# Strategies for Increasing the Efficacy of Collaborative Grant Writing Groups in Preparing Federal Proposals

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**Abstract:** *This study explored approaches to collaborative grant proposal writing to gain a comprehensive understanding of the details and range of variation in the processes that are currently employed by professionals in pursuit of Federal grant funding. Findings were used to identify and suggest practical strategies for organizing and managing group dynamics and tasks during the phases of the collaborative writing process. It is anticipated that such strategies, when deployed at specific points in the collaborative process, may increase the efficacy of the group and the probability of a successfully funded proposal.*

Keywords: *grant writing, grant collaboration, grant partnership, Federal grantsmanship*

## Introduction

Required collaboration is becoming the norm for organizations in pursuit of Federal grant funding. While collaborative partnerships have long been encouraged, mandatory collaboration, in which the type of partner organizations (e.g., workforce development boards, K-12 schools, non-profits, community or faith-based groups, industry or businesses, etc.) are designated by the sponsoring agency, has not traditionally been required. However, many Federal departments recognize that in order to achieve the greatest return on the public investment that grants represent, a comprehensive solution that taps into the variety of resources available within a given community must be encouraged (Baker, Homan, Schonhoff & Kreuter, 1999). This commitment to protect taxpayer interests is set forth as part of a Federal agency's strategic plan, and reflects its priorities through integration of these interests with its mission and program authorities.

Mandatory grant collaboration means that collaborative writing has become a necessary skill for those charged with drafting the proposal document. The opportunity for collaboration presents many advantages for writers such as maximum input, checks and balances, access to a depth of experience, resources, joint knowledge, error reduction/achieving a more accurate text, and potentially, a higher quality document (Appel, 2005; Noël & Robert, 2004). However, these benefits hinge upon the ability of the collaborative group as a whole to carry out interactions and subsequent writing tasks effectively. This is often simpler in theory than in practice, given that the turnaround time for many requests for grant proposals is now 30 to 45 days from announcement in the Federal Register.

When such collaborative structures are not already in place (i.e., "…an alliance among individuals linked by a common problem in order to develop a viable solution for addressing that problem") (Crawley, Hughes, Dopke & Dolan, 2007, p. 184), creating an innovative

program that represents a *true collaboration* of organizational resources and ongoing reciprocity can be difficult to achieve within these constraints. Moreover, even when underlying structures for collaboration are in place, the communication required to orchestrate a diverse team through a successful grant writing endeavor, and subsequent implementation (if funding is awarded), tends to be challenging from the outset for a number of reasons.

For instance, group members from representative organizations may play diverse roles and/ or have differing levels of influence within and outside of their organization (Bacon, 1990), leading to dissention in assignment of tasks. Partnering organizations also do not necessarily share similar missions and organizational acculturation (Palmeri, 2004), which dictate how and when work is accomplished. The group's ability to mediate these, and other differences, therefore likely plays a significant role in whether or not they can achieve a successful outcome.

In addition, "because collaborative work often places unique demands on participants - requiring some unfamiliar attitudes and behaviors and a wide range of specialized skills - collaborative capacity is greatly influenced by both the existing skills, knowledge and attitudes members bring to the table and efforts taken to build, support, and access this capacity" (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz & Lounsbury, 2001, p. 243). In other words, not only is it essential to strategically select the group's members, as each individual's skills, talents and work habits must provide an added value to the whole, but the ability of the group to communicate and work together to achieve its collective purpose also largely depends on how effectively its dynamics are organized and managed to create conditions that promote collaboration.

Ensuring the success of collaborative grant writing endeavors is of utmost importance for organizations seeking Federal grant funding. And while past research on collaborative writing provides a broad overview of collaborative writing practices across a variety of settings, such strategies have yet to be established within the context of collaborative grant proposal writing (hereafter referred to as *grant writing*). This study therefore sought to identify practical strategies for organizing and managing group dynamics and tasks by exploring the following research questions:

1. What information might help professionals position themselves and their organization for success as they prepare to embark on collaborative grant writing endeavors?

2. What strategies are being deployed by professionals who participate in collaborative grant writing activities to organize and manage group *dynamics* (i.e., managing interpersonal communications, negotiating conflict, assigning roles, establishing a communication plan, and debriefing)?

3. What strategies are being deployed by professionals who participate in collaborative grant writing activities to organize and manage group *tasks* (i.e., information collection, document management, and writing tasks)?

Findings were used to build a typology of the roles specific to collaborative grant writing groups, and to provide a discussion of ideal group composition and leadership. In addition, strategies were presented within the framework of a model based on Fisher's (1970) theory of small group decision-making. According to the theory, group communication transactions

can be organized into four phases; orientation, conflict, emergence and reinforcement. Fisher postulates that groups consistently move from one phase to the next, and sometimes back again, as collective decisions are made. Creating a model of the collaborative grant writing work continuum consistent with the theoretical phases of decision emergence provided a way to demonstrate how particular strategies, when deployed at specific points, might help groups move through the collaborative and writing processes more efficiently. It is anticipated that the suggested best practice strategies will increase the effectiveness of groups in developing an innovative project that can then be represented through a collective proposal document.

## Literature Review

A review of the literature reveals that collaborative writing as a subject of inquiry began in the late 1980s (Noël & Robert, 2004). Over the past decades such research has explored the topic in a variety of ways. For example, researchers have examined the writing strategies used by *collaborative writing* groups (Noël & Robert, 2004; Stratton, 1989), the assignment of group roles (Nelson & Smith, 1990; Stratton, 1989), the influence of gender (Lay, 1989), the use of collaborative writing assignments in business communications courses (Scheffler, 1992; Duin, 1990; Nelson & Smith, 1990), and the impact on, and use of, technology in collaborative writing endeavors (Jones, 2005; Sakellariadis, et al., 2008). The majority of these studies have been qualitative in nature, using case studies, open-ended interviews and surveys, or a combination thereof to explore the topic and establish a basis for understanding collaborative writing processes in these various contexts. Yet, even with several aspects of this topic having been explored, many inconsistencies remain; thus, the information that we have about collaborative writing in general tends to be somewhat fragmentary and unfocused (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore & Snow, 1987).

One reason for inconsistencies across research may be that there has been little agreement in defining the term collaborative writing (Beck, 1993; Lowry, Curtis & Lowry, 2004). For instance, Duin (1990) defined collaborative writing as "…a process that requires support for more than just the exchange and maintenance of information" (p. 45), while Jones (2005) defined it "…as interaction by an author or authors with people, documents, and organizational rules in the process of creating documents" (p. 450). In addition, seemingly synonymous terms are used throughout the literature such as cooperative writing, group authoring and co-authoring (Lowry, et al., 2004), which is indicative of the numerous iterations of collaborative writing endeavors. Consequently, these variations make it difficult to interpret the findings of the existing research with any degree of specificity (Allen, et al., 1987; Lowry, et al., 2004). What has been established, however, is the difficult nature of writing collaboratively, the wide range of strategies groups use for producing a collective document, roles that emerge as a group moves through stages of interaction and the writing process, and the influence and functions of interpersonal communication within collaborative writing groups.

One observation that nearly all researchers agree on is that collaborative writing is as difficult as it is complex, and that it involves both social and intellectual aspects. This complexity is well illustrated in the following discussion by Kraut, Galegher, Fish & Chalfonte (1992):

> Socially, collaborative writing requires that group members establish shared achievement goals, that they divide tasks among themselves keeping in mind both concerns for fairness and differences in individual skills, and that they resolve questions of authority within their group. Intellectually, it requires that group members establish shared rhetorical goals and a common understanding of the facts on which the document is to be based. They must also solve high-level writing problems… To meet these social and intellectual challenges, group members must also contend with considerable procedural complexity. That is, they must adopt procedures that will enable them to get their work launched; to circulate draft versions among group members; and to refer to specific portions of their documents as pieces of text are created, revised, and incorporated into a unified whole. To launch their work, group members must be able to coordinate their conversation well enough to ensure mutual understanding of the project's requirements and goals and, more important, of the substance of the problem they are confronting; that is, they must be able to collaborate in the construction of meaning. (p. 377)

It is evident in reviewing the challenges faced by collaborative writing groups across contexts that the difficulties they encounter typically rest upon how group communication, including the organization and management of group dynamics, is facilitated. For example, if a problem arises with group dynamics, it is likely that the management of writing tasks will also be compromised. Instances in which group communication or the management thereof is the primary cause of difficulty with writing tasks include diffusion of responsibility, inequitable division of labor, difficulty keeping to a timeline and managing interpersonal relationships throughout the writing process (Noël & Robert, 2004).

## Defining "Collaborative Writing"

While many of the existing studies touch on the idea of group communication as being central to collaborative writing issues, few fully explore this idea or provide a discussion of how "interventions" at the various identified phases of the group communication or writing processes might impact the overall success of the group in completing collaborative writing tasks. In seeking best practice strategies, it was therefore important to first define collaborative writing and then consider the distinctive characteristics of the context in which the writing is taking place, as different scenarios often require their own unique strategies (Stratton, 1989).

Collaboration is in essence a communicative venture, as communication is a fundamental necessity of any kind of teamwork (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2001; Germonprez & Zigurs, 2006). As such, collaborative writing was defined for the purposes of this research as it was by Lowry, et al. (2004): "An iterative and social process that involves a team focused on a common objective that negotiates, coordinates and communicates during the creation of a common document" (p. 72). This definition was selected, as it implies the necessity for group communication and shared decision making within the overall framework of the writing process.

## Overview of the Collaborative Grant Writing Process

The development of a Federal grant proposal is driven by a request for grant proposals (RFP), which sets forth the priorities of the funding agency and establishes the "rules" governing the submission of a proposal including document content, formatting and requirements for mandatory partners. It is then up to the collaborating group to determine who is best positioned to be the lead applicant (i.e., fiscal agent). This decision often impacts who is assigned to the roles of the collaborative writing team, as well as who is ultimately responsible for the preparation and submission of the final proposal. In this sense, collaborative writing is "a holistic process, which involves heavy group communication and can be conducted through many different strategies and work modes" (Lowry, et al., 2004, p. 90), which the group must negotiate. Thus, while program development is in theory separate from the writing, those interactions greatly influence the ability of the team, particularly the writers, to adequately convey the details of the project without discrepancy.

The proposal document itself is technical in nature, requiring a detailed response to questions posed by the funding agency in the areas of need, proposed solution for addressing the need (i.e., project description, implementation and management plans), goals and objectives, budget, and methods for evaluating outcomes. The collective proposal document must present details of the collaborative project in a clear, concise format, and be created relatively quickly in accordance with a strict deadline. For the writing team, the goal is to articulately describe and/or explain the project concept, which often blends the different workplace cultures and values, as well as the different missions of each partner organization. Proposal writers must also ensure that action items (i.e., project activities) tie seamlessly to implementation costs, which involves a weaving together of the need, objectives and outcome evaluation as they relate to the development and implementation of the grant-funded project.

## Unique Characteristics of Collaborative Grant Writing

In comparing collaborative grant writing to other types of collaborative writing, some unique characteristics are evident. For instance, grant writing groups are typically comprised of members representing diverse public sectors but who must work together to collectively develop and propose a comprehensive project (e.g., complementary set of services) within a very short timeframe; typically 30 to 45 days. During the brief period when a group comes together, members must negotiate hierarchies, build trust, resolve conflicts as they arise, and implement project management strategies within the time constraints in order to achieve collective goals that include drafting a well-written proposal. Therefore, the complexity of the writing process is increased not only with multiple authors, which leads to an inevitable need to coordinate multiple perspectives and work efforts, but also in navigating group dynamics within the context of project development, budget negotiations and the like (Lowry, et al., 2004). As such, challenges may arise, as this context requires integration of multiple perspectives, consensus-building, and high-level interpersonal interactions that are not typically involved in single-author writing or a part of day-to-day workflow (Kraut, et al., 1992).

Other unique factors that may affect the collaborative grant writing process include community politics, existing relationships among organizations, individual agendas and loyalties to the group, and ideological differences in how partner organizations approach the issue(s) to be addressed. Such facets and the degree to which various stakeholders are influenced to act on them can create positive working conditions or cause strain, either of which impacts the group's overall capacity for collaboration. It is in this sense that managing expectations, group dynamics, and writing tasks using best practice strategies can play an integral role in the success of a collaborative grant-writing group.

## *Theories of Small Group Decision Making*

A number of models have been developed in the study of small group interaction, and there is consensus that behavior in small groups is not random. Rather, distinct phases can be identified along a continuum in which group transactions typically take place (Nelson & Smith, 1990). The number of phases involved in group decision making, and the terms used to explain the phases, is dependent on the particular theory and model used to examine the communication transactions; however, similar phases emerge in each case.

As noted, Fisher's (1970) theory of group decision emergence divides communication transactions into the phases of orientation, conflict, emergence and reinforcement. Using these phases as the overarching framework for exploring the collaborative grant writing process, a model of the collaborative work continuum was created for the study. The model provided a way to show the complex collaborative processes in an organized way, and was advantageous in identifying the strategies to be employed by grant writing groups at specific points in the work process. It was anticipated that this added level of detail likely increases the potential effectiveness of the strategies suggested to influence group efficacy.

## Method

### *Scope*

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB #199263-1) at Grand Valley State University, the research was conducted during 2010 - 2011 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Interview participants were comprised of professionals who had at least three years of grant experience (e.g., as a proposal writer, program director, executive director, etc.) and who had participated as a member of multiple (i.e., three or more) collaborative grant writing groups. It was anticipated that this level of knowledge and experience would provide the individual with a good understanding of the nuances specific to the context of the research, and that such a group would provide diversity of perspective beyond what would be accessible if the research had focused only on a single case. An analysis of interview transcripts and semi-transcribed, detailed field notes was conducted to discover patterns and/or themes as they related to the various theoretical decision making phases through which groups pass as they work to achieve the tasks that culminate in an end product (i.e., the grant proposal).

## Sampling Methods

The first round of interview respondents was recruited by means of a purposive sampling framework, by inviting members of a local, professional grant writers group (i.e., Grant Writer's Roundtable) to participate in the research. The principal investigator (PI) initiated contact with the roundtable facilitator via email and a formal presentation about the study was made to the group during their November 2010 meeting. This selection method resulted in a prospect pool of four individuals.

Upon initial contact, basic demographic information was gathered to determine if the prospective participant met the requisite criteria. Specifically, criteria were used to compile a respondent group that was representative of a variety of public sectors and levels of organization hierarchy (i.e., professional job roles) in order to produce a rich data pool from which to discover potential nuances that might influence the effectiveness of suggested strategies. Table 1 below lists the information that was gathered for this purpose, as well as the minimum baseline criteria that each subject had to meet in order to be selected as a respondent. Two of the original four individuals were selected for participation in this study, as they met the criteria.

*Table 1.* Prerequisite Demographic Criteria

| Question re: Prerequisite Criterion | Minimal Requirement for Participation |
|---|---|
| With respect to collaborating with external partners in a work setting, how many years of experience do you have:<br>• In your current position?<br>• In previous positions? | Three years of experience. |
| How many years of grant experience do you have? | Three years of grant experience/familiarity with grant processes; experience did not need to be specific to writing, but may have may related to grant development, management, etc. |
| What type of organization do you work for? (categories will be provided) | Participants representing several public sectors where sought to discover potential nuances that could influence the research findings. |
| Is collaboration part of your regular job responsibilities? | Participants representing different job titles, responsibilities and/or experiences were sought to discover potential nuances that could influence research findings. |

Respondent driven sampling was used to locate additional interviewees. Specifically, at the conclusion of the two initial "seed" interviews (Heckathorn, 2002), the first sample generation, each respondent was asked to provide the name of additional contacts whom they believed would have similar experiences participating in collaborative grant writing activities, and who

might be interested in participating in the research. This technique resulted in an additional two sample generations consisting of five additional interview respondents.

*Data Collection*

Taking an objectivist approach, the wording and sequence of the interview questions were stipulated by creating a script for conducting structured interviews. The questions comprising this script were focused to correlate with the primary research questions, which were more broad and exploratory in nature. The script facilitated the interview process and ensured consistency across interviews while lending to the ease with which data could later be retrieved and analyzed. This approach also allowed the PI to compare participant responses and identify themes pertinent to "answering" the primary research questions. Emergent design strategies were occasionally employed allowing questions to be rearranged and additional ones incorporated when the opportunity to do so arose serendipitously during the course of an interview.

The first part of the interview script (Part I) was comprised of questions for collecting demographic information. The data collected were used to provide descriptive statistics about the research population to include gender, age range, years of professional experience, current type of position, and type of employer organization. The second part of the interview script (Part II) was comprised of a series of 16 primary open-ended questions and 14 sub-questions, arranged into categories according to the four theoretical phases suggested by Fisher (1970), as well as two additional categories; one focused on pre-collaboration activities, and the other on participant observation/reflection pertaining to their collaborative grant writing experiences. Specifically, interview questions were arranged into the following six categories: pre-collaboration, orientation, conflict, emergence, reinforcement, and reflection.

Using Fisher's suggested theoretical phases to define the question categories allowed the PI to focus the questions on the types of activities that one might anticipate would occur during any given phase. For instance, the first category, *pre-collaboration*, included questions that asked the interviewee about the criteria that he/she has used in choosing collaborative group members, as it seems naturally intuitive that this would take place prior to the second category, orientation. Table 2 lists the survey questions for each of the categories.

In addition to serving as the framework for the interview script, the theoretical phases suggested by Fisher and the category of pre-collaboration was used to create a model of the collaborative grant writing work continuum. This model provided a way to illustrate the complex processes in an organized way, and to confirm whether or not the theory was applicable in the context of collaborative grant writing, as suggested. Following the analysis of findings, strategies applicable during each of the phases were added to complete the model, as presented in the discussion of findings section of this paper as Figure 1.

Participation in this research was voluntary and data collection took place across a six week period. A total of seven structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes were conducted. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The PI also maintained semi-transcribed, detailed field notes. Data collection concluded once a point of saturation had been reached in each of the pre-determined categories of inquiry.

*Table 2.* Interview Questions

| Part I: Demographic Variables of Interest |
| --- |
| 1. What is your job title/degree of responsibility/leadership in your present position? <br> 2. Years of professional experience? (In current position? Including previous experience?) <br> 3. Is collaboration part of the mission of the organization? Part of your regular job duties? <br> 4. What is the approximate size of the organization? <br> 5. What type(s) of grants (private, federal, local/county, state) have required collaboration? <br> 6. Gender <br> 7. Age Range |
| **Part II: Substantive Questions** |
| **Category 1: Pre-Collaboration** <br> 1. Based on your experiences, describe the steps you have taken in planning for collaboration that you believe ultimately makes the endeavor successful or unsuccessful? (i.e., before initial meeting) <br> 2. Please discuss the selection criteria have you used in choosing group members/partners. <br>   • In terms of personal skills, who might the ideal group consist of? <br>   • With respect to the hierarchy of an employee in an organization, who should be included in the group and in what role? |
| **Category 2: Orientation ~ Phase 1** <br> 3. In your experience, what has been an effective breakdown of group roles? <br>   • What tasks are associated with these roles? <br>   • Describe what you believe the characteristics of an effective leader are within the context of a collaborative grant writing group? <br> 4. In your experience, are there strategies that can be used during the initial meetings that set the tone for ongoing group interactions? <br> 5. How have the groups with whom you have worked organized the work process? How have the tasks and timelines been negotiated? <br> 6. How have the groups that you have worked with managed the shared document production? <br> 7. How have the groups that you have worked with handled communicating/have they had a plan for communicating? If so, please describe? <br>   • What are the attributes of an effective communication plan? |

**Category 3 & 4: Conflict ~ Phase 2 and Emergence ~ Phase 3**

8. In your experience, what is the primary cause of group conflict in the context of collaborative grant writing?

9. Describe a situation in which a conflict was successfully resolved.
   - How did the group resolve this conflict? What strategies did they use?

10. Describe a situation in which a conflict was not successfully resolved.
    - What was the result/outcome of the conflict not being resolved?
    - Thinking about the situation you just described, what do you think inhibited the resolution of the conflict?
    - How were group dynamics impacted?
    - Based on hindsight, how do you think this issue could have been resolved successfully?

11. Did this issue impact future collaborative endeavors with these partners? If so, how?

**Category 5: Reinforcement ~ Phase 4**

12. Describe the activities that typically take place during the conclusion of the group's work together?
    - Has a formal debriefing session been a part of the process for the groups that you have worked with?
    - If yes, please describe what you mean by "debriefing."

13. Thinking about a collaborative proposal that was funded, did the initial tone of the collaborative process carry over to implementation?
    - To what extent was program staff significantly involved in the proposal development?
    - To what extent was anyone from the writing team part of the implementation process?

**Category 6: Respondent Reflection:**

14. How do you define success in the context of collaborative grant writing?

15. What have been the greatest challenges that you have encountered while participating in collaborative grant writing activities?

16. What has been most rewarding while participating in collaborative grant writing activities?

*Assumptions*

The underlying assumption central to this research was that all groups move through phases of decision making that are both socially constructed, and influenced by the particular context in which the individual members are working. Moreover, it was presumed that processes specific to each phase can be identified and predicted to some extent, and further, that strategies can be identified and deployed to help groups move more seamlessly through the collaborative

process. In other words, group decision-making is governed by patterns of group interaction as theorized by Fisher (1970) and best practices can be strategically deployed to ensure that a collaborative grant writing group more effectively achieves its objective.

*Limitations*

Potential limitations of any research methodology should be considered when reflecting on, and implementing, findings. First, as with all qualitative methods, bias on the part of the researcher may have presented possible limitations in the way that the data were processed and findings reported. For instance, the PI's experience as a grant writing professional and collaborator may have had the potential to introduce bias with respect to interpretation of data. However, while the PI's background could have been a limitation in some ways, it was more likely that it enhanced accessibility to the research population, as well as provided deeper insight into the factors that influence grant writing groups in terms of selection of members, internal politics, and strategies that inevitably set the collaboration up for success or failure.

Another potential source of bias was the way that the interview questions were worded and the order in which they were asked (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For this reason, the PI kept the wording of the interview questions as neutral as possible by refraining from the use of jargon, and by using language that would be clear to a general audience in an effort to lessen the possible misinterpretation of the questions. In addition, the interview script was reviewed for bias by an impartial professional colleague. This individual reviewed the questions for appropriate wording, cultural sensitivity, and different interpretations of words and sentences that could have led to misconceptions.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge issues related to generalizability of research findings. Here, the scope of the research was restricted to West Michigan. The suggested strategies could therefore differ slightly from those used in other locations, as each community has its own politics and inner workings which influence the ability of groups to form and work in collaboration regardless of the strategies deployed. In this sense, generalizability of findings may have been compromised. However, it is anticipated that the findings are potentially applicable to similar organizations and under similar circumstances.

## Discussion of Findings

*Part I: Interview Participant Demographics*

The demographic data collected in response to Part I of the structured interviews were collated into categories in order to provide information about the research population. Categories included: organization type and size, job categories, gender, age range, professional experience in years, and the types of grants that have required the respondent to participate in collaborative activities (i.e., private, federal, local/county, state). A diverse set of participants was compiled to capture differing perspectives across multiple settings that would allow for cross-case analysis of responses. Resulting data were therefore not specific to any particular individual but rather provided insight about professionals involved in collaborative grant writing activities.

## Respondent Characteristics

Criteria used to select respondents ensured that the group was representative of a variety of public sectors and levels of organizational hierarchy (i.e., professional job roles). Additionally, individuals selected for participation had a plethora of experience and "…regularly moved outside the confines of their organizations to represent their own organization and to link programs with others by establishing and cultivating relationships" (Tsasi, 2009, p. 8). That is, collaboration was within the scope of their regular job duties with each individual having participated in three or more collaborative grant writing endeavors.

The gender composition of the respondent group was nearly equal with a total of three males and four females participating. The group ranged in age from 30 to 48 years of age, with the majority falling between 40 and 45 years. Many had at least ten years of professional experience or more; two had ten years or less. In total, six respondents held a position as either a director or grant professional, and one respondent held a position as a grant-funded staff person.

Respondents represented a range of organizations of varying size that regularly take part in inter-organizational collaborations to provide complementary services via grant funding. Four respondents were drawn from non-profit organizations, two were employed by institutions of higher education, and one represented local government. Collectively, the missions of each organization included collaboration within the general scope of business activities. It was noted that these collaborations did not always involve grant projects. However, with respect to the type of grantors requiring collaboration, it was predominately government grantors (i.e., Federal grants) that required collaboration with specified types of partner organizations.

## Part II: Substantive Interview Questions

A review of the data collected in response to Part II interview questions was conducted. The technique of analytic generalization, also termed theoretical elaboration, was used to compare participant responses and identify themes. Thereafter, findings (i.e., best practice strategies) were linked to the collaborative work continuum model that was created based on Fisher's (1970) theory of small group decision making. With respect to the model specifically, findings confirmed that there is an initial phase, pre-collaboration, during which an internal team prepares to initiate an endeavor. Pre-collaboration is then followed by the subsequent phases of orientation, conflict, emergence and reinforcement, as suggested. A discussion of the findings, organized by the pre-determined categories of the interview script, is presented.

## Phase 1: Pre-Collaboration

Pre-collaborative activities precede the orientation phase and are completed in preparation for collaborative work. Findings revealed these activities are more essential to the collaborative grant writing process than initially anticipated. Specifically, individuals charged with representing their organization in a collaborative effort must be prepared to strategically position the organization for partnership. This requires fully understanding the organizational mission and the resources that can or cannot be brought to the table. This insight is developed through

internal planning, networking with colleagues, and understanding the nuances of the funding environment; all of which enables staff members to assess the community need as it relates to their organization, and to articulate how organizational services and resources will contribute to a collective approach that comprehensively addresses the issue(s).

## Pre-Collaboration Strategies

*Internal planning.* Findings indicated that successful grant writing collaborations begin with internal planning that takes place well before proposal development and writing, as an essential "first step" in the process. Here, the issue of a strict timeframe was a paramount factor, as a lack of preparation can lead to an organization having to pass up a grant opportunity. Responses suggested that internal grant planning entails bringing together a core internal team comprised of the grant writer(s), program staff and subject experts to develop a collective agreement as to how the organization will propose to respond to the anticipated request for grant proposals. While not intended as an all-inclusive list, specific planning strategies may include formal strategic planning of long-range organizational initiatives that will require budget allocations, discussions among key staff to determine the "fit" of a potential grant opportunity prior to engaging partners, informal planning of the collective approach to be taken during project development negotiations, and/or obtaining buy-in from organizational leadership.

Planning discussions might also include a review of the full scope of resources necessary for a project, and what organizational resources (e.g., monetary and otherwise - staff time, etc.) can be offered during collaborative negotiations. Such planning equips those tasked with the responsibility of participating in the collaborative activities with the knowledge necessary for proceeding with deliberate action on a project. It also allows time for vetting potential obligations with the organization's leadership when such individuals are not involved as members of the core team. Respondents also noted that grant-funded projects are more easily implemented when accurate insights about resources can be shared during proposal development.

Finally, findings also suggested that an internal team may choose to plan, or at least discuss, various approaches for addressing potential issues that members believe might arise in a group setting. For instance, the team may decide on one or more strategies for addressing budget negotiations, or how to engage problem group members while maintaining political sensitivities. While such strategies are not typically deployed until a collaborative group enters the phases of conflict and emergence (or not at all in some cases), anticipating and preparing for potential issues may help individuals in a leadership role to better manage such circumstances.

*Choosing partners.* Determining which external organizations to invite as grant partners is an important next step, and may be the focus of discussions during the internal planning phase. While it is often the case that specific types of entities are mandated by the funding agency, organizations have some leeway in choosing the specific organizations with whom they collaborate (e.g., there may be a number of non-profit organizations offering similar services). With respect to best practices for selecting partners, three primary strategies emerged.

The first strategy was to choose partners with whom the organization has an existing relationship. This can be especially important given the limited timeframe for developing and writing a grant proposal. More specifically, the general consensus was that when the underlying structures for partnership are already in place (i.e., trust, group cohesion, etc.), a group is more likely to advance through the collaborative and writing processes more efficiently, and with greater success. Additionally, when two or more organizations have previously implemented a collaborative grant project, the group typically understands how the other organization's program staff works and what services can or cannot be seamlessly combined. Findings support that having this shared history is especially helpful during the project development phase.

The second strategy for selecting partners was to choose an organization based on whether or not it offered complementary services. Respondents viewed alignment across services to be a primary advantage for all partners, as offering a full scope of services is often necessary for meeting the needs of the population served by the grant-funded program; and thus, achieving the required grant outcomes. However, even when combined resources would be advantageous, several respondents stated that an organization was still sometimes passed up as a collaborator because the monetary resources it required to deliver its services would exceed an acceptable share of grant funds. In other words, resources are only considered complementary when the cost of delivering them is viewed as feasible by potential partners.

The last strategy for selecting partners was to choose an organization that empowers key staff to make decisions on its behalf. Respondents were firm in stating that it is critical for partners to appoint a single decision maker for the duration of the collaborative process due to the limited timeframe for developing the project and submitting the grant proposal. Grant projects typically cannot move forward without firm commitments from each of the partners; thus, projects that lack a firm commitment end up stalling out and wasting the valuable organizational resources that have been devoted to preparing the grant proposal.

Finally, while not necessarily a strategy but rather a noteworthy aspect of selecting partners, was consideration of community politics. Respondents noted for example, the importance of considering the political ramifications that participating (or not participating) can have for an organization prior to entering a collaborative relationship. In addition, the way that a collaborative relationship may shape the community's perception of an organization is often a concern (i.e., publicity management). Likewise, it may be necessary to select a partner organization based on the position it holds within the community; in terms of their status as a key stakeholder or their influence with particular community groups and/or the target population of the grant.

## Phase 2: Orientation

During the orientation phase, group members build rapport as they become acquainted and begin to establish the communication rules, and expectations for group interaction. To enhance collaborative processes, there must be some form of relationship building at this stage to serve

as a way to gain commitment to the project. Therefore, formal and informal channels may be used to gain feelings of reciprocity and to set the stage for the positive exchange of information (Fisher, 1970; Swarts, 2004). In the context of collaborative grant writing, the initial group meeting functions as the orientation phase, and serves the dual purposes of providing the venue for establishing a group's collective purpose, and defining the modes for project management. A sense of group identity and cohesion develops if the group is functional. These feelings lend to satisfaction with the group by individual members, as does perceived progress toward a shared goal (Kerr & Tindale, 2004; Nelson & Smith, 1990).

## Orientation Strategies

*Guided interaction.* A basic, but nevertheless important, project management strategy is to use a flexible agenda to guide the initial meeting, as an agenda lends structure for interactions as the collaborative group becomes established. Doing so also keeps the group on track to accomplish essential tasks, as the document outlines specific items to be discussed or decided. During the initial meeting, a cohesive group will likely move from formal introductions to informal interactions in establishing a common goal (i.e., identifying as a group through the acknowledgment and discussion of the issue(s) to be addressed), and clarifying its purpose (i.e., motives for acting, next steps, etc.). Participants reported that informal socializing between group members, initial verbal commitment to pursuing a collaborative approach, and discussion concerning "next steps" typically takes place. Respondents also believed that open discussions about expectations and "rules" helps to create a certain camaraderie and trust between group members which adds to the group's ability to resolve conflicts later in the process. Settling these fundamental concerns advances the group to their next task of assigning roles.

*Assigning roles.* A successful collaboration provides members with a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities that facilitate collective action toward achieving a common goal. "Such clarity and formality help to create a stable, predictable coalition structure and operating procedure, reduce conflicts and, promote member satisfaction and commitment" (Foster-Fishman, et al., 2001, p. 254), as the potential for conflict increases when the boundaries of responsibility are unclear (Nelson & Smith, 1990). Roles provide a niche for each member, and each role typically has a set of associated duties that help establish accountability to the group (Yalom, 1985). Furthermore, because certain tasks are typically associated with each role, determining the method for accomplishing "next steps" logically flows from role assignments.

Findings revealed that the most common roles include leader, coordinator, decision maker, writer/editor, and subject expert; all of which have been discussed in the literature as they also apply in similar contexts (Lowry, et al., 2004; Noël & Robert, 2004). While it was beyond the scope of the study to conduct an in-depth exploration of group leadership, it is important to highlight the role of leader, as it is perhaps most crucial in dictating the overall effectiveness of a group according to participant responses. Table 3 offers a snapshot of how the different roles interrelate throughout the collaborative grant writing process.

*Table 3.* Interrelationship of Group Roles

| Role | Value-Add to Group | Relation to Other Members |
|---|---|---|
| Leader | Keeps the collaborative process moving forward; facilitates buy-in, determines "next steps," and serves as the final decision maker. | Interacts with all group members in one way or another, especially the coordinator. |
| Coordinator | Manages the technical aspects of drafting the proposal; coordinates group communication, set the timelines, ensures follow-through. | Communicates with all group members to ensure the project stays on track. |
| Decision Makers | Makes timely decisions/commitments on behalf of their organization. | Works with Leader to make final decisions. |
| Grant Writer | Possesses knowledge about the "ins and outs" of grant writing. Attends group meetings to obtain specific information about the project. Crafts the proposal document. | Works with all group members to draft the proposal, especially the coordinator. |
| Editor | Ensures that the details in the final proposal document are accurate and clearly written in a cohesive voice. | Works with the writer(s) and coordinator to put the text into one style and voice. |
| Subject Experts | Provides insight from his/her specialized knowledge and experience with the target population, aspects of the program, etc. | Works with the leader and other group members to develop the program. |

*Work plan and timelines.* With roles established, the next strategy is to create a formal work plan for accomplishing the writing and other proposal preparation tasks according to an agreed upon timeline. The lead organization typically facilitates a discussion among the group during the initial meeting to expedite agreement on work assignments. According to McNellis (2009), work plans should specify the task to be accomplished (e.g., data to be gathered, sections to be drafted, etc.), who is responsible, the deadline, the agreed upon method for assessing progress or completion of the task, and the system for reporting on progress (e.g., draft will be emailed to the group or presented at the next meeting, etc.). Participants noted that work plans are often developed during face-to-face meetings, and then distributed in writing via email.

The work plan can be arranged according to the required criteria as outlined in the RFP, and often includes items such as data to be gathered, proposal sections to be drafted for review by the group (i.e., need section, objectives, etc.), meeting dates/times, and pertinent tasks (i.e., securing required letters of commitment, discussions with stakeholders outside the group such as external evaluators, etc.). Once work plans are written, respondents shared that they make useful "social contracts," providing members with clear deadlines, a sense of direction, and a

sense of accountability to the larger group. Moreover, clearly stated plans and activities can facilitate the perception of progress among group members (Nelson & Smith, 1998).

*Proposal document management.* As part of creating a work plan, another strategy is to determine how the collective proposal document will be drafted. Potential methods include single-author writing in which a single writer drafts the text, but interacts with the collaborative group to get advice about, or review of, the text (Jones, 2005; Lowry, et al., 2004, Noël & Robert, 2004), horizontal division wherein multiple writers divide the writing tasks by section but then work autonomously (Jones, 2005; Lowry, et al., 2004, Stratton, 1989, Noël & Robert, 2004), sequential in which the document is circulated from one writer to the next with each section of text building on what has previously been written (Jones, 2005; Lowry, Curtis, & Lowry, 2004, Sharples, 1992, Noël & Robert, 2004), or collective which involves two or more individuals simultaneously drafting a single document together throughout the entire writing process. This includes 'real time' writing using a computer program (Jones, 2005; Lowry, et al., 2004, Sharples, et al., 1993, Noël & Robert, 2004).

The majority of respondents reported having used horizontal writing (i.e., sections of the proposal assigned to single authors and later compiled into one document) and using some form of technology (usually email) to manage the shared proposal document. However, some respondents reported having used a real time platform such as GoogleDocs, Basecamp, or a Wiki, which enabled them to use the real time writing method. Regardless of how the writing is divided, it is advisable to have a single individual (usually the coordinator) assigned as the "keeper of the master document." This prevents confusion from arising when there are multiple writers and drafts, and also keeps required grant criteria from being overlooked.

*Communication plan.* Collectively constructing a complex document such as a grant proposal involves considerable navigation of group communication among the principle partners (Bell, 1998). For this reason, a crucial strategy during the orientation phase is developing a shared plan for frequent and transparent communication (Baker, et al., 1999). This plan will facilitate group cooperation so that members arrive at a coordinated effort. An effective plan establishes the main method for group communications such as conference calls, email or face-to-face meetings, and designates a responsible party to facilitate these. Further, McNellis (2009) suggests that each meeting conclude with the group developing a prescriptive plan for how they will communicate about group activities between meetings, and how the group will share its progress with leadership. He suggests that effective plans must be distributed in writing, and consist of five elements: 1) who needs to know, 2) what they need to know, 3) how they will be told (e.g., email, in person), 4) who will tell them, and 5) the deadline for telling them.

Like work plans, the strategy of using a written communication plan provides group members with a reminder about deadlines, a sense of progress, and establishes accountability. This is an important consideration as findings indicated two things with respect to unresolved conflict: 1) that communication had broken down in some way, and 2) some aspect of the planned process (e.g., work assignments) were not clear; thus, resulting in frustration, lack of accountability, and/or lack of commitment to the common goal. While this strategy is relatively simple,

findings suggest that many groups fall short of devising a formal plan for communicating and instead opt for an ad hoc arrangement. This may indicate a lack of project management expertise, as formal project management training and experience are not necessarily required for the majority of the respondent job categories, or perhaps the assumption among group members that a formal plan is not necessary.

## Phases 3 and 4: Conflict and Emergence

As a group works through the collaborative process toward developing a grant proposal, it is suggested that unpredictable activities will keep the group vacillating between conflict and emergence. During the conflict phase, group members may attempt to resolve tension surrounding the tasks of project development by exchanging and analyzing information. The group enters the emergence phase once members arrive at a shared solution to a conflict. It is likely that this shift from conflict to emergence occurs for each aspect of project development, such as specifying goals and objectives, developing the budget and selecting evaluation methods, for example. In the context of collaborative grant writing, the coordinator usually manages the tasks of the writers during repetitive rounds of drafting and revision/conflict and emergence (Lowry, et al., 2004). As this description implies, moving through the conflict and emergence phases is an ongoing process for a group.

## Strategies for Moving Through Conflict and Emergence

Nelson & Smith (1990) suggest that a functional group uses conflict to arrive at a consensus, while a dysfunctional group begins to break down during this phase:

> Conflict in a small group situation may be productive or functional when members are encouraged to: search for new ideas or solutions, clarify issues, increase participation, delay premature decisions, or discuss disagreements. Group decisions may be improved by new ideas generated during conflict by groups which allow time for reflection. Conflict is functional when opportunities for discussion of disagreements are created. However, conflict may become negative, dysfunctional, or destructive when the object of conflict progresses from issues to personalities, and when conflict consumes time, sidetracking the group from its goal. (p. 60)

In collaborative grant writing, it is primarily the role of a leader to organize and manage group dynamics so that they do not become dysfunctional. Yalom & Yalom (1998) stated that "the effective group leader…must be something of a social engineer, maintaining the structure of the group in the interest of productive work. Setting up a culture of trust, in which members feel safe to give and receive feedback, is especially difficult…with high stress levels, ambiguity and confusion. But honesty and an atmosphere of frank mutual exchange are essential components of any fruitful collaborative effort" (p. 36). With a leader's skills significantly influencing the capacity of the group to achieve its purpose, it is important for the lead organization to consider who it assigns as a representative in grant collaborations, as that individual nearly always assumes the role of "group leader."

*Interpersonal sensitivity.* With the collaborative writing process underway, a leader will ideally deploy strategies to support interpersonal harmony among the team such as encouraging the group to search for new ideas or solutions, ensuring issues are clarified, delaying premature decisions, and perhaps most important during the conflict and emergence phases, discussing disagreements (Lowry, et al., 2004; Nelson & Smith, 1990). As issues arise, it is up to the leader to recognize them and address the source of the conflict. Findings revealed three broad strategies for dealing with conflict with interpersonal sensitivity.

First, a leader may choose to address conflict during face-to-face group meetings with all group members present. This strategy facilitates transparency and trust among members, as each member has the opportunity to weigh in on potential resolutions. Findings suggested this strategy be used for addressing substantive conflict (i.e., positive conflict that occurs as a functional group moves toward shared ideas and solutions through productive discussion), as it provides the opportunity for clarification of issues, increased participation, and productive disagreements that help move the group move toward consensus (Lay, 1989; Lowry, et al., 2004).

With interpersonal conflict (i.e., negative conflict directed at individuals and their ideas) or when a single partner is holding up the progress of the group in some other way (e.g., lack of accountability, failing to obtain a commitment from leadership, etc.), respondents indicated it was best for a leader to have a face-to-face conversation with the problem partner in a one-on-one setting. Doing so prevents embarrassment and allows the partner to openly discuss issues he/she may be reluctant to discuss in the presence of the group.

Finally, findings revealed that there are sometimes conflicts that the leader may choose not to address. While choosing not to resolve a conflict is not a strategy per se, it may be the best course of action in some situations. For instance, due to time constraints a leader may decide it is better to finalize a decision before achieving buy-in from the whole group. Likewise, the political ramifications of confronting an issue may not be worth the "social cost" of forcing a resolution.

*Focused guidance.* To avoid many types of conflict, or to address it in other cases (i.e., enforcing social contracts such as the work plan), a leader must possess the skills to intuitively provide direction that keeps the group on task, or tactfully exert influence at key points in the process. It is also important for a leader to oversee project management by working closely with the coordinator. Initially, a leader provides focused guidance by facilitating the development of communication and work plans, and ensuring roles are assigned and tasks made clear. Later in the collaborative process, a coordinator can alert a leader to breakdowns in any aspect of the process that may require enforcing follow-through. These themes emerged from responses regarding the ability to lead group interactions and other task-oriented exchanges in a structured manner thereby facilitating overall progress toward the group's collective goal.

## Phase 5: Reinforcement

The reinforcement phase is essential for creating group solidarity, as it provides a sense of closure and often a renewed sense of commitment to the project. In this context, informal debriefing provides the venue for discussing final steps in the grant writing process (i.e., review

and approval of the proposal, obtaining approvals/signatures, submitting the proposal) and reinforcing camaraderie, while formal debriefing serves the functions of allowing a group to determine what went well, lessons learned, and ways to facilitate future endeavors more smoothly (McNellis, 2009).

## Strategies for Reinforcement

*Formal debriefing.* Although recommended in the literature, findings indicated that collaborative grant writing groups typically do not hold a formal debriefing session. Rather, the collaborative process concludes once each organization reviews and approves the final grant proposal. This may be the case for a few reasons. First, there often is not a direct need for the proposal writing team to work together again per se. That is, each individual resumes his/her daily job duties, as the goal for working together has been accomplished. Additionally, the proposal writing team is not usually the same as those who will be responsible for grant implementation.

Findings did reveal that internal debriefing may take place in some cases, especially among participants of the lead organization. It was noted that these debriefing sessions are often informal venues for discussing what could have gone better, whether or not to consider an organization for future partnership, and making tentative plans for grant implementation. While it was evident that debriefing is important for the internal team that will be ultimately responsible for the project should the grant be awarded, research supports inclusion of the practice for all organizations that intend to be involved in future collaborations, as it can help
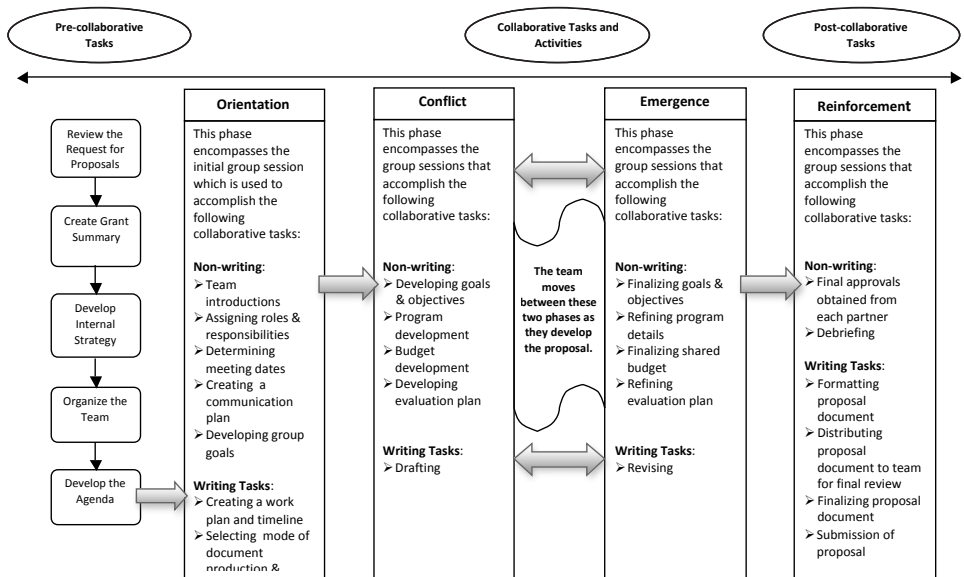


*Figure 1.* Collaborative Grant Writing Continuum

individuals charged with participating in collaborative endeavors to develop more effective processes and an aptitude for managing complicated projects.

Figure 1 is the model created using Fisher's theory of small group decision making as a paradigm to provide a visual representation of the collaborative grant writing process. Each phase described in this section is shown, along with the activities that typically occur during each phase.

## *Participant Reflection*

Finally, respondents were asked to discuss their definition of success in the context of collaborative grant writing, as well as the most common challenges they typically encounter. The majority noted that true collaboration often requires some degree of change or flexibility in the current system for addressing the issue(s). Most viewed such compromises as positive, and welcomed the opportunity to take a greater risk in trying something new than would otherwise be possible for their organization alone. That is, many appreciated the increased level of risk tolerance that collaboration can provide. Several respondents also noted that even if a project is a failure, the experience provides the entire group with a fresh perspective on the issue(s). Thus, successful relationship building and the occasion for gaining a new understanding about the other organizations was viewed as highly beneficial, even when challenges arose.

## Conclusion

This study explored and identified practical strategies for organizing and managing group dynamics and tasks within the context of collaborative grant writing. The topic was both timely and relevant, as many Federal departments now require organizations to engage in collaborative partnerships in proposing and delivering grant-funded activities. As many who participate in such collaborations have discovered, this context tends to be particularly challenging, as there are a number of dynamics simultaneously at play which influence the formation, interactions and work processes of the group. While not all dynamics can be strictly controlled for such as outside factors (e.g., community politics, competing personal or organizational agendas, etc.), and to some degree, managing interpersonal interactions, findings evidenced that most factors can be mediated through strong leadership and coordinated project management.

## *Leadership Development Implications*

In review of the research findings, it was realized that leadership competencies likely have a much greater influence on the outcome of a collaborative project than originally assumed. Consequently, even when best practice strategies are deployed, the quality of the leadership may ultimately drive the level of success achieved by the group. This presents several implications for organizations, in terms of who is assigned to collaborative work, the leadership aptitudes an individual possesses, and the ongoing professional development opportunities necessary for tapping into the individual's highest capacity.

The skills and behaviors of individuals in positions that require them to represent their organization to external partners greatly inform stakeholder perceptions about the organization. The most crucial aspect for organizations is therefore to appoint individuals who have the capacity to carry out the strategic direction of the organization in a way that preserves its reputation. According to Goleman (1998), the base skills needed to perform effectively in a leadership role include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The sum of these skills readily translates to an individual's level of interpersonal sensitivity and his/her ability to provide focused guidance to a group. That is, a leader must have the capacity to not only manage projects, but to lead people. With this in mind, it seems advantageous for organizations to appoint leaders based on current skill level, and to provide professional development opportunities that will continuously improve the individual's leadership competencies.

Professional learning offers a positive approach for an organization to ensure the continued development of its staff. Such opportunities help with retaining talent (i.e., return on investment), maximizing productivity, improving both individual and team performance, and promoting innovative problem solving (Anderson, 2010). Organizations have many options when it comes to leadership development. External opportunities abound and are offered year-round in a variety of venues. Organizations also have the option of providing such opportunities in-house. In either case, leadership training should ideally provide the individual with the opportunity to recognize shortcomings and begin to work toward self-improvement as a leader.

## Coordinated Project Management

To achieve the most effective results in deploying the best practice strategies suggested herein, findings evidenced that it is best for a group to collectively deploy them as part of a coordinated effort. Specifically, it is recommended that a coordinated approach to project management address both interpersonal dynamics (group interactions) and technical aspects (task achievement) synergistically. In managing a collaborative process in this way, the individuals assuming the roles of group leader and coordinator work together, deploying targeted strategies as needed throughout the collaborative grant writing process. This is easily facilitated as the leader and coordinator are typically from the organization that is heading the collaborative endeavor.

As one might expect, the group leader assumes responsibility for oversight and facilitation of group interactions during each phase. As such, the leader deploys interpersonal strategies as needed to maintain group cohesion, ensure engagement, and in addressing conflict. This keeps the group on track and advancing through the phases of the collaborative process. The coordinator concurrently deploys technical strategies such as circulating the written work plan and monitoring writing and revisions, to ensure the group completes the required tasks by the deadline. Due to the manner in which the strategies are deployed, if a problem with task achievements that could delay or halt progress occurs, the coordinator can then alert the leader

that an intercession is necessary to mediate the issue. It is suggested that this approach is most effective, as it allows the leader to focus on managing the "personalities" of the group, while the coordinator concentrates on ensuring that tasks are achieved on time.

In conclusion, the context of collaborative grant writing is both unique and challenging in that a diverse group representing various public sectors must come together to collectively develop and prepare a comprehensive grant proposal within a very short timeframe. Moreover, by employing the suggested best practice strategies as suggested, a group will be more likely to succeed in achieving its fundamental purpose; developing a successfully funded grant proposal.

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