

In conversation...

Festival of International Conferences on Caregiving, Disability, Aging and Technology (FICCDAT)

From June 16-19, 2007, rehabilitation, social and health service providers, government policy makers, researchers, family caregivers, students, seniors and persons with disabilities gathered in Toronto to attend the first FICCDAT Festival. FICCDAT brought together five distinctive conferences focused on improving the lives of seniors, persons with disabilities and their caregivers. FICCDAT was hosted by Toronto Rehab and March of Dimes Canada.

Achieving Successful Grant Funding

Useful ideas and key advice on approaching grantmakers were presented to participants at the festival on June 18, 2007. The following is an excerpt from that presentation.

The four presenters were:

L. Robin Cardozo, Chief Executive Officer of the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF).

Stuart Kidd, former board member and Grant Review Team Chair with the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

Randi Fine, Executive Director of the Older Persons' Mental Health and Addictions Network, a cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary network, and OTF grant recipient.

and

Sandy Keshen, President and Chief Executive Officer of Reena, a social services agency that supports integrating individuals with developmental disabilities into the community. Sandy is also the lead for the Ontario Aging and Developmental Disabilities Project, an OTF grant recipient.

The conversation began...

Stuart Kidd:

Funded by the government of Ontario, OTF grants support not-for-profit and charitable organizations in Ontario and these grants continue to have a remarkable impact in communities across Ontario.

OTF is a busy organization, funding approximately 1,500 grants each year. Applications are assessed by dedicated teams of volunteers, of which I was one. These Grant Review Teams review a proposed activity to determine if it is the best use of OTF funds and if the applicant is the best group to carry out the work.

Based on my work and experience as past Chair of a Grant Review Team, I'd like to offer two pieces of advice that might help not-for-profit and charitable organizations apply for grants.

First...keep your eye on the big picture and re-examine your organization from time to time.

I've seen organizations or groups that keep adding programs and services to the point where the added services impair their main objective. A story comes to mind about a small family business I used to drive by near Temagami: Gramp's Outdoor Store.

It started off supplying fishing, boating and camping stuff. Gramp's did well and added a restaurant, then later a gas bar. Their sign grew with the business until the whole message basically read "Gramp's Store, eat here, get gas and worms". Obviously not the right message!

They needed to re-examine their big picture. It is a worthy experience for any organization to look back and assess where they started, where they have been and where they want to go. This is particularly true for organizations serving seniors. I say this because of the dramatically changing nature of the population they serve.

While organizations with fixed assets and evolving memberships tend to look to grantors for assistance in fixing their assets, they should also look inwardly. Perhaps their mission and their objectives need to be modified or tweaked in response to a changing membership.

So, maintain *perspective* on the big picture and be *introspective* about your organization.

My second piece of advice...avoid the Shoebox Syndrome. This is an expression coined by a past OTF Program Manager and her point is that some organizations grow large but still think small. Organizations that fall into this trap often find themselves lacking basic, but important skills. Writing and technical skills, for example.

I'm thinking of organizations staffed, perhaps, by older people who are used to, or comfortable with, hand-written reports. As such, at the most basic level, their grant application may not be legible. Yet the mindset is: we've always done things this way; therefore it should still be okay. Well...like it or not, in 2007, computer and internet skills are essential.

Shoebox syndrome organizations often also lack simple bookkeeping skills.

Another story comes to mind. The organization I'm thinking of was well established, and had significant funding sources, particularly from the province. When an OTF Program Manager met with this organization to discuss their financial background and budget issues, out came the box that held their records and they started going through invoices and receipts to support their application. Thus the term shoebox syndrome was born!

Smaller non-profits can grow faster than their financial systems. Grantees that practice fuzzy bookkeeping sometimes interpret financial requirements as 'too nosey'. It's not. It's due diligence. From a grantor perspective – and Robin will certainly speak from that viewpoint – the absence of good and open financial habits and paper trails tends to put potentially good ideas in second or third place for limited funds. Not the place you want to be.

And if you've outgrown your 'mom and pop' roots, your organization needs other formalized processes - such as succession planning - to ensure that new leaders are groomed and ready to assume the helm when the time comes.

Those are some of the things I've gleaned from the four years I served as Chair of a Grant Review Team. Of course, grantees bring an entirely different perspective to the table...so I'd like to ask Randi Fine to tell us a bit about her organization

Randi Fine:

OPMHAN, the Older Persons' Mental Health and Addictions Network, is a coalition of more than 60 provincial and regional organizations, as well as individuals and family members. It's a network committed to making life better for older adults living in the community who are at risk of, or coping with, mental illness and/or addictions...and for those who care for and about them. OPMHAN has operated as a collaborative, under the OPMHAN name, since 2002.

Stuart Kidd:

OPMHAN has been successful in applying for and receiving funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. I think we'd all benefit from hearing some of your suggestions on how to successfully secure grants.

Randi Fine:

I'd be delighted...

- Be sure you have a clear objective: know what you want to do and why.
- Have a clear action plan, including activities, timelines, responsible individuals or groups, etc. Be sure your action plan fits realistically into the time you are asking for funding.
- Do your homework. Take the time to gather all pertinent background research and to conduct needs assessments - even if on a pilot or sample basis - to demonstrate that you are on the right track, there is need, and that you have the support of the community you are planning to work with.
- Make sure your partnerships are in place before you apply. Be sure you can delineate the roles and expectations of each of the partners and you have real commitment on that basis.
- When all of this is in place, meet with the funder before you submit an application so you know you are in synch with their goals and that there will be no surprises when the grant application is received.
- Be open and responsive to suggestions for change. Stuart, you touched on this as well, overcoming the "we've always done it this way" mind set.
- When preparing the grant application, make sure you answer each question as it is meant. If you're not sure, check with funder's staff. Don't assume.
- Check such mundane things as spelling and grammar. Mistakes can reflect on the quality of work your organization is capable of. You don't want to be categorized as one of those shoebox organizations Stuart talked about!
- Follow the rules, exactly. If they ask for 3 copies don't send more, or less. Don't irritate the funder!
- If you're not successful, find out why and how you can do it differently the next time. Re-apply with the changes made, if you fit the criteria.
- When you are successful - thank the funders! Then stay in touch before and between reporting periods. It's important to let them know what's working and what's not...and to listen to their advice.
- Don't forget to share your successes! Funders like to know that their monies are being well spent.

Stuart Kidd:

Thank you, Randi, for your insight. I know that Sandy Keshen also has a few thoughts she'd like to share.

I'll start by asking you the same question I asked Randi. Can you give us a quick overview of your organization?

Sandy Keshen:

Reena is a social service agency based in North Toronto and is funded by the Ministry of Community and Social Services. For more than 32 years, we have been sustaining individuals with developmental disabilities through day and residential support, outreach and respite options and clinical support. We facilitated the development of OPADD the Ontario Aging and Developmental Disabilities Project (OPADD) in 2000.

Stuart Kidd:

Sandy, you have also been successful in securing grants from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Randi gave us several suggestions...do you have anything to add?

Sandy Keshen:

Randi and I are definitely on the same page here. Allow me to add a few more ideas to the pot.

- I couldn't agree more that ongoing communication with a grantor is key. Talk to your grantor prior to submitting your application. Understand the grantor's priorities and broader based goals and where your project would fit in. Continue to converse with the grantor to give updates and obtain feedback on your ideas and your project.
- Be open to ideas from the grantor without losing sight of your focus.
- Try to avoid applying in isolation. Look at partnerships and the broader community perspective – how to involve and include others.
- Identify the gap or issue clearly with evidence.
- Be persistent – we started small and kept working on this issue over the long term.
- Meet with agencies and organizations and government representatives, make presentations at conferences, and bring the issue forward in many different venues. Doing all of these things enabled us to build partnerships and commitment to our project prior to submission.
- Clearly articulate your project and ensure that all of your champions understand the initiative.
- As Randi said, work with the government and with your funders – show how the project will assist them with an issue or problem. And, don't forget to say thank you!

Stuart Kidd:

Now let's shift our viewpoint slightly...and look at this from the perspective of the grantors.

Robin, take us for a walk in your shoes. When a grant application comes in your door, what are you looking for?

L. Robin Cardozo:

Remember that grantmakers need grant applicants and grantees. As grantmakers, we have objectives we wish to achieve. But we cannot realize these objectives without grantee organizations to carry them out. To a thoughtful grantmaker, a qualified, credible, capable grant applicant is a potential partner in achieving its mission.

In sharing their ideas, both Randi and Sandy touched on my first bit of advice:

Show how you can help a grantmaker achieve its objectives. Funding bodies do not exist simply to give out money. So, look closely at grants already made. Point to your strengths and past successes in areas that are relevant to the grantmaker's goals and demonstrate how your organization can help the grantmaker achieve its objectives.

So as grantees, you need to know what the grantmaker funds and why.

Before approaching any grantmaker, make sure you have answers to the following questions:

- What is its mission – what is it trying to achieve?
- What type of activities does it fund?
- What size grants does it make? and
- How long will it fund initiatives?

There's no point in approaching a grantmaker if there is no fit between your organization's mission and that of the grantmaker.

Foundations and government departments provide a great deal of useful information on their websites. Another excellent source of information is the Canadian Directory to Foundations and Grants, which is available from the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.

Increasingly, grantmakers, like grantees, aim for transparency and accountability to the public. This means it's usually possible to find a tremendous amount of useful information about grantmaking institutions.

My second point is: **Do your homework first.** Avoid making a 'cold' approach. If at all possible, explore your ideas in conversation with the grantmaker before submitting a written grant proposal. With most foundations, including OTF, this is strongly encouraged. We welcome conversations with potential grantees. However, if it's not possible to have exploratory conversations with the grantmaker directly, it is often worthwhile to contact other organizations that have received funding to get ideas about how to frame your application.

It's also important to be cognizant of the fact that, unfortunately, there is not enough grant dollars to fund every application.

So my third bit of advice is...**be aware of the competition for funding.** As much as we would like to, the reality is that no grantmaker can fund every good initiative. Ensure that your request is for a realistic amount of funding and have a 'plan B' just in case your grant is not approved or you receive a lesser amount. Consider partnerships and collaborative undertakings that might reduce costs and better serve more members of the community.

Having an application declined does not mean that your organization is not worthy; it only means that the funder received other applications that more closely fit their objectives and funding criteria or that they received more requests than the funder could support.

My fourth piece of advice applies to grant applications...and to life in general, that is, **be open to change.**

While grantmakers rarely carry out direct program activities, we often have considerable experience in the field, and as a result understand what works and what doesn't work. So be open to the possibility that the grantmaker may suggest changes or alternative approaches. If you get a number of questions directed at you while the grant is being reviewed, use this as an opportunity to ask your own questions to better understand what is being sought. As Stuart

noted, we're not being nosey or intrusive. We seek clarification. This understanding may improve your chances of success.

It often helps if you are open to working with partners to achieve your stated objectives.

I'd like to make one other point about openness to change.

If you are successful in securing a grant, remain open about changing conditions or shifting needs that become apparent after a grant is underway. You may realize that the money would be better spent on something a bit different, that the project is going to take longer than originally estimated, or that some of the expected results will differ.

Most grantmakers are quite open to reasonable changes because we do not want the grant to fail any more than you do. So please don't hesitate to raise these questions about a grant project that is under way.

My last bit of advice may seem obvious and quite basic: **pay attention to details.** Success in getting grants depends on more than just good ideas. The organization must demonstrate its credibility and capacity to carry out the initiative. Applicants should try to put themselves in the shoes of the grantmaker. We are looking for clearly articulated proposals, backed by facts and accompanied by complete documentation.

Applicants should take care to follow the instructions carefully and provide complete information. As Randi said, follow the rules, exactly.

If a grantmaker asks for a one-page summary of your initiative, do not send a 15-page proposal. At OTF, for example, we ask that applications not be bound. Yet many applicants disregard these instructions thinking that submitting a more professional looking cerlox bound document will improve their chances of success. Actually, all it does is increase our administrative work as we must disassemble the document in order to make copies for the reviewers. So Randi's comment about 'irritating' the funder has some merit!

I understand and appreciate that grantees go that extra mile with the best of intentions. One applicant made a larger-than-life lamination of a grant proposal thinking that it would be sure to get our attention. Imagine the fun our administrative assistants had trying to make copies of that proposal for our reviewers. So *do* pay attention to the details. *That's* the best way to get the attention of and impress your potential funder.

In closing...I believe that grantees and grantmakers are natural partners. We need one another. And when the right grantee meets the right grantor, amazing things can happen!

FICCDAT Steering Committee c/o Ontario March of Dimes received an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant of \$71,000 over six months in 2006 to help support the conference. The grant provided an opportunity for family caregivers, seniors and people with disabilities to attend the world's first Festival of International Conferences on Caregiving, Disability, Aging and Technology.