

FOREWORD

A SOCIAL WORK LEADER ON WRITING

Linda Hoffman

“I SURE HOPE THAT ONE of your staff will make an urgently needed home visit to Mrs. M’s apartment, at some time tomorrow, to help our staff evaluate and ensure that she is protected. Contrary to the attached letter from Mr. S, neither he nor Mrs. M has been allowing our Enriched Housing Program staff into her apartment to check on or provide services for her. In view of Mr. S’s letter, we are also reaching out to the person whom Mrs. M claims to be her doctor. In addition, we have been in touch with her home attendant vendor agency during each of the last two days to apprise them of the situation as it has evolved. We will call them again tomorrow morning to urgently request that they send their RN to visit, medically evaluate Mrs. M, and help us to ensure that her health needs are identified and met before this upcoming long weekend. I deeply appreciate your ongoing support of our agency in providing the highest quality services. I am also terribly sorry to involve you in this case, but I am deeply concerned about its seriousness and, therefore, trying to ensure that our respective agencies urgently make every possible effort to visit, evaluate, and, in accordance with the law, protect Mrs. M.”

A few minutes after sending that e-mail, I received the following reply: “Will forward immediately.”

Before writing the above e-mail, I utilized the critical-thinking process taught by my second-year Columbia University School of Social Work field instructor. In so doing, I made sure that the beginning and end of the first and last sentences of my e-mail corresponded so that the beginning told that which I wanted to tell the recipient and the end repeated that which I had already told the recipient. As a result, my e-mail quickly got its extremely busy recipient to “get to yes” (Fisher & Ury, 1983).

Writing powerful and succinct e-mail messages is only one of the many kinds of writing that my job requires of me as president and chief executive officer of a major not-for-profit organization that serves the New York City region by providing social service programs and housing for the elderly. Part of my work is to continuously search for professional social workers who possess strong writing skills, especially those able to write government grant proposals and administrative documents. My job requires that I assume overall and ongoing responsibility for writing innumerable administrative documents, including government grant proposals, letters (especially to government officials), responses to evaluation reports, budget narratives, board meeting agendas, reports and minutes, procedures, policy statements, mission statements, case notes, brochures, fact sheets, vignettes, press releases, public service announcements, and speeches. In writing such administrative material, one must also understand, be sensitive to, and creatively think through its respective legal implications, political innuendos, and other possible ramifications to ensure that it is protective of the organization and its clients.

Over the years, I have learned that key to a successful social work career is the possession of excellent writing skills in the production of comprehensively thought-out, clear, and well-written professional documents. I have also learned that receiving A's on academic writing assignments in social work school does not mean that upon graduation MSWs possess all of the writing skills required for a successful career in a not-for-profit organization. Writing, for MSWs and most other professionals, is time-consuming and often described as "painful" and "a struggle." However, to achieve a successful career in social work, MSWs must continuously work toward enhancing their writing skills—making the resulting documents ever more compact, clear, and convincing. I have learned through hiring, training, and supervising staff that those with a positive attitude, patience, and fortitude, along with excellent analytic and creative-thinking skills and a determination to develop and strengthen those skills, can progress to higher levels.

To quote one Columbia social work professor, "If you can't think, you can't write." However, the guiding principle that my second-year field instructor taught me has proven most helpful to my staff and to me: "Know what to say, what not to say, when to say it, when not to say it, who to say what to, and how to muster your troops." The "troops" metaphor may sound a bit too militaristic for social work, but in my experience, the struggle to marshal

resources for those organizations and issues that one cares about is often a battle of wits, grant applications, and well-phrased letters or e-mails.

My agency's top priority is to write and submit critically thought-through and well-presented government grant proposals and administrative documents. They are the lifeblood of our not-for-profit organization and essential to its survival during both good and bad economic times. Over the years, my staff and I have recognized that, along with writing exceptional proposals and administrative documents, it is important for a not-for-profit organization to attain an outstanding track record and reputation for providing the highest-quality services, and for its staff to develop positive working relationships with both government and community-based organizations and representatives. Basic to sustaining such relations with public and community allies is maintaining frequent contact with them, whether in person or via e-mail or phone.

Producing winning proposals, especially government grants, which provide my agency with its lifeblood, is a complex process. Along with excellent writings skills, it requires critical thinking that is "outside the box" and that demonstrates, beyond any reasonable doubt, that our agency, its board, and its staff possess the qualifications and ability to perform the social service and housing program contracts for which we seek approval.

Since requests for government grant proposals are voluminous as well as time-sensitive (usually with deadlines of six weeks or less), to meet such tight time frames and ensure that our proposals are complete, comprehensive, accurate, and justifiable, it is necessary to work on them days, nights, and weekends. Therefore, *before* the issuance of government requests for proposals we try to anticipate the questions that will be asked, and we begin researching and pulling together information from earlier proposals and administrative documents, so we can "hit the ground running" as soon as the actual request for proposals is issued. For example, prior to and in anticipation of the issuance of the "request for proposals" to renew our agency's largest social service program for an additional three years, I proactively wrote at least eight drafts of a grant application.

Upon receipt of that actual request for proposals, my staff and I noted its six-week submission deadline and immediately read the questions, together, two or three times. As we did so, we analyzed each question so that we understood it as fully as possible, letting our minds go free to think comprehensively and creatively—outside the box. While writing our first-draft response

to the questions, we incorporated the information we had already gathered. Always keeping the competition factor in mind, we also incorporated our present thinking while simultaneously continuing to research and gather additional information from prior proposals and other documents relating to our current analysis so as to respond to each question as comprehensively as possible. We focused on proving beyond any reasonable doubt that our agency, board, and staff were the best qualified and had the experience and the know-how to perform the work better than any other proposal applicant. As soon as the material was typed in draft form, we reorganized the information according to our updated analysis of how to structure the answers and ensure that they clearly, comprehensively, and justifiably addressed each of the questions. We continued to update them and, again, thinking outside the box, added new ideas, clearly presenting and completing our responses to the questions in a professional, analytic, organized, and convincing manner. If two or more questions asked for the same type of, or similar, information, as appropriate, we referenced such information back and forth among our responses.

Throughout the proposal-writing process, the program narrative and budget were developed in sync. After the budget was finalized, staff utilized a template that our agency developed to write a comprehensive and justifiable budget narrative. We submitted a carefully proofed proposal that included a program narrative, a budget, a budget narrative, and numerous supporting documents. That two-inch-thick winning proposal was clearly and concisely written, so, as I explained to my staff, “if we were no longer administering the agency’s programs and Martians came down and read our clearly written proposals, they could understand how to successfully implement and administer our agency’s social service and building programs.”

There are many program planning and political innuendos that we must continuously and critically keep in mind when writing a proposal. For example, with the thought that there might be cat lovers on the proposal review team, we decided to remove a vignette from a draft of the proposal that explained the need to approve the extermination of 30 physically ill cats that were living in a guardian client’s home. In another situation, while creatively thinking about and planning to write another winning proposal to construct a 150-unit senior-citizen apartment building on a hilly site, we recognized the need for its main entrance to be located at the top of a hill so that it would be level and wheelchair accessible. A competing proposal for the same site located the entrance at the bottom of the hill, thereby requir-

ing both steps and a wheelchair ramp. While working late one Saturday on another proposal that was due the following Monday and that required a program name to obtain funds to purchase a van for the development of a new transportation program, I began to force myself to creatively think of a relevant name. Suddenly the word *cart* came to mind as a cute acronym for a transportation program. I immediately decided to name the proposed program Project CART and miraculously backed into creating the now full name for its acronym, which is “Community Arranged Resident Transportation.”

Another important public document that must be written by a not-for-profit organization is the minutes of its board of directors meetings, which are quite detailed as well as legally and politically sensitive. In writing our agency’s board minutes, I ensure that such public documents accurately demonstrate that the board is legally fulfilling all of its corporate governance responsibilities. I also assume the responsibility of thinking through and writing all board meeting invitations, agendas, my president’s report, and, as requested, drafts of the board chairman’s remarks and the nominating committee chairman’s report for their respective reviews, modifications, and/or approvals, prior to each meeting. I ensure that all of the board meeting information regarding each of the programs administered by the agency is reported in a clear and concise manner at the meetings and in the board minutes. Paying attention to detail and taking the time to think through and write each board report, ensuring that the grammar, syntax, and spelling are correct, afford me the ability to quickly and easily write board minutes immediately after each meeting. In addition to writing my agency’s board minutes, I write the board minutes of the 13 legally separate corporate entities under its sponsorship.

I have worked on both the not-for-profit organization “begging side” and the government agency “giving side,” and I find the begging side much more difficult. As mentioned earlier, the not-for-profit begging side requires an enormous amount of creative thinking, excellent writing skills, political and entrepreneurial instincts, a stellar track record with regard to reputation, and strong linkages and positive relationships with government agencies and officials and with community organizations and leaders. The combination of such riches strengthens an agency’s ability to successfully develop and win approval of its proposals.

My staff—which includes some of New York City’s most talented professional social workers—and I work together as a team. I carefully review the written materials that they originate, and I seek peer reviews of my draft

proposals from other agency administrative staff members, professional social work colleagues, authors, and editors to ensure that they are as accurate, complete, and comprehensive as possible prior to their finalization.

To ensure that my staff continue to develop their creative and analytic thinking and their proposal and other administrative writing skills, over the years we have retained many outstanding professionals to provide training in those areas. I reinforce such training by reminding staff to research, analyze, and synthesize throughout their writing assignments. In my ongoing endeavor to create incentives for and to further enhance social work administrators' ability to successfully perform their work and achieve their career goals, my husband, Peter, and I have established an endowment fund at Columbia's School of Social Work that provides for seminars on writing proposals (preferably for government grants) and for the presentation of monetary awards to Columbia social work students who have written the best proposals.

With this philosophy and mission of "good, better, best, never let it rest until the good is better and the better is best," our agency has grown from only a fiscal conduit with no direct social service programs or buildings in 1978 to an organization that has since implemented and now administers 30 New York City social service programs. We have also developed and now manage 10 senior-citizen apartment buildings for the well, frail, and homeless elderly. This growth has occurred as a result of critical thinking, the production of an enormous number of masterfully crafted government grant proposals and administrative documents, and the deployment of entrepreneurial, legal, and political instincts.

Writing is an art form. I believe that strong writing in social work emerges out of education combined with certain instinctive abilities and critical-thinking skills that MSWs and other professionals must possess and continue to build upon throughout their careers. It is my hope that the numerous guiding principles that have been included in *The Columbia Guide to Social Work Writing* will further enhance social workers' ability to think critically and write outstandingly. If social workers marry critical thinking with sound writing, they can compete professionally, serve their organizations ably, and achieve their own career goals.

Reference

Fisher, R., & Ury, W. L. (1983). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. New York: Penguin Books.