for different projects to the two foundations, this surprise addition made the discussion difficult. And, unlike the situation in a relationship between parties of equal power, the grant-seeker had no recourse, nor could he even express his displeasure, without risking disaffection on the part of one or both of the program officers, the professional staff people who represent grant-makers.

Notwithstanding their protestations to the contrary, many program officers are truly power brokers. In fact, most program officers have a high level of authority in grant-making decisions, even to the point where they can decline a request without ever showing it to the foundation's lay leadership. But beyond their function of "gatekeeper" is the more complex role of advocate, whereby program staff can present your case in

a way that results in a grant award, or a decision to decline your request.

Even in foundations where program staff function in a role that is more administrative, the program officer or administrative assistant is someone "inside" the foundation, someone who is, by virtue of their position, trusted by the foundation's leaders, and thus can help or hurt your appeal.

When program staff is comprised of people recognized for their knowledge, expertise and experience, members of the foundation board or oversight committee often develop such a high level of confidence in them that as far as the grant-seeker is concerned, the Board or committee seems to act merely as a "rubber stamp" for staff recommendations.

In fact, if you are dealing with a program officer who is well regarded and has a high level of authority, you should be wary if she mentions that the members of the Board or Oversight Committee will be making the decision about whether to fund your request. In this situation, such a comment usually constitutes a subtle signal that the program officer has already decided to recommend declining your request, but she is reluctant to tell you the bad news directly.

As in many negotiations between people where the distribution of power is uneven, it is not wise for the impotent party to rail at the imbalance, or to try to wrest power overtly from the person in the "catbird seat."

So what is a frustrated grant-seeker to do? If revolution or other overt action won't work, the best way to win on this particularly uneven playing field is through patience, perseverance, forbearance and clear thinking. Here are five strategies which can help you overcome the impotence you experience as a grant-seeker:

1) Education

The first strategy—and by far the best—is education, but this approach requires you to take the long view.

If you invite a new grant-maker out to your campus, to see the need "up close and personal," he may decline, and insist on meeting in his office. However, if you accede to his wishes today, and invite him again six months hence, and perhaps again in another six months, eventually he may accept, and then be able to witness your situation for himself.

Or let's say a grant-maker just isn't "buying" the need for a service you propose. While your request will be declined this quarter, don't give up. Continue to send him information about your program, newsletters, news releases, and progress updates, and eventually, you may be able to raise his awareness about the importance of your work.

2) Seeking a higher authority

If you can forecast that a particular program officer will probably not be enthusiastic about

Continued overleaf

Susan L. Golden, Ph.D., CFRE is the author of *Secrets of Successful Grantsmanship: A Guerrilla Guide to Raising Money*, published by Jossey-Bass. Dr. Golden is a Cleveland-based consultant who works with organizations in grant seeking and capital campaigns. She may be reached at (216) 464-9700.

Viagra for grant seekers

(Continued)

your appeal, or if you have discerned in advance that he'll not be receptive to your approach, you may wish to try a different route. If you have a trustee or volunteer who is herself a powerful person in your community, you might recruit her to approach the executive director of the foundation on your behalf. If your volunteer is, say, one of the largest employers in your town, it may be politically unwise for the foundation director to refuse her a favor.

This approach, of course, constitutes going over the program officer's head and is thus somewhat risky, insofar as the program officer will doubtless resent it. Such a power play might rebound in future dealings with the foundation where the program officer's alienation could affect your progress.

Nonetheless, if you can get the foundation's executive director to advocate the foundation's support for your project, you will be spared the necessity of futilely arguing the merits of the case with the program officer, and you will get the support you need for the project currently under discussion.

3) Manipulation

Whether your model is Scheherazade or Niccolo Machiavelli, manipulating the situation

is a time-honored approach to gaining power indirectly.

Grant-seekers who successfully practice manipulation bring the grant-maker to believe that their idea has become his idea. To do this requires subtlety, and usually patience, but it is highly effective. Some grant-seekers use an intermediary, a business or social friend of the grant-maker, to plant the seed, and then wait for the idea to blossom.

4) Just move on

Sometimes a grant is more than just money. Some grants bring with them a cachet which is far more valuable than the actual dollars involved. For instance, a grant from a prominent national foundation, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, may convey a message about the perceived excellence and sophistication of your organization.

On a local level, a grant from a community foundation whose staff are well respected for their expertise, may serve as an imprimatur that your organization is well-managed and your services effective. If you are seeking a grant from such an established grant-maker, you may feel that a positive response from that philanthropic leader will leverage your efforts, and encourage other funders to follow suit. While this

is a sound strategy, sometimes—despite your very best efforts, despite your perseverance and persistence—the grant-maker in question just can't be convinced of the merit of your request.

If your approach to such a power broker is met with a repeated lack of enthusiasm, just move on. No one funder holds the key to your success or failure. Life is short; you can't win them all.

5) "OK, I'll do it myself!"

Years ago, as feminists took up screwdrivers and pliers, some women discovered that home repairs are often simpler to do oneself rather than going through the effort of cajoling a spouse or male friend.

If your organization has the capacity to generate more earned income, you may wish to concentrate on expanding your earned income-generating activities to replace some of the grant-seeking (or groveling, as it can become).

While you need to be mindful of the legal limitations required to maintain your tax exempt status, the law permits a much heftier percentage of your revenues coming from earned income than most people can reasonably expect to achieve. Often a creative, entrepreneurial approach will not only raise

funds, but will generate friends and fans as well.

•••••

The power imbalance is often frustrating, but it shouldn't be viewed as a frustration that is peculiar to grant-seeking, or even to the nonprofit sector. Indeed, as one looks at any business endeavor, or even any personal relationship, the person with the money or other scarce resource is always in the more powerful position, and the person who is "selling," or the person who needs what the other has, must always dance to the other's tune.

This reality is inescapable. And while complaining to others who lack power may make you feel better momentarily, the most useful thing you can do is to figure out a strategy which will eventually shift some of the power in your direction.

None of the strategies I outline here is perfect, nor are they guaranteed to overcome the response of a program officer who is thoroughly negative about either your project or your organization. That said, there may be additional strategies you have developed which are better than the ones I've described here, and I would welcome your letting me know about them, so I can share them in future columns.