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Why Are Your Projects Always Late?

Here's a clue: It's you!

One of the requirements frequently included in a request for proposal (RFP) is a timeline for project completion. Sometimes the key dates for this timeline are specified in the RFP; other times, the consultant is free to estimate the time required to complete the project and its various phases.

It really doesn't matter, though. It is rare that a project ends up adhering to the proposed timeline. Sometimes the reason for the delay is an unanticipated emergency affecting either the client or the consultant. But nine times out of ten, the problem lies with you, the client.

It starts with the RFP

One of the reality checks I do when deciding on whether I want to respond to your RFP is to look at the timeline you've included. It tells me a lot about how you're going to approach the project. An unrealistic timeline is a major red flag. Either you haven't done your homework or there's more going on behind the scenes.

Here are common errors I see in RFPs that can lead to unrealistic timelines:

- Your project end date is concurrent with the end of the fiscal year. This tells me that your concern is probably with meeting a grant deadline and that your timeline may have no relation to the actual project workplan.
- The timeline does not match the level of effort called for in your statement of work. This is common in what I call "kitchen sink" RFPs that consist of all the projects you've had sitting on your desk and are lumping into one RFP. It means you haven't determined to how long it will take to do all the tasks you want done and are just guessing.
- You haven't factored in your organization's contracting process. I recently reviewed a proposal that stated it would take one week to review proposals and one more to process the contract, with work to begin two weeks from the award date. This is unrealistic and tells me they had no understanding of their contracting process. I've seen these short timelines work in the private sector but never in the public.

When the project goes sideways

Any consultant will tell you that the timeline in a proposal is a best estimate based on the consultant's experience and the information you provide in the RFP. We expect that there will need to be adjustments as the project progresses. However, there are things over which we have no control that can have a major impact on the project schedule. Here are some examples:

- Lack of prioritization by key executives. The level of priority your senior management places on the project will affect the level of cooperation we receive from participants in the project. Three months into a nine-month project, the senior executive canceled and rescheduled the initial project meeting three times, preventing any work from starting,
- Coordinating schedules. Scheduling group meetings with key participants is probably the biggest headache for consultants. On one project, our three-month timeline stretched to over a year because of scheduling conflicts over one-hour conference calls.
- Changing the parameters of the project. I personally don't mind adjusting work plans if it produces a better result for the client. However, when it significantly adds to the workload and/or increases the duration of the project, that presents a problem. At an initial project meeting, a client informed me that the participants had been told that they would not have to do any work outside our meetings. This conflicted with the project approach we had proposed and resulted in an increase in meetings from three to over a dozen.

Keeping your project on track

Here are some possible solutions to some of the problems I've identified:

- In preparing your RFP, factor in the time required for contracting. If you don't know how long it takes or how many levels of approval are required, *find out*. The contracting process is out of your hands and can affect your project start date, putting you behind schedule before you even start.
- Try to factor in realistic estimates of time based on the anticipated work, not grant requirements. There are ways around grant deadlines such as extensions and advance billing. They may present problems but not as much as an unrealistic timeline.
- Create the aura of executive support. Recognize that the initial project meeting is a working meeting and may not require the presence of a senior executive. Schedule a courtesy meeting at the executive's convenience rather than holding up the project. Having a signed letter expressing support may be more useful in the long run.
- Treat the proposed schedule as a draft that will be refined at the initial project meeting. Manage expectations by clearly identifying time commitments and regularly scheduled meetings and time commitments. Minimize in person meetings in favor of conference or video calls. On one project, we established a mandatory weekly check-in call that allowed for project updates and technical assistance for those who needed it.

No project will be without its delays, but you can limit the ones that are self-generated with a little foresight and planning. 