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Stop Throwing Your Money Away! *Eight Tips for Improving Your RFP*

As a consultant, about half my business is with the public sector, which means participating in the request for proposal (RFP) process. While, thankfully, the private sector largely avoids this process, I have also seen a few corporate RFPs in my time. Over the years, I've noticed a number of mistakes that organizations make in RFPs that ultimately cost them money by getting too little value for their project dollars.

So, for what it's worth, here's a view from the other side of the trenches and some advice on how to improve your RFPs.

1. Decide what you really want from the RFP. Most RFPs I see define the project in terms of deliverables. This is a lazy approach – it makes it easy to manage the contract but doesn't give you real results. What you really want is more subjective, i.e. a better process for meeting your program requirements. So give some thought to what you really want and how you will know when you have achieved it. I always try to dig beneath the deliverables to articulate what I think the client really wants but I don't always get it right. It's much better to do it yourself up front. By the way, you're going to do it sooner or later if you hire someone like me – I won't leave our initial meeting without knowing what you want accomplished and how we will measure success.

2. Decide whether you want a consultant or a contractor. Contractors perform specific tasks; consultants improve the client condition. Both have a role to play and many

of us do both but you need to decide which one you want. There are many qualified contractors but few really good consultants. You can compare contractor rates because there are only so many ways to do a task e.g. write a plan or conduct an exercise. Consultants are unique; we each bring different skills, experience, and knowledge to your project and our fees are based on that uniqueness, not on the task you want performed.

3. Consider whether you really need an RFP. Depending on what you're trying to accomplish, an RFP may not be the best way to get what you want. Most organizations offer the option to create sole source contracts under special circumstances. Since consultants are unique, there's a chance that if you're seeking a consultant, you may be able to use this option.

4. Stop worrying about hourly rates. Most RFPs are really modified engineering contracts. Engineers have clearly defined roles, predictable work tasks and bills of materials. That's not the case for a consultant. I don't make widgets and I don't charge by the hour. My personal belief is that hourly rates for consultants are unethical in that they create pressure for the consultant to bill additional hours or to take longer to do the work. You're much better off if we agree on objectives and performance measures and then negotiate a set project fee. Do you really care if your project takes ten days or ten minutes if you get the results you want?

5. **Tell me what you want to spend.** If you don't know how much to budget for a project, do your homework before you request a proposal. If you know how much you want to spend, don't keep it a secret. You won't get a better deal by not disclosing your budget. If I don't have an idea of your budget, we're probably both wasting time. It does neither of us any good if I give you a proposal for \$70,000 when you only have \$25,000 available. A good consultant will look at your desired outcome and try to work within your budget. The budget determines how much value I can add to your project. It doesn't allow me to make more money at your expense.

6. **Make sure your requirements don't limit your options.** A lot of RFPs limit the field of potential proposers by requiring that the consultant demonstrate that he or she has performed similar work in the past, be able to provide client references, and show you samples of his or her work. In most cases, this requirement eliminates individual practitioners whose skills are derived from life experience. Do you really look at all that paper or do you just use it as a screening tool? Have you ever stopped to think that the work products submitted by the big companies were very likely done by an independent and you could get more for your money by hiring that independent directly? Further, isn't your project unique? You're probably not going to want it done the same way it was for another organization and you probably wouldn't want others seeing your final end product. Consider asking for more relevant information about the consultant's experience rather than past projects.

7. **Make sure you're getting the right kind of experience.** Another factor that screens out the potential proposers is the requirement for experience in your particular field. There are times when you really do need a consultant that knows a lot about your discipline but I suspect that most of the time, you don't. Like most consultants, I am a process consultant. Most of what I do in terms of gathering information, facilitating, planning, coaching and training are skills that are transferable to any business. You're already an

expert in your field; why do you need another one? Sometimes what you really need is someone to ask obvious questions and to help you think in different ways.

8. **Don't tell me how to do my job.** This is the engineering mindset again. I see a lot of RFPs that specify how many meetings I should hold, with whom I should meet, and so forth. This is another lazy approach that makes it easy to compare proposals but can limit creativity on the part of the proposers. You need to give me enough information to understand the scope of the project, but let me suggest ways to achieve the results you want. I have a number of tools I can choose from and may actually be able to suggest a better way of doing something than you had considered. When you hire a consultant, you're paying for our knowledge and experience – use them!

IAEM Conference

The International Association of Emergency Managers will be holding its annual conference in Orlando FL October 31-November 5 in Orlando FL. It's a great networking opportunity and tremendous learning experience.

This year I'll be offering a pre-conference training session on Emergency Management Program Fundamentals and conference sessions on the Mississippi flood of 1927 and developing a program administrative plan. Should be fun, so why not join me? You can find more information at www.iaem.com and I'll be blogging about the sessions as we get closer to the conference.

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