

It's Time To Reengineer The Proposal Process

And it's about time someone said so...

If you are tired of ineffective Red Teams and submitting proposals you know could be so much better, please join us in changing everything the industry thinks it knows about the proposal process

Introduction

I have attended industry association meetings for more than 15 years. The meetings today have a lot in common with the meetings 15 years ago. Proposal Managers struggle to implement their processes. Most processes are not documented. You've been told that you are supposed to use storyboards, but you seldom do. You do hold kickoff meetings, but they make no difference whatsoever in the outcome. You've been told that you are supposed to hold a series of Color Team reviews. You almost always hold a Red Team, and sometimes fit in a Pink Team or a Gold Team. The reviews are never as effective as they should be. You struggle for acceptance. People continue to make changes right up until the last moment. You trade war stories about last minute submissions. Does this sound familiar? After all these years of discussing best practices, has nothing really changed?

The reason everyone is struggling is that a lot of what we have been told about the proposal process is flawed. Many of the things we consider "best practices" don't work and never did. We beat ourselves up for not implementing them with enough discipline to make them work, when what we should be doing is re-examining whether they really meet our needs. Consider:

- Everybody talks about storyboards, but hardly anyone actually uses them. That's because they only apply to certain types of proposals (solutions, R&D, engineer, etc.) and don't work well for many other types (staffing, services, etc.). Even

This whitepaper is intended as a message of hope. We can change the pessimism that plagues our industry. All we have to do is change ourselves, and abandon certain practices that have never worked and are never going to work. This white paper identifies the principles that a successful process can be built upon.

for proposals where they can be made to work, there are other approaches that are just as good, if not better. If people aren't finding success with storyboards, then why do we continue to identify them as a best practice?

- The Color Team model for proposal reviews is obsolete. After 20 years of attempts at improving it, the vast majority of people are unable to consistently get effective results from it. It's time to replace it with something that does work.
- The proposal process, as it is commonly practiced, does not define "Proposal Quality." If you can't define it, then you can't measure it. And if you can't measure it, you can't manage it.
- While everyone recommends starting before the RFP is released, the traditional proposal process doesn't provide any actual guidance regarding how to achieve that. As a result, even when people know about the RFP ahead of release, they end up wasting the time instead of taking advantage of it.

What Do We Really Need?

Step back for a moment and consider why we have a process at all. What is it that we really need from our process? Instead of us serving the process, what contribution can the process make towards helping us achieve our goals? Here are some things that an effective process should deliver:

- A structured approach to defining and achieving the goals needed to win an opportunity during the critical period before the RFP is released.
- Guidance regarding what intelligence to collect and how to best take advantage of it.
- Clarity regarding roles, responsibilities, and authority.
- A robust means to set and manage expectations of all stakeholders, throughout the process.
- A means to track progress that provides continuous feedback regarding whether you are on track or behind.
- A means to validate the proposal, with well defined review scopes.
- A means to define what is necessary to win and then to measure output against those criteria.
- Streamlined and efficient allocation of effort, so that work goes into the document, and not into the process.
- Equal applicability to proposals large and small, and the ability to accommodate different RFPs and acquisition strategies (from task orders to oral proposals).

Create a process that delivers these and not only will your proposal experience improve, but so will the quality of your proposals.

Why It's Time to Throw It Out And Start Over

The proposal process as traditionally practiced and commonly understood fails to achieve what we need. The rare successes only happen when people reengineer the process themselves to such a degree that it no longer can be considered “traditional.” Proposal Managers struggle with ineffective Red Teams and usually submit proposals everyone knows could be so much better.



People have been unwilling to abandon what they've been taught about the proposal process because the need for quality proposals is supreme, and an ineffective attempt at quality is perceived as better than no attempt. People hold on to the hope that if they make a few improvements here or there, or if they just try a little harder, they can make it work. But somehow it never seems to happen.

Storyboards and Color Teams were introduced with good intentions. But they fail in implementation. If a process can't be implemented effectively in practice, then it's worth questioning whether it's actually a good idea. **Without positive results after 20 years, Red Teams certainly can no longer be considered a best practice.** Does it make sense for the entire industry to accept a process that no one can implement with consistent success? Even with Storyboards and Color Teams, the need for proposal process and quality validation is going unmet.

Progress requires going back to the drawing board

Reengineering means you throw out the current process and think fresh. Reengineering means you face up to the fact that after more than 20 years of trying, our industry is not going to make it work with little improvements here or there. Reengineering means we go all the way back to identifying what we really need from the proposal process and building something that actually delivers.



What We Are Doing About It

Whenever I point out flaws in the current practices the response I most frequently hear is “I agree.” This is closely followed by “So what’s your process?” CapturePlanning.com is doing the hard work of documenting an end-to-end process that fulfills the requirements we discuss. We intend to release it to the paid members of our site as an off-the-shelf, ready to use or customized solution. But we want the discussion to be much larger. Some people will create their own processes. We want to encourage and help them find solutions. And even though we have developed our own, we’d love to hear about yours.

Proposal Process Requirement	Our Response
A structured approach to defining and achieving your goals during the critical period before the RFP is released.	CapturePlanning.com divides the Pre-RFP period into intervals that have specifically defined goals. At the end of each phase, we have reviews to measure progress and ensure readiness. This ensures that this valuable time is not wasted and that people know what to do to get ready.
Guidance regarding what intelligence to collect and how to best take advantage of it.	We structure the Pre-RFP process around delivering the information people need to qualify the opportunity, formulate strategies, define approaches, develop a competitive advantage, and ultimately win the proposal.
Clarity regarding roles, responsibilities, and authority.	We define roles functionally and not by who is available. A person may wear multiple hats, but all activity is accounted for and assigned. The result is that assignments become easier, expectations are better known, and staffing requirements are easier to predict.
A robust means to set/manage expectations of all stakeholders, throughout the process.	While recognizing the importance of communications, most people do it informally. We build it into the process to ensure that expectations are defined, action items are tracked, and guidance is delivered so that communication actually happens.
A means to track progress that provides continuous feedback regarding whether you are on track or behind.	Instead of validating quality, most reviews end up checking progress, and progress is measured by which review you are on. We measure progress by the extent to which goals have been achieved. By specifically identifying goals, we can accurately measure progress in ways that matter.
A means to validate the proposal, with well defined review scopes.	Traditional proposal reviews are all-encompassing, milestone-based, color-labeled, and performed by people who “should know.” They are also ineffective. Our approach is different and is based on validating the specific items that have been identified as requirements for winning.
A means to define what is necessary to win and to measure proposal quality by those criteria.	We define quality and validate against it to make quality measurable and not just an opinion.
Streamlined/efficient allocation of effort, so work goes into the document instead of the process.	We try to ensure that information is only provided once and stored in one place. It should move through the process seamlessly and flow to where it is needed to impact the document.
Equal applicability to proposals large and small, and the ability to accommodate different RFPs and acquisition strategies (from task orders to oral proposals).	Most proposal processes do not scale. What works for a large proposal does not work for a small proposal or task order. The principles are the same, but the procedures are too different. Because our process is based on principles and not on milestones or procedures, it provides multiple options regarding how to fulfill the goals. In other words, it scales.

What You Should Do About It

Evolve. Go back to the principles that your process is built on, and re-think how they fulfill your needs. Don't use things like Storyboards or Color Teams just because you think you are supposed to. Include them if you think they are the best way to fulfill your requirements. Begin a discussion with your peers about what really works. Make a difference. The choice you are faced with is to stay in the box and try to refine the current process which has a long history of failure, or try something new and take things to a whole new level.

Re-Train People Regarding The Process

Many organizations have evolved to the point where it is universally accepted that every proposal should have a process and that a proposal process should at least include a "Red Team." This is progress. There was a time when organizations did proposals without any process to ensure quality. Today, it's a safe bet that if the Proposal Manager doesn't mention it, someone will ask "When will we have the Red Team?"



As an industry, we have trained people to expect a "Red Team" as a means to ensure quality. **This was a good first step. Now we need to teach them that a "Red Team" is not a total solution for proposal quality.** If we want to be consistently successful, we need to do things differently. And that means we need to retrain the process stakeholders.



New Mantras

In addition to reengineering the process, we need to re-think what we tell ourselves about the process. It also helps to be able to describe the process in a 30-second elevator speech. Here are some sound bites you can use as mantras to help re-train people regarding the process.

New Mantra	Why It's Needed
<p>"You must define what needs to be accomplished before the proposal starts."</p> <p>"Periodically measure your readiness for RFP release."</p>	<p>"You need to start before the RFP is released" is good advice, it's just completely insufficient. Most proposals are not ready at RFP release, even when the date is known in advance. We need to take it to the next level if we are to end the excuses and be ready and in a position of competitive advantage when the RFP is released.</p>
<p>"Proposal quality must be defined."</p> <p>"Quality can be measured against a specific list of what it will take to win."</p>	<p>"Is it any good?", "Does it answer the mail?", or even "Does it sell?" are poor ways to assess quality. Measuring quality takes individual opinions out of the equation and helps force people to identify early on what it will take to win.</p>
<p>"Storyboard and Color Teams are obsolete."</p>	<p>If in 20 years they haven't been made to produce consistent success, then they are not going to. It's time to reengineer.</p>
<p>"Explicitly define what needs to be validated."</p>	<p>Instead of rolling everything up into a couple of reviews and expecting people to know what to look for, we specifically identify what to validate as part of a written validation plan.</p>
<p>"Plan before you write and measure the writing against the plan."</p> <p>"Reviewing the plan is more important than reviewing the draft."</p>	<p>"Plan before you write" is old school worth keeping. But it has to be measurable in order to be accountable. Traditionally, draft reviews have been subjective. Reviewing against a baseline is more reliable. But for that to work, the plan has to be there to review against. Traditionally, Storyboards have formed the basis of this plan. It's time to replace Storyboards with a more effective planning tool so we can make sure that the planning actually takes place to provide us with the baseline needed to measure the draft against.</p>
<p>"Expectations must be agreed to from the start and managed continuously throughout the process."</p>	<p>Assignment completion is all about expectation management. Formalizing the presentation of expectations and their acceptance helps to provide accountability.</p>
<p>"Training and guidance should be embedded in the process and not something separate."</p>	<p>Every assignment should come with guidance regarding how to complete it and how to assess its quality.</p>

Don't Fall Back On Old Habits

You will be tempted to include a “Red Team” in your Validation Plan. If you do that, you carry into the future the confusion that will corrupt your efforts at validating specific items. Participants will fall back on old habits and execute the process the only way they know how. So banish the phrase “Red Team” and all other color team labels. If you are going to validate something, then call out specifically what you want to validate.

How to Turn Down a Request for a Red Team

From now on, when I am asked, “When will we have the Red Team?” I will answer:

We are not having a Red Team. Red Teams are no longer a best practice. Instead we will explicitly identify what we are going to validate before submitting the proposal and we will validate each and every item. Some may require a meeting, some may just be a sign-off. I will prepare a Validation Plan that identifies each type of validation and how it will be performed and submit it for approval. When we execute the Validation Plan, people will know what is expected of them and receive appropriate guidance. This will add more value than I've ever seen a Red Team deliver.



More Things To Consider For Your Process



Define quality and measure yourself against it

When you don't have a written definition for proposal quality, or when you define proposal quality as "anything that wins," the result is that you have no standard to judge a proposal against. Today most companies manage their proposals by bringing in experienced people who are "supposed to know" what a quality proposal is. This is inevitably a hit or miss proposition. An experienced guess is still just a guess.

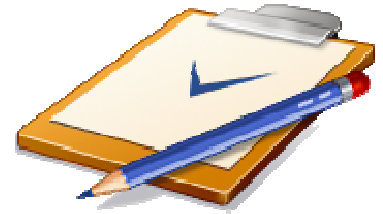
It is far better to look at the factors that determine whether or not you will win — evaluation score, price, offering, presentation, etc. — then validate that you have made the best decision or response you are capable of making for each factor. If you use them to develop specific criteria that define what a quality proposal is, then instead of a seat of the pants approach to determining whether your proposal is "good enough," you can ensure that each aspect of the proposal intentionally reflects the right decisions.

Defining "proposal quality" is easy: A quality proposal is one that implements all of the things you have decided are needed to persuade the customer to select you.

The difficult part is defining your goals. What does a proposal need to do to win? Start by making a list. It might look like this:

- Will it score well against the evaluation criteria?
- Is the outline/organization correct?
- Is it compliant with all RFP requirements?
- Does it reflect your win strategies?
- Are the proposed approaches cost-effective?

- Do the proposed approaches offer compelling benefits and value to the customer?
- Do they reflect the best trade-off between price and other factors?
- Does the pricing reflect the best trade-off between competitiveness and revenue/profit goals?
- Does it reflect your full awareness of the customer?
- Does it demonstrate the relevance of your previous experience at every opportunity?
- Are the reasons why the customer should select you clear?
- Does it discriminate you from the competition?
- Does it have any typographical errors?
- Is the pricing data compliant, accurate, and properly structured?
- Does the pricing account for all costs, direct and indirect?
- Are all assumptions documented?



Every one of these attributes can be validated. In fact, each one must be validated for you to know that you have a quality proposal. This is why we advocate scrapping the Color Team model of proposal reviews, and instead using the Proposal Quality Validation method.

Some of the items above have predecessors or components that can be separately validated. When you arrange them in a sequence, you begin to form a process. Only it's a process designed from the beginning to validate that the proposal reflects how you define proposal quality. It enables you to intentionally manage your proposal by enabling you to measure the results of your proposal efforts against specific quality criteria.



12 Questions Your Proposal Process Should Answer

People tend to look at their business development and proposal process as a series of steps. Another way to look at it is whether the process answers questions that people have so that they can complete the task.

1. **What do you need to do to be ready to bid?** What has to happen before the RFP is released and what information do you need to have before you start?
2. **How should you go about planning?** What should your proposal plan include? How do you plan the content? How do you validate your plans?
3. **Who should do what?** It takes more than an assignment list for people to know what to do. It takes more than a roles and responsibilities table at the beginning of the process. At all times it should be clear what tasks need to be done and who is responsible for doing them.
4. **How will expectations be set?** What do you expect from participants? What can stakeholders expect from you? How will assignments be managed?
5. **What guidance should people get in performing tasks?** It's not enough to assign a task. You have to make sure people are capable of fulfilling it. A big part of this is making sure they understand what is required to fulfill the task. Since most of the people working on proposals are not specialists, they often need guidance. A little bit of ad hoc training or a manual is not sufficient. If you want them to be successful, you must make sure they get the guidance they need. If you want to make sure that happens, it must be built into the process.
6. **How do you measure and track progress?** Feedback to the proposal team is critical in order to know when what you are doing is successful and when it is not. How do you know if things are on track? You need a way to measure progress. And if you want things to stay that way, you need a way to track your progress.
7. **How do you estimate and track resources?** How many people do you need to prepare the proposal? Where will the work locations be? What equipment and access requirements do you have? Most people just guess at their

resources requirements. A major cause of proposal failure is insufficient resources. If you want a systemic approach to solving that problem, you must build resource estimation and tracking into your process.

8. **What are the deliverables and how should they be prepared?** A proposal process requires a number of deliverables such as planning documents, review comments, forms, templates, and checklists. To prevent people from inventing these as they go along, your process should define the deliverables, including content and format.
9. **Are people getting what they need, when they need it, and is it in the right format?** People have needs. Some of these include food, lodging, recognition, feedback, and information. Does your process address what people need in order to perform their tasks and be successful? With regards to information, you may need to address the format that information is stored in to ensure that it is accessible at the moment of need.
10. **What criteria should be used in reviews?** If you want reviews to be conducted effectively, you must specify the criteria to be used in performing the review. In order to ensure that reviews have criteria that are specific to the opportunity, the process must address the definitions of the criteria and their use.
11. **How do you validate that things were done correctly?** People often issue assignments and then are surprised when things don't get done correctly. To avoid this, you need to build validation into your process. All work needs to be checked to make sure that it was done correctly. Instead of building your process around one or more milestone reviews, you may need to build it around your need to validate work as it is performed instead.
12. **How do you know if you've created the right proposal?** If you can't define something, you can't measure it. If you can't measure it, you don't know when it is complete. If you can't define what the right proposal is in terms that are measurable and can be validated, you won't know whether the proposal you have written is the right proposal. "I'll know it when I see it" is not a reliable approach. Your proposal must begin and end with how you define the right proposal.

About The Author

Carl Dickson is the Founder and Publisher of CapturePlanning.com. He has helped companies win proposals since 1989 and has submitted hundreds of proposals to government and industry. He is a former President of the National Capital Area Chapter of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals. He is a prolific author and frequent speaker. He can be reached at carl.dickson@captureplanning.com.

About CapturePlanning.com

CapturePlanning.com is changing the economics of business development and proposal training. CapturePlanning.com is an online resource for learning how to develop business and win proposals. Members get access to hundreds of helpful articles, checklists, forms, worksheets, tutorials, and online training. Companies that cannot afford to send people out for training or document their processes can now afford to provide memberships for all of their staff involved in business development. For more information, please visit our site at: <http://www.captureplanning.com>

Using this document

This document is formatted for double-sided printing in color. It can also be printing single-sided or in black and white. Color hard copies can also be ordered from our website.

Copyright 2007. This document may be freely copied and distributed in its original unaltered form.

CapturePlanning.com
5284 Randolph Road, #215
Rockville, Maryland 20852

Please feel free to pass a copy of this white paper on to your friends and colleagues. Discuss it. Come up with solutions. We have developed our own. But we'd like to hear about yours, if you'd care to share them. This white paper was written by Carl Dickson of CapturePlanning.com. Carl can be reached at carl.dickson@captureplanning.com.

<http://www.captureplanning.com>