HENRY FORD HEALTH SYSTEM:
ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR DIMENSIONS OF PREPARING GRANT WRITERS TO INCREASE EFFECTIVENESS

MSA 698 Directed Administrative Portfolio

Paper #2 MSA 601 Organizational Dynamics and Human Behavior

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Organizational Dynamics and Human Behavior Implications of
Preparing Grant Writers to Increase Effectiveness

Section 1: Organizational Dynamics & Human Behavior Aspects of the MSA 698 Issue

This paper is the second in a series of studies examining how to prepare grant writers to write competitive grant proposals, which is a significant issue facing Henry Ford Health System (HFHS). This paper analyzes specific organizational dynamic and human behavior issues related to this challenge.

The need to provide adequate preparation resources to grant writers is a critical system-wide issue. HFHS must ensure that research staff have sufficient training, experience, and other resources necessary to develop high-quality grant proposals, as funding from federal agencies and private foundations for research studies is limited and there is significant competition for this funding. External funding is essential to maintain the system’s research enterprise.

Several organizational dynamics and human behavior topics relate to the issue of effectual grant writer preparation, including management and leadership styles, group and team dynamics, communication, and power relationships. Subsequent sections of this paper present a brief review of the literature involving these topics, relevant organizational information, an analysis that examines the issues in more detail, and answers to the following research questions related to these topics and the major issue of study:

1. How do management and leadership style affect the implementation and utilization of training resources to prepare grant writers to develop more competitive proposals?

2. How do group and team dynamics influence grant writers’ effectiveness and use of available grant writer preparation resources?
3. How does communication impact grant writers’ understanding of the competitive grant environment, relevant grant funding opportunities, and available grant writer preparation resources?

4. What effect might power relationships and politics have on conducting peer reviews of and providing feedback on grant proposals?

5. What actions can HFHS take to address organizational dynamics and human behavior issues to prepare grant writers to write successful grant proposals?

Section 2: Brief Review of the Literature

Organizational dynamics and human behavior have been thoroughly studied and there is substantial literature discussing how these topics affect organizations. This literature review discusses the impact of leaders, group dynamics, power relationships, and communication on the grant writing process and grant writer preparation resources.

Leaders play a crucial role in the effectiveness of any training program. According to Ellinger, Watkins, and Bostrom (1999), managers in organizations that desire to promote learning must assume a role of coaches who help employees to grow and develop. Managers should offer guidance and support, while encouraging employees to assume personal responsibility for training. It is critical that managers take an active role in employees’ learning when it relates to a critical organizational issue, such as writing successful grant proposals.

After receiving grant writing training, it is essential that the newly developed skills are utilized when writing new grant proposals. Training transfer, maintenance, and generalization are key outcomes related to training effectiveness (Scaduto, Lindsay, & Chiaburu, 2008). Scaduto et al. (2008) showed that employees who have a good relationship with their direct supervisor, characterized by high levels of social exchanges, are more likely to experience sustained benefits
from training. Additionally, leaders affect employees' training motivation and outcome expectancy, both of which positively impact training transfer.

Individual employee training transfer does not, however, guarantee effective grant writing on its own. Preparing a grant proposal is often a highly collaborative effort, with input from a range of scientific and administrative personnel, and the ability of a grant writing team to effectively communicate and work together toward the goal of drafting a competitive proposal is dependent upon how well the team’s dynamics are organized (Dopke & Crawley, 2013). Grant writers would therefore benefit from training that incorporates cooperative learning strategies, such as encouraging face-to-face interactions and active listening, identifying specific individual roles and responsibilities, and conducting group self-assessment (Cavalier, Klein, & Cavalier, 1995). These strategies could increase team interaction and performance during training and translate into more effective grant writing teams.

In addition to training, another key resource for preparing effective grant writers is utilizing peer review groups. Lee and Boud (2003) emphasized that, in order for a writing and review group to be successful, members must be comfortable addressing each other directly about their writings. Differences in experience should be exploited and hierarchic power relationships must be secondary to the group’s common goal of producing quality writing. These power relationships can be difficult to identify and avoid, however, as they are sometimes subtle and complex, as noted by Morley, Leonard, and David (2002). Reviewers’ careers could be adversely affected if they give a disagreeable review of a grant proposal written or supported by their supervisor or another person with power or influence.

Communication effectiveness significantly affects the use of grant writer preparation resources and the overall grant writing process. As previously stated, grant writing frequently
involves the collaboration of several staff members, some of whom may work at different locations or schedules. This can require a reliance on electronic communication methods, such as emails or websites, which may cause communication issues. Email does not always allow for efficient, adequate acknowledgement of comments or concerns and feedback (Gennari, Weng, Benedetti, & McDonald, 2005). A reliance on websites can cause issues because, as White, Vanc, and Stafford (2010) found, while employees appreciate the availability of information on a website, it is erroneous to believe that all employees are informed because the information is available on the website, as few employees have time to read all of the information provided. This belief is held by many managers, though, so direct communication of important information is not provided via email or meetings; thus, it is not always known by all affected employees.

Effectively preparing grant writers to develop successful proposals is dependent upon the interaction of a number of organizational dynamics and human behavior factors. Leaders must assume a guiding, supportive role to maximize the effectiveness of training programs and training transfer and grant writing teams would benefit from inclusion in their training of methods to enhance team interaction and dynamics. The impact of power relationships on peer reviews must be understood and mitigated to promote beneficial reviews. Finally, appropriate methods of communication are essential to ensure that all parties have the necessary information.

Section 3: Brief Description of MSA 601 Organizational Data Collection Efforts

Information on HFHS for this report was obtained through two main sources. The primary source of information was informal interviews with a variety of personnel involved in the grant writing process, including researchers, research assistants, other research staff, and Research Administration department staff. The data obtained from these discussions covered all topics discussed in this report, such as views on current leadership strengths and weaknesses,
challenges within research groups, communication issues, and concerns about reviewing grants written by people in a position of power. Personal observations based on six years of working in research within the health system provide additional information on these topics.

Section 4: The Role of Managers and Leaders in Training Effective Grant Writers

The development and implementation of resources to prepare grant writers to be successful in the competitive research funding environment is affected by a number of organizational dynamic and human behavior issues, the most germane of which are examined in this paper. This section examines the impact of management and leadership characteristics on grant writer training.

The term “leader” can be applied to both official managers and supervisors and those personnel who serve a guiding role within the research unit. At HFHS, managers are responsible for providing the tangible training resources, such as how-to books, dedicated work time for training, and funds for the materials and trainer for the training sessions. The unofficial leaders are often experienced research staff, who act as mentors and help provide intellectual resources to prepare new grant writers to be effective, for example, advice on which funding opportunities to pursue and how to best convey a research plan.

As discussed in the literature review above, effective leaders act as coaches and are actively involved in employees’ learning. Informal interviews with HFHS research staff revealed that some leaders demonstrated these characteristics, but optimal support was lacking. Most grant writers interviewed felt that they received support and guidance on scientific issues, but many expressed a desire for more coaching related to identifying and applying for relevant funding opportunities and indicated that this type of mentoring would likely be very beneficial. The interviews also showed that managerial support, both financially and motivationally, of
grant writers’ use of training programs was inconsistent between departments and often low. Few interviewees felt that their manager strongly supported the time and other resources required to attend the training.

Adequate support, guidance, and mentoring from both formal and informal leaders can have a significant impact on the use and effectiveness of grant writer training. Ensuring that all leaders are aware of the importance of their support, and how to best convey this support to grant writers, would help to increase training value and the transfer of this training to grant writing.

Section 5: Dynamics of Grant Writing Teams

The dynamics of research groups and these groups’ grant writing teams are explored in this section. The research enterprise at HFHS has many layers of groups of individuals that interact with each other in a variety of ways, from the large group consisting of all research staff, to department-level groups, down to study-specific groups. The dynamics of each group vary, but all can affect the utilization of grant writing preparation resources.

At the broadest level, all research staff at HFHS form a group that interact through annual symposiums, monthly seminars, and numerous informal discussions about their research. While all HFHS staff share a similar organizational culture, each department and subgroup has some differences in expectations and norms. These differences can have an impact when researchers from different departments collaborate on a research project or attend training sessions together.

The smallest unit is the individual grant writing team. The dynamics of this team are likely to have the greatest effect on the use and effectiveness of preparation resources. The majority of HFHS research staff reported a high level of trust and cooperation within grant writing teams. Most teams have worked together extensively for a long period of time and have established roles and responsibilities for each team member and effective strategies for utilizing
available grant writing preparation resources and handling conflicts. It can be difficult, however, for new team members to identify their roles and adjust to group norms.

Section 6: The Role of Power and Politics in Peer Review Panels

This section examines the topic of power and politics and their potential influence on peer reviews of grant proposals. HFHS grant writers identified two primary concerns regarding peer reviews of grant proposals: repercussions for providing negative evaluations and unfair evaluations of proposals due to political factors.

The main concern about conducting reviews of grants written by people in a position of power is that providing a negative evaluation could have an adverse result for the reviewers. Negative performance evaluations by an offended manager or supervisor could affect pay, work schedule, or access to laboratory space and research supplies. Additionally, informal power and influence plays a role. Influential grant writers can more subtly affect who is willing to collaborate with the reviewer, which can greatly impact the quality and feasibility of future research studies.

The second concern is the role of politics in reviewing grant proposals. Reviewers who wish to further certain topics, or hinder research into other topics, could score such proposals accordingly. Frequent low scores by the review panel could sway system leadership to reduce support for a particular researcher or line of research.

Section 7: Communication Challenges among Research Staff

The final organizational dynamic and human behavior topic explored in this paper is communication. HFHS experiences challenges related to both face-to-face and electronic communication that hinder grant writers’ understanding of the grant environment, relevant grant funding opportunities, and available grant writer preparation resources.
There are significant barriers to effective face-to-face communication. The size of the HFHS research enterprise has necessitated a wide dispersal of different research groups to different locations throughout southeast Michigan. Additionally, many studies force an atypical work schedule for some research staff due to the protocols’ requirements. Geographic and time separation force research personnel to rely on asynchronous electronic communication options, impacting grant writers’ ability to collaborate effectively with others.

HFHS has developed a variety of technological resources to address the need for grant writers to communicate with each other and with the Research Administration department’s staff at different sites asynchronously, however, these resources are often ineffective and underutilized. For example, the Research Administration department maintains a website that provides information on available funding sources, common requirements and helpful tips for grant writing, and upcoming training sessions, but many grant writers find this website difficult to navigate and do not often access it. Another method to communicate important information to grant writers is a weekly newsletter from the Research Administration department containing new grant opportunities, changed proposal requirements, and available training and other educational seminars, but each recipient must be manually updated by the department, so many new grant writers do not receive this newsletter. Communication between grant writers at different sites is sometimes limited to emails and voice calls, both of which have drawbacks when staff are trying to write a grant proposal together, such as delays in response and difficulties identifying exactly what changes within the grant the other person is requesting. There is clear frustration with current resources for communicating important information about available grant opportunities and grant proposal requirements.
Section 8: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The analysis in the preceding sections highlights four major organizational dynamics and human behavior issues related to HFHS grant writer preparation resources. Management and leadership factors, group dynamics, communication issues, and power and politics play a diverse role in grant writers’ utilization of preparation resources.

Management and leadership style have a direct effect on the implementation and utilization of training resources to prepare grant writers to develop more competitive proposals. The literature shows that in organizations where managers assume a coaching role and have a good relationship with their employees, training programs and the subsequent transfer of training are more effective. Unfortunately, many research staff at HFHS do not feel that they have this support from or a good relationship with their managers, which hinders the use and effectiveness of grant writer training programs.

Team dynamics, such as members’ ability to communicate, work together, and trust one another can influence grant writers’ effectiveness and their use of available grant writer preparation resources. These dynamics vary between different groups at HFHS, and while many grant writing teams are effective, differing dynamics can create challenges when separate teams must collaborate on a grant or when new members join a team.

Effective communication of relevant grant funding opportunities and available grant writer preparation resources is essential to prepare grant writers to be successful in the competitive grant environment. Current resources at HFHS for distributing grant writing-related information, such as the Research Administration website and newsletter, are inadequate and do not provide sufficient information to all grant writers.
Power relationships and politics have the potential to deter grant writers from participating in peer reviews of grant proposals. HFHS grant writers have expressed concerns that providing a negative evaluation could impact their pay or access to lab space and research supplies. Another concern is that reviewers may provide low scores on proposals in areas that they wish to divert funding from. While it has been shown that review groups can be successful when participants can freely discuss grant proposals without the influence of power relationships, some types of influence can be subtle and difficult to prevent.

Recommendations

The first recommendation for HFHS to address the main organizational dynamics and human behavior issues related to preparing grant writers to write successful grant proposals is to provide training to managers and other leaders that addresses the issues identified in this paper. This training should prepare leaders to assume a coaching role, develop a good relationship with their employees, provide support for employees to attend training sessions, foster an environment in which employees are comfortable addressing each other and their leaders directly about their grants, and develop effective methods of communicating important information.

The second recommendation is to develop more effective and efficient methods of communicating pertinent information related to grant writing. Eliciting user feedback could help the Research Administration department design a more user-friendly website that would provide the information needed by grant writers. Additionally, the implementation of an automatic distribution list for the weekly newsletter could allow new grant writers to add themselves to the list, improving access to this information resource.
References


