

Red Teaming the Solicitation

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Red teaming proposals offers significant competitive advantages to ensure that a submitted research narrative responds fully to the agency solicitation and makes the most compelling case possible to persuade program officers and reviewers to recommend funding (See *Red Teaming Proposals for Funding Success* in the November 15, 2010 issue). Equally important to red teaming the proposal is what might be called **red teaming the solicitation**, a process that needs to start immediately upon publication of a funding solicitation of potential interest.

The term “**red team**” derives from government and industrial evaluations that use a group—a red team—to review, assess, test, or vet plans, operations, concepts, capabilities, or proposals. **Red teaming very thoroughly reviews and evaluates a proposal.** In this context, it is important to keep in mind that successful proposals approach excellence through repeated revisions that eradicate ambiguities and bring focus, specificity, and clarity to the proposal. Narratives relying on excessive generalities and unsupported claims rather than specific and validating detail that advances a research vision will quickly lose reviewers’ attention and confidence. The red teaming process can help assure this does not happen.

Importantly, red teaming is a scalable process. While often used for large research proposals, or other major institutional initiatives, the step-by-step red team review process can be adapted to smaller proposals as well, such as NSF CAREER proposals wherein a “**critique club**” of applicants reading and commenting on each other’s CAREER narrative can significantly enhance success. The red teaming process features a unique and key characteristic: a **frank, open and unflinching assessment** in the spirit of Tom Hanks’ instructional comment to right-fielder Bitty Schram in the movie, *A League of Their Own*: “Are you crying? Are you crying?! There’s no crying in baseball!”

Moreover, applying a variant of the red teaming process to analyze the solicitation is the first critical step in making several key strategic decisions that will determine the outcome, i.e., success or failure, of a proposal.

Of course the first critical decision to make is whether or not to submit a proposal based on a candid assessment of your competitiveness as you map your capacities to the research goals defined in the solicitation. Once that analysis is complete, and if a decision is made to submit a proposal, the solicitation becomes to the development and writing of a successful proposal what the North Star was to ancient navigators.

However, correctly analyzing a solicitation prior to developing the proposal amounts to the critical first step in your effort’s ultimate success. Solicitations by their nature tend towards the prescriptive rather than the open ended, in the sense of Lewis Carroll’s observation in *Alice in Wonderland*: “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.” That will not work in proposal writing. **Solicitations, by analogy, place significant, exacting, and often**

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nuanced initial conditions on the logical structure of your proposal, e.g., what you propose, how you propose it, and the rationale and arguments you make for the significance of your research to the field or the mission critical objectives of the funding agency.

Moreover, because solicitations are written documents used to convey an often complex set of sponsor instructions and expectations (e.g., vision, goals, objectives, outcomes, etc.), sometimes well written and sometimes not, they typically leave a lot of room for significant ambiguity and misdirection to enter the process of accurately “decoding the solicitation.” This ambiguity typically arises from several sources, often concurrently, including:

- lack of clarity in some portions of the solicitation itself (talk to the program officer),
- failure on your part to thoroughly and accurately analyze the solicitation (read it; read it again),
- failure of team members to closely read the solicitation before advancing ideas (put them in in-school suspension),
- failure of you or your team members to sufficiently understand the research culture and mission objectives of the agency in a way that allows you to gain a deeper and more nuanced insight into the solicitation (e.g., the capacity to “read between the lines” or “understand the subtext”)
- unfamiliarity with the agency’s language used to describe its research vision, goals, and objectives at various scales, from the solicitation to the entire agency.

Given the importance of an insightful reading of the solicitation to the ultimate success of a proposal, particularly given that small misinterpretations of the solicitation early on may well be amplified into missed opportunities during the writing of the research narrative, putting together a solicitation review team, i.e., a red team, to analyze the solicitation together rather than separately, offers another opportunity to weight the outcome to your advantage.