Viewpoint
Reimagining the Request for Proposal
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As currently structured, requests for proposal (RFPs) are counterproductive to social change efforts. We must redesign granting systems to empower the communities in which we work.

BY DEVON DAVEY, HEATHER HISCOX & NICOLE MARKWICK

In recent years, the social sector and the communities it serves have called for deep structural change to address our most serious social injustices. Yet one of the basic tools we use to fund change, the request for proposal (RFP), has remained largely unchanged. We believe that RFPs must become part of the larger call for systemic reform.

At best, RFPs undermine social change work. In many cases, they damage the communities that the philanthropic and nonprofit sector intend to support. RFPs are structured in a way that reinforces extractive power asymmetries and bolsters systems of oppression. They concentrate power in the hands of the few and leave out the people who could best guide and implement social change work—namely, those with expertise, through either personal experience or technical knowledge.

While RFPs can have positive qualities, we favor adopting a number of alternatives to retain their strengths while advancing more just outcomes.

Extractive and Inequitable

Requests for proposals are solicitations that outline projects and seek external assistance for part or all of the work. RFPs typically include program descriptions, objectives, deliverables to be achieved, time frames, and project budgets. RFPs are posted mostly by funders and nonprofits on organizational websites or portals and typically disseminated through networks of known contacts. Those who respond to RFPs (typically consultants and nonprofits) are asked to conceptualize and outline potential project work through a proposal, which is sent to a decision-making body for evaluation. Successful proposals net a contract.

At first glance, the RFP process may seem neutral or fair. Yet RFPs are often designed by individuals in high-level positions without meaningful input from community members and frontline staff—those who are most familiar with social injustices and who often hold the least institutional power. What's more, those who both issue and respond to RFPs often rely on their social capital to find and collaborate on RFP opportunities. Since social networks are highly homogeneous, RFP participation is limited to the professionals who have social connections to the issuer, resulting in a more limited pool of applicants.

This selection process is further compounded by the human propensity to hire people who look the same and who reflect similar ways of thinking. Social sector decision makers and power holders tend to be—among other identities—white. This lack of diversity, furthered by historical oppression, has ensured that white privilege and ways of working have come to dominate within the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. This concentration of power and lack of diverse perspectives and experiences shaping RFPs results in projects failing to respond to the needs of communities and, in many cases, projects that directly perpetuate racism, colonialism, misogyny, ableism, sexism, and other forms of systemic and individual oppression.

The rigid structure of RFPs plays an important role in many of the negative outcomes of projects. Effective social change work is emergent, is iterative, and centers trust by nature. By contrast, RFPs frequently apply inflexible work scopes, limited timelines and budgets, and unproven solutions that are developed within the blinders of institutional power. Too often, funders force programs into implementation because they want to see results according to a specified plan. This rigidity can produce initiatives that are ineffective and removed from community needs. As consultant Joyce Lee-Ibarra says, “[RFPs] feel fundamentally transactional, when the work I want to do is relational.”

RFPs typically require a high degree of unpaid labor from applicants; working without compensation can be particularly difficult for people of color, women, and smaller businesses, among other demographics. In demanding unpaid labor, RFPs systematically exclude individuals who can offer invaluable technical expertise and personal experience that would enrich the work and connection with diverse communities.

We also know of plagiarism cases by RFP issuers. These examples include organizations collecting information from responders and integrating consultants’
recommendations into subsequent RFPs or other publications without compensation, attribution, or contract work. In a world where people of color, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and women have to work harder for professional recognition, not to mention psychological safety, this extraction of ideas reinforces the same patterns of oppression.

As a result, the transactional, extractive nature of RFPs causes many responders to disengage from these processes, while others never break through the many barriers in the first place. Communities lose out on potentially impactful collaborations, while philanthropies and nonprofits fail to make the social change they seek to create, sometimes leaving deep damage in their wake.

The Alternative

Those of us who participate in RFP structures and who are not part of historically and/or currently oppressed communities must reflect on our role in perpetuating an unjust and ineffective system. How can we develop more inclusive and equitable practices? We highlight three ways to reimagine RFPs: community co-creation, focusing on challenges rather than solutions, and redistributing resources.

First, reimagined RFPs must engage in community co-creation. The scope and focus of a project, including the problem definition, must emerge from the community. We recommend including a wide range of people in the early stages of defining an RFP or a similar call for collaboration, including frontline staff and community members who are participating in, or are affected by, the issues that the proposal addresses. The RFP should cite evidence of community engagement and plans for continued community inclusion and shared power. The exact form of those plans will depend on the project, and it might look like requiring a community steering committee, co-designing the RFP with community members, and providing regular opportunities for dialogue and updates to and from the community.

An RFP should also require inclusive decision-making. We suggest bringing together a racially diverse review team that includes a range of stakeholders (such as community members, frontline staff, and collaborative partners) to review and select the RFP responses. The decision-making committee would select the final recipient based on budget and alignment in values, methods, approach, team demographics or identity representation, and communication styles. This team may have a life beyond the RFP, as well, taking on the monitoring and evaluation of recipients throughout the duration of the project. Resources should be allocated during the RFP process to compensate community members and reduce barriers to participation, such as access to transportation and childcare.

Second, RFPs need to focus on identifying challenges or potential opportunities, rather than determining the so-called solutions and deliverables. This change leaves space for the RFP issuer, responder, and community to come together and collectively design (and potentially test) desired project outcomes or intentions. The practice must be centered in relationship building and include room for dialogue over time, so that a broader group of people can deliberate and learn together about the project scope, approach, and potential methodologies.

Instead of providing rigid constraints, RFP issuers should focus on the RFP on the challenges at hand. For example, the RFP might include the questions the issuer is trying to answer or the barriers they are trying to address, as well as what has been tried in the past, inviting responders to articulate the methods they think are most appropriate. This approach is likely to lead to more effective results, because it calls consultants, nonprofits, and community members together to collaboratively frame the challenges and explore creative methods, while leaving space to develop final deliverables through the various stages of learning and project work.

To embrace the flexibility required for co-design, RFPs also need adaptable budgets and time frames. Injecting greater elasticity into project finances or timetables allows for genuine relationship building and responsiveness to emergent community needs. We recommend embracing more open-ended projects, in which the various stages of a project are defined in an emergent, step-by-step manner through agreements among consultants, nonprofits, and community members.

Third, RFPs should provide an important opportunity to share power and influence how resources are redistributed. Avoiding unpaid labor altogether may be difficult in our current economy, though it can be mitigated by limiting both the RFP call and response lengths in words to reduce the amount of time invested. Some issuers offer compensation to responders who can include unpaid labor within the overall costs of a project proposal (although such remuneration would be limited to the responders chosen for the engagement). Grant makers such as Magic Cabinet and Tipping Point are already doing this by renumerating the up-front work in applications or proposals.

Responders can also use their privilege to minimize inequities. They can share relationships, knowledge, and access—all forms of power—with one another by submitting collective responses. In this way, responders can either share the up-front cost of unpaid labor or use their networks to leverage greater opportunities for peers without requiring a great deal of increased labor from those individuals.

Responders must also reflect on their role within this system and, at times, choose to abstain altogether from applying for RFP grants, especially when we are not from the community and do not reflect the needs of the project. Instead, we should consider withholding a proposal and putting others’ names forward. We recommend a wider reach that includes talented consultants and nonprofits such as those listed by Nonprofit Consultants of Color, Social Change by Design Database, and Momentum Nonprofit Partners Consultant Directory.

Reforming RFPs in these three ways represents an interim solution as we work simultaneously toward greater systems change. As community development advisor Dell Gines says, “In the short run, RFP reform may help mitigate [power asymmetries], but the fundamental system of consolidated wealth or consolidated power is the major problem.”