

The Too Kind Program Officer

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The combination of a too subtle program officer and a too optimistic grant applicant often leads to an unsatisfactory conclusion. When this dynamic occurs, it is usually the result of a program officer attempting to encourage rather than discourage an applicant who then exercises selective hearing. The ground becomes set for this dynamic when an applicant poses general questions to a program officer as he first considers a response to a solicitation. These questions will not elicit a critical review of the proposed idea, but rather more general observations that carry no commitment on the likelihood of funding success whatsoever. Such a commitment is the purview of the review panel. But an overly optimistic applicant may misinterpret a program officer's indication of an idea's likely fit for an agency's solicitation as a signal that the agency is likely to fund the idea were it to be proposed. It is not unheard of for an overly optimistic applicant to tell colleagues after consulting with a program officer that "The agency really wants to fund this idea. We just have to submit a proposal." Unfortunately, the kindness that motivates an officer's subtlety and indirectness does not always offer the best approach for those who passionately believe in the exceptionalism of their ideas.

There are many good reasons to contact an agency program officer to provide clarification on all sorts of issues related to submitting a proposal. But if an applicant believes that such a conversation gives her an inside track to funding success, then she is likely suffering from what psychologists call optimism bias, or, as former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan described the dot-com bubble of the 1990's, as "irrational exuberance." Reading too much into a program officer's encouraging comments occurs more often among inexperienced investigators and more often on the more prestigious programs, e.g., many NSF cross-cutting programs, various institutional grants, or center-level proposals from various agencies. Many of the most prestigious programs, i.e., those highly visible programs most sought after by universities, draw large numbers of applicants but low funding rates. This environment often serves as a Petri dish for breeding excessive and unrealistic expectations, or "irrational exuberance."

Hoping for success in such environments is fine, but like all things related to successful grant writing, you must temper optimism with self-discipline and realistic self-assessment. Don't expect a program officer to assume the role of the person responsible for your own realistic assessment of the quality of your research idea and your plans for achieving it. It is, therefore, important when talking to a program officer to look for subtle signals and "tells" that indicate whether your idea may need to be more fully developed before it can compete for funding. Take care to listen closely and respect the fact that some program officers prefer to use indirectness to signal discouraging news. However, if you are a hopelessly experiential learner, then you may have to wait for the brutally frank opinions expressed by reviewers. After all, if you talk to an agency program officer about submitting a proposal to that agency, it is unlikely that the officer will give any of the following responses:

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- Sure, I would love to tell you the probability of your being funded, but that is not permitted, although I do have a number in mind.
- Your idea is not very exciting or novel in any way whatsoever.
- I am looking at a pile of declined proposals that advanced the same research as you propose.
- We did fund some research in this area back in the 1980s.
- Why does “cold fusion” keep coming to mind when I am talking with you?
- Your research is not in an area the agency views as worth funding.
- My impression is that you are on a fishing expedition and that you will propose any research you think we might fund.
- We do not fund “*Field of Dreams*” proposals. If you build it, do it with your money, not ours, because we don’t think anyone will come, even the ghosts of researchers past.
- You seem to have insufficient experience and expertise in the research topic; in fact, it appears you have none.
- Why are you wasting my time asking questions you could easily answer yourself by a close reading of the solicitation and the referenced documents?
- Have you actually read the solicitation?
- Yes, NSF has entered into a national conspiracy to deny funding to your region of the county and only make awards to the less deserving regions that we favor.

Fortunately, most program officers can handle these situations with grace and subtlety, signaling to the potential applicant that perhaps a reassessment and reconsideration of the planned proposal is in order. The problem arises when the program officer is too kind, too subtle, too indirect, and too encouraging to a potential applicant who then begins to see a realistic self-assessment as a waste of time. As Mark Twain once commented, “The only thing sadder than a young pessimist is an old optimist.” So make sure that when you talk to a program officer, you really listen to ensure that your optimism does not drown out the conversation. You want to come away better able to make a realistic self-assessment of the appropriateness of your research to a particular program area. Outside of the Three Stooges, no one likes to hit another person in the forehead with a ball-peen hammer to get a point across, so don’t expect that of the program officer. At some point, the reviewers may oblige you if you continue to avoid performing your own self-assessment before developing, writing, and submitting a proposal.