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Grant Getting: A Different Sort of Art

by Graham Kelsey

“Oh, yes, of course we applied for a grant, but we didn’t get it. I guess they didn’t like our application.”

Two sentences like these are often heard in the world of non-profit societies. Variations on the second of the two sentences are also common: “I guess we were unlucky with who was on the selection committee”, or “They said we didn’t fit their criteria”, or “You have to know someone”. However, one variation on the second sentence that is rarely, if ever, heard is “We put in a poor application”.

From time to time over three decades I have served on a variety of juries and selection and advisory committees. The most recent, [last] year, was an Arts Now advisory committee. In many ways, work on that committee was like work on the others: over two days we discussed hundreds of pages of applications, admired a lot of the initiatives that were being proposed, agonized over our limited funds,

and recommended a lot of grants. We also metaphorically wept at seeing potentially good ideas fail to win awards because their applications were, to put it bluntly, poorly done.

Generalising about such poorly done applications is difficult, but what they seem to have in common is that their authors fail to do themselves or their projects justice. I want to point to three ways in which this happens, all of which are linked by one common factor, namely *they focus on what the applicant needs, not on what the granting organization needs*. I will come back to this point later, but first I want to describe the three kinds of failure. They are (1) a failure to speak to the grantor’s guidelines, (2) a failure to describe the proposed project, (3) a failure to provide the right technical details.

Failing to speak to the grantor’s guidelines

All grant programs publish guidelines. Not to observe them is to guarantee failure. At the simplest level one shouldn’t apply for funding for something that the

grantor specifically excludes. The Carthy Foundation, for example, which at one time supported the arts, now clearly specifies that it will make grants in only two categories, Youth, Education and Development and Sustainable Environmental Development. You will waste your own and everyone else’s time if you apply to them to fund an arts festival.

Other grantors cast their guidelines in terms that are general enough to suggest that you might be able to describe your project in ways that meet them. BC Hydro’s website, for example, clearly states that under its outreach program the company will make donations in the areas of environment, education, and community investment and that in each of these areas preference will be given to applications that meet five named criteria. Before you conclude that your proposed community “paint-in” is excluded, you might wonder what is meant by “community investment” A one-time only “paint-in” for your community might not cut it, but if there are ways in which your proposed “paint-in” might be an

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investment for further development (community, educational or environmental) your request might not be automatically rejected.

Key to getting past the first hurdle in examples like the BC Hydro one, is writing up your project in a way which speaks to the guidelines. If you genuinely consider that a one-time event is being thought of as a catalyst for longer term community enhancement, (i.e., as a community investment), then you will need to describe the project that way.

Failing to describe the project

It seems strange that one could fail to describe the project which, after all, is the *raison d'être* for the application. Nonetheless, one important reason for failure is that the way the project is described is inadequate. It doesn't fully make sense to the members of the adjudicating committee.

There seem to be two main ways in which project descriptions can be inadequate. Either they fail to make clear how the project fits the grantor's criteria, or they fail to show why the project is worth doing. The BC Arts Council, for example, has a program that provides funding to festivals. One of the criteria for funding is that the festival has to show some coherent overall theme. For the person who has conceived of the festival, the overall theme may be vague. Even thinking about it is often overshadowed by the preoccupation with getting this star turn or that stellar performer. When this happens, the festival becomes defined by its glitter, and the coherent overall theme (which may not have been too clearly thought through in the first place) gets

neglected in the way the festival is written up.

As to why the project is worth doing, "Well", says the writer of the proposal, "isn't it self evident? Why would anyone even question it?" The answer is that it may be self evident in Burns Lake or in 100 Mile House, but it is far from self evident to adjudicators from Nanaimo or Surrey or North Vancouver, or even Prince George. These people do not know your context. Most project descriptions tend to focus on *what* is to be done and *how* it will be achieved. Those are essential ingredients, but fundamental to an understanding of the project is an explanation of *why* it is worth doing.

Fully describing why is almost certainly going to involve some explanation of the local context, of how the project contributes to that context, and in what ways the contribution will be a catalyst for new things or provide some kind of lasting benefit. Only with such explanations can the adjudicator from Surrey grasp the significance of the project in Burns Lake.

In the case of the Legacies Now programs, the word "legacies" is not there by chance. If your project can't convincingly show a lasting sustainable benefit, it is unlikely to be funded from those programs. Moreover, as demands for funds increase, grantors are less likely than they once were to take your word for it that you'll know when the project is successful. At least two corporations whose donation application forms I have recently examined ask plainly, "How will your project be evaluated?" Clearly, without some well thought out evaluation scheme, it is unlikely to be funded.



The inadequacy of a project description is often not even noticed by the writer of the proposal. He or she has often been incubating the idea for a long time and every detail and nuance seems clear to them. Writers of successful applications are those who get one or two people to review drafts of their applications carefully and critically—and they don't get upset when reviewers say they don't understand this or that; they take heed of the criticisms and make changes before they submit the application.

Failing to provide the right technical details

It is surprising how often members of an adjudication panel will say things like, “Why aren't they projecting any municipal contribution?” or “I don't understand why they aren't projecting any earned revenue,” or “Is that \$20,000 a restricted reserve?” or “How do they arrive at only \$7,000 for artists fees?” or “That federal program has finished, so do they have that Heritage grant or don't they?” In the best of these cases, the grantor's staff member will have the answer and adjudicators are reluctantly satisfied (but still feel that they shouldn't have had to ask in the first place). In too many cases, however, the staff member doesn't have the answer, or will have to say something like, “Well, I did ask them that, but they haven't got back to me” or “They call it a restricted reserve, but by our definition it really isn't”.

As is apparent from these examples, most questions about technical details are concerned with financial matters or project budgets. In some cases they can be about production details or audience projections or touring arrangements. Whatever area they are in, they are

questions that adjudicators shouldn't have had to ask. The golden rule is to make sure that the budget arithmetic is clear and accurate and that any projected revenues or expenses are clearly justified. Again, there are two essential guiding questions for writers of applications: What details is the grantor asking for? and How clear are things to the friends you've asked to review your draft?

A different sort of art: the key techniques

As in any art, there are some techniques that have to be learned. I have suggested some in the preceding paragraphs:

- Read the grantor's criteria carefully,
- Apply only in areas the grantor funds,
- Describe not only what and how, but also why,
- Describe your project in ways that speak to the grantor's criteria,
- Remember not everyone understands your context, so explain, explain, explain,
- Get the technical details right and provide sufficient justification for numbers.

As you apply these techniques, seek advice. Asking friends or experienced colleagues to review your drafts is one way to do this. Another very important way is to contact the grantor at the outset. In some cases, this is an essential first step, indeed a requirement. Staff members of the granting agency don't enjoy having their already heavy work load increased by applications that don't fit, or that are missing key ingredients. An initial conversation between applicant and grantor is mutually beneficial.

There is another reason to contact granting agencies early. It is not often

spoken about, but it is well worth remembering. It is this: granting agencies have needs, just like you do. Their boards regularly want to know how effective their programs are, whether their objectives are being met, and whether there are some glitches in their procedures. Legacies Now, for example, was designed not only to fund a 2010 legacy, but also to energize municipalities and local agencies to contribute to that legacy. To the extent that your application shows community “buy-in” and long term contributions, it will be better received. As another example, the Vancouver Foundation, in spite of its name, has a mandate to serve the entire province, and yet its staff sometimes worry that they don't have enough applications from the remoter parts of the province. The BC Arts Council by statute must serve the geographic and demographic diversity of the entire province, but doesn't always find applications that make it easy for them to achieve that goal. To adapt a well-known maxim: ask not what the grantor can do for you; ask what you can do for the grantor.

An artist rarely has to justify his or her work to others. It expresses a view or an intent or some other internal imaginative process, and whether the viewer fully understands that is not of prime importance. Grant getting is a different sort of art. With every stroke of the brush, every curve of the mould or every choice of a thread, the artist needs to speak to what the grantor wants and to some complete stranger's understanding.

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