Understanding the Proposal Process for the Federal Sector

A Deep Dive into the Technical Development Process

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Agenda of this Presentation

- Provide an overview of the Federal proposal process with a focus on only the technical proposal.
- Drill down into some aspects of the technical proposal process to provide some insight into preparing an easy to read winning technical proposal.
- Goal: To help you develop a better understanding of the entire Federal proposal process and identify actions you can implement to improve technical proposals.

Learning Objectives

- Roles & responsibilities of key participants
- Major elements of a technical proposal
- Overview of proposal process
- Pre-proposal activities
- Proposal development activities
- Post-proposal submission activities
- Some technical proposal success factors
- Some things small businesses should do and should avoid

Roles & Responsibilities of Key Participants

Who makes up your proposal team

- **Capture Manager –** client- and solution-focused, strategy lead
  - Smaller firms use an operations, business development, or sales person
  - Larger firms use a specialist or line manager who may run the program after winning
  - Concerned with competitive analysis, capture strategy, price-to-win, view of best value and overall solution, team composition, and implementing capture strategy
- **Proposal Manager –** integration and process lead
  - Smaller firms use business developer, operations person or consultant
  - Larger firms use a professional, certified proposal manager
  - Concerned with aligning proposal with capture strategy, proposal process, managing proposal activities, compliance, solution clarity, proposal outline, production, delivery
- **Volume Leads** – management of writing assignments and compliance
  - Usually only in larger firms
  - Focus on technical, management, past performance, and cost volumes
- **Writers** – write technical content for all volumes

Typical Elements of a Technical Proposal

What's In The Document?

- **Transmittal or Cover Letter** - Sometimes page limited; frequently not required
- **Compliance Matrix** - Never page limited; frequently not required
- **Executive Summary** - Usually page limited; frequently not required
- Summarizes understanding, solution, and approach – no cost information
- Usually is read only by senior officials and not review team
- **Management Approach** - Almost always page limited
- Covers organizational structure; teaming arrangements; subcontractor management; processes/tools for managing performance, cost, and schedule; quality management; risk management; and staffing and recruiting
- Usually identifies key personnel and includes their resumes
- **Technical Approach** – Almost always page limited
- Covers tech solution; details on how work will be performed, benefits to client, proof points
- Always largest section in the proposal
- **Experience or Past Performance** - Almost always page limited
- Descriptions of previous projects as proof of ability to perform
- Almost always requires forms to be filled out by client references or use of Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System (CPARS)

Overview of Proposal Process

Three Phases

Phase | 1 | 2 | 3

Phase 1 • Pre-proposal (Marketing, Capture, and Planning)

- At least 180 days prior to solicitation release; usually much more!
- Opportunity assessment, capture planning and target marketing activities, and proposal planning or design
- Technical and cost solution development

Phase 2 • Proposal Development (Preparation and Implementation)

- 30+ days prior to solicitation release through proposal delivery
- Actual preparation of proposal document

Phase 3 • Post-proposal (Recovery and clean-up)

- Proposal submission through 4+ weeks after contract award
- “Some” preparation for launch of project
- Win or loss debrief
- Closure with teammates, consultants, and contingent hires

Overview of Proposal Process

Continued

Phase | 1 | 2 | 3

Color Team Reviews:

Blue Team: Reviews strategy and solution
Black Hat Team: Predicts competitor's solutions and strategies

Pink Team: Reviews 1st draft of proposal
Green Team: Reviews price-to-win
Red Team: Reviews final draft of proposal
Gold Team: Executive-level review of final proposal

Silver Team: Reviews lessons learned within 30 days after proposal submitted

Pre-proposal Activities

Phase **1** 2 3

➢ Opportunity Assessment – BD Leads/Ops Buy-in

- Assess opportunity fit, gather intel, identify competitors
- Make early initial bid decision (6 to 24+ months in advance for large bids; less time for small bids)

➢ Capture Activities – BD/Ops Share Responsibility

- Assign capture team; draft, approve and implement capture plan
- Conduct periodic reviews of bid decision – most critical decision
- Perform Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analysis
- Develop solution, value proposition, staffing plan, identify teammates, identify past performance references, develop themes and discriminators
- Monitor agency contacts frequently

➢ Proposal Planning – BD

- Assign proposal team, review lessons learned, develop initial schedule, prepare project plan, prepare draft of briefing for kickoff meeting, confirm or develop proposal standards (e.g., font, color scheme)

Pre-proposal Activities (cont'd)

Phase **1** 2 3

Discuss/Resolve Solution and Cost Issues

- Can you provide winning solution (Ops defined)?
  - Is it within firm's technical capacity?
  - Do you possess PM and required technical staff?
  - If not can you acquire them and at what cost; are they contingency hires?
  - Have you REALLY performed work before, how recently, for client or similar client?
  - Can you identify features and benefits? If not then WHY not?
- What is cost of developing winning proposal?
- Can you win; at what cost! (Both a solution issue AND a cost issue!)?
- Can you make a profit?
- What is cost of direct labor? (Is it too expensive for client?)
- Do you need consultants/subcontractors, have you identified them and are teaming agreements signed?
- Have you identified performance location, equipment, and materials?
- Any Other Direct Costs (ODCs)? (e.g., travel, special equipment or tools)

Pre-proposal Activities (cont'd)

Identify Benefits and Features of Proposed Solution:

Phase **1** 2 3

- Benefits (Ops defined)
  - Clients buy benefits – not features!
  - You and client must have common vision – comes from intelligence, access, and KTR (Know, Trust, Respect)!
  - Your solution and its benefits solve a client problem; it eliminates their pain!
  - Connect each benefit to a feature of your solution
- Features (Ops defined)
  - Separate aspects of your custom solution (e.g., processes, methods, tools, equipment, type of staff, metrics, reliability, certifications)
  - Can have least impact on client and lead to price concerns – too expensive
  - Too many features and too few benefits?
- Display benefits in a table and use them in technical approach discussion – always make them clear

Pre-proposal Activities (cont'd)

Develop Themes and Identify Discriminators

Phase **1** 2 3

➢Themes (BD developed)

- Several in a proposal – tie a client critical benefit to discriminating
- Should be single complete sentence saying why client should select you
- May have proposal themes and volume or section themes
- Not sales slogans (e.g., Be all you can be! or We try harder!)

➢Discriminators (BD developed)

- Unique to bidder or bidder's team (e.g., only business with a certain piece of software, only business that has supported client and really understands client)
- Discriminators support themes; if no discriminators than low price or proposal quality can be client's decision point
- Must understand client and competitors to identify good discriminators
- Emphasize those that focus on: people, experience, performance, certifications, and understanding client

Pre-proposal Activities (cont'd)

Phase **1** 2 3

Basis for Win Themes/Discriminators

- Intelligence – What client wants, what client can afford, incumbent mistakes, changing environment, new technologies, etc.
- Solution – describe your value proposition (BD & Ops)
  - Qualifications – Are you unique? – almost NEVER!
  - History w/client – Do you understand client and they understand you?
  - Technical Approach – What is special about it; benefits and features?
  - Proposed Staff – Do they really add value and how?
  - Cost – Is solution reasonable and affordable to client?
- Competition – Strengths & Weaknesses (Your SWOT analysis?)
- Your Past Performance – Directly related or not really related
- Quality – Do you have a real process that adds tangible value?

Pre-proposal Activities (cont'd)

Theme Examples:

Phase **1** 2 3

- (Agency name) eliminates development risk and cost by selecting the only transport aircraft in this class that is in current production.

- (Agency name) will experience increased system uptime and lower maintenance costs by choosing the only firm that has experience maintaining the XYZ system in other Federal agencies.

- Our cyber security team has identified and neutralized every attempted penetration of XYZ over the last four years and we provided all support actions at or under budget.

Proposal Development Activities

Pre-RFP Release Activities Start Within 30-days of Release:

Phase	1	2	3

- Review all solicitation information and bid decision
- Review and update solution
- Tailor resumes and past performances
- Determine/confirm proposal team staffing (e.g., writers, pricers, review teams, graphics support, editor/proof reader, production)
- Verify status of teammates – lock them down with signed agreements
- Verify information on competition
- Develop draft proposal kickoff briefing
- Develop preliminary proposal schedule and, if possible, draft outline
- Attend pre-proposal conference – not always held

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Post RFP Release Activities:

Phase	1	2	3

- Make Internal RFP Distribution and Perform Review
  - Distribute electronically same day released
  - Complete detailed review within 24 hours after release
  - Review M, then L then B then H then C then all other sections 2 or 3 times
- Prepare/Submit Questions to Government per RFP Instructions (BD)
- Make Final Bid Decision (within 48 hrs after RFP drops) (BD/OPS)
  - Review and finalize technical solution – before writing starts
  - Review competition and their status
  - Review cost requirements
- Develop Final Proposal Schedule, Outline, Compliance Matrix (BD)
  - Within 48 hrs after RFP release
- Complete Final Kick-off Briefing and Schedule Briefing (BD)
  - Have team briefing within 3 business days after RFP release
  - Treat it is a project kickoff meeting

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Sample Kick-off Meeting Agenda – Capture Manager/Proposal Manager

Phase	1	**2**	3

- Introduce proposal team and identify individual roles
- Give overview of requirement (Section C & available intelligence)
- Review technical solution – Include benefits and features
- Summarize solution staffing requirements
- Provide cost strategy overview – No detail cost information
- Review win themes/discriminators – Provide copy to everyone
- Give overview of competition & provide SWOT analysis
- Review final technical and cost schedule and assignments (e.g., milestone chart or calendar)
- Review outline at high level (Compliant w/L, M & C)
- Summarize key instructions (e.g., special writing requirements, past performance, font requirements, page limits)
- Provide list of POCs and contact information

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Phase 1 **2** 3

Partial Sample Proposal Schedule – Table Form

Assignment/Activity/Sub activity	Responsibility Assignment	Due Date	Completed
Prepare Proposal Schedule. Checklist, & Work Plan	Prop Mgr	5 pm, Mar 23	√
Update Checklist and Work Plan	Prop Mgr	Daily	
Develop Kickoff Briefing	Capture/Prop Mgr	-	-
• **Prepare draft**	Capture/Prop Mgr	11 am, Mar 27	√
• **Prepare final**	Capture/Prop Mgr	5 pm, Mar 28	
Review RFP	PMT, Key Staff, Writers, Partners	Mar 25, 26, 27	
• **Disseminate RFP and Question Template to Staff (and to Partners?)**	Prop Coordinator	9 am, Mar 25	
• **Note to Partners to Review RFP & Be Ready for Kickoff Conf Call Mar 30; Send Question Template**	Prop Coordinator	9 am, Mar 25	
Compliant Outline & Compliance Matrix	Prop Mgr	-	-
• **Initial Outline & Matrix**	Prop Mgr	9 pm, Mar 27	
• **Final Outline & Matrix (Assuming no amendments)**	Prop Mgr	11 am, Mar 31	

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Phase 1 **2** 3

Partial Sample Proposal Schedule – Calendar Form

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
MARCH						
20	21	22 **1 pm**: send out preliminary prop schedule to ABC staff & add internal kickoff mtg to calendar	23 **9 am to 12 noon**: Regular internal solution review meeting	24 Consider additional data calls	25 • RFP Drops (probably late in day) • ABC team begins RFP review • Note to partners to review RFP and be ready for team kickoff mtg via conf call on 3/29 at 9 am	26 • RFP review • Prop mgr prepares outline & compliance matrix
27 • RFP Review • Work on outline & matrix	28 **9 am**: ABC internal kick-off; outline & compliance matrix disseminated; writing assignments given to internal team **1 pm**: Send out question template & suspense	29 **9 am**: ABC partner kick-off mtg via conf call; writing assignments to partners **1 to 3 pm**: Prop mgr meets w/each writer 3 pm: send out data call **4 pm**: stand-up mtg	30 **9–10:30 am**: Blue Team mtg Write! **1 to 3 pm**: Coordination with each partner writer 3 pm: Questions due to prop mgr **4 pm**: stand-up mtg	31 **11 am**: Send out pricing data call to partners **3 pm**: Submit vetted questions to gov't **4 pm**: stand-up mtg	1 April **9 am**: Schedule and outline adjustment, as necessary **1 to 3 pm**: Prop mgr meets with each ABC writer **4 pm**: stand-up mtg	2 April Writing continues
APRIL						

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Sample Sequence of Post RFP Tech Prop Activities:

Phase	1	2	3

- Technical strategy and solution review – Capture Mgr/Ops/ Prop Mgr/Vol Mgrs/Writers
- Develop text, graphics, tables, and resumes – Prop Mgr/Vol Mgrs/Writers
- Team member support letters – Prop Mgr
- 1st Draft – Prop Mgr/Vol Mgrs/Writers
- Green Team – Prime CFO leads price-to-win review with Prime Senior Staff
- Pink Team – Capture Mgr/Prop Mgr/Senior Non Writers/focus on compliance check
- Pink Team recovery produces 2nd draft – Prop Mgr/Vol Mgrs/Writers
- Red Team – Capture Mgr/Prop Mgr/Senior Non Writers/content & compliance check
- Red Team recovery produces final draft – Prop Mgr/Vol Mgrs/Writers
- Editorial review – Prop Mgr/Editor
- Final compliance check – Prop Mgr/Vol Mgrs/Prop Coordinator
- Gold Team approval – Prime Executive Management/Capture Mgr/Prop Mgr/Ops
- Final production and quality check (white glove check) – Production Team
- White Team – Capture or Prop Mgr leads team review of lessons learned

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Phase 1 **2** 3

Some Ways to Improve Evaluator Readability:

- Use less than 30 words per sentence; 3 lines max
- Limit paragraphs to 4 or 5 sentences max
  - Have one topic per paragraph
  - If too many thoughts or details it may be too complex for stressed out evaluator
- Use active voice – make about 80% of your prop active voice
  - More readable and less complex
  - Emphasis on real subject of sentence; no confusion on actor
  - Saves words
- Cross reference PWS paragraphs in parenthesis after prop paragraphs
- Bulletize a string of information
- Vary use of pronouns and don't over use offeror's name
- Use direct, concise wording

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Examples of Direct, Concise Wording:

Phase	1	2	3

Original: The paragraphs below contain a detailed description of the specific and detailed activities that will be undertaken by our team (20).

Better: We will perform activities described in the following paragraphs (9).

Original: Team XYZ fully supports the separate use of appropriate performance metrics in order to fully assess the effective performance of the Third Level Maintenance Tasks (25).

Better: Team XYZ assesses 3rd Level Maintenance Task performance using metrics (10).

Original: Our management approach is outlined in Section 1.3 below. (9)

Better: Section 1.3 describes our management approach. (6)

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Phase 1 **2** 3

- Eliminate Unsupported (Unsubstantiated) Claims:
  - Evaluators tend to question all content
  - Examples: unique, greatest, best-of-breed, best-of-industry, industry leading
  - Use only if you offer real, concrete proof in statements
  - Never say we understand something without saying why we understand it
    - We <u>understand</u> (or know how to do) XYZ <u>because</u> we have provided those same services to three other clients in the last five years
    - Better and more believable if you name clients
- Avoid Superlatives: Hard to support and risky
  - Common practice used to create significance where one may not actually exist
  - Examples: greatest, best, fastest, lowest cost, safest, fewest, highest
- Avoid Being Negative: Can hurt your case
  - Good: Win rate or accuracy rate; we always do X
  - Less Good: Loss rate or error rate; we never do Y
- Use Simple Words Whenever Possible

Proposal Development Activities (cont'd)

Phase 1 **2** 3

Some Technical Writing Tips:

1. Outline 1st – design your technical proposal and its content (e.g., style, graphics, tables)
2. Take outline at least 4 levels down – lowest level may not be numbered
3. Do what RFP asks you to do and in the sequence they ask you to do it
4. Use win themes, discriminators, and benefits/features – make them client-centered
5. Eliminate unsupported claims – numbers and examples make it real (or appear real)!
6. Write to reduce risk – don't use words like all, every, most, guarantee, ensure, promise
7. Use graphics and tables that carry a message – try to get 1 or 2 on each page
8. Write to inform, explain, and comply – not impress – tell them how you will do something
9. Avoid jargon that is too technical; most reviewers will not be technical professionals
10. Write in active voice and between 10th and 12th grade level
11. Write without adjectives and adverbs – they add nothing and take up valuable space
12. Don't use redundant words (e.g., a <u>qualified</u> expert, <u>absolutely</u> essential)
13. Don't be pompous (e.g., call, write, or meet versus "interface")
14. Review, Review, Review … then do "color" reviews.

Post-proposal Submission Activities

Phase	1	2	3

✓ Plan Ahead (BD/OPS)

- Respond to questions from the Government
- For implementation by operations after a win
  - New staff/staff reassignments
  - New equipment/facilities/tools
  - Client kick-off meeting

✓ Prepare for Positive Closure (BD/OPS)

- With client organization – Award or loss and debrief or protest
- With teaming partners/consultants/contingent hires – Plan next steps
- With proposal team
  - Capture lessons learned
  - Correct process problems
  - Perform win/loss analysis
  - Consider internal training

Some Technical Proposal Success Factors

Phase 1 2 **3**

✓ Collect Effective Intelligence

Five C's: keys to winning

- Client Access (KTR) – single most important aspect! Without this you should probably NEVER bid
- "C" of RFP (SOW or PWS) – What will it look like; Is it you?
- Corporate Capabilities – Good business decision; Do we fit; Can we staff it?
- Competition – Who are they; Can we beat them; SWOT analysis?
- Cost issues – Is it worth the cost; Can we make a profit?

✓ Conduct Thorough Opportunity Screening Activities

✓ Have Early, Detailed, and Frequent Bid-decision Reviews

- Perform SWOT analysis
- Develop detailed solution <u>before</u> RFP drops

✓ Be Committed and Organized with Thorough Planning

- Treat the target opportunity as an OPS project and develop a project plan

Some Technical Proposal Success Factors (Cont'd)

Phase 1 2 **3**

- ✓ Put Lot of Effort in Up-front Strategy, Planning, and Outlining
- ✓ Develop Your Technical Solution Early
  - Is it client-based and intelligence-driven (KTR)?
  - Is it work breakdown structure (WBS)-based?
  - Have you developed an early cost picture?
  - What are the benefits and features of your technical solution?
  - Have you identified and resolved staffing and support issues?
- ✓ Know the Solicitation (RFP)
  - Sections M, L & C (Read in this order)
  - Read multiple times – BEFORE kickoff meeting!
- ✓ Use Effective Writing – be simple, clear, and uncomplicated; focus on the how
- ✓ Write for Compliance!
- ✓ Hold Frequent Progress Updates! – Id problems & slippage immediately!
- ✓ Stay on Schedule!

Action Items

Always:

1. Start early but always before RFP is released
2. Develop standards (e.g., templates, font style/size, review process)
3. Outline for compliance and write for compliance
4. Develop detailed outline – down to at least 4 levels
5. Develop compliance matrix – use MS Word table or Excel
6. Follow RFP instructions re organization, format, content, etc.
7. Work backwards when developing proposal schedule
8. Be extremely rigid on proposal deadlines and milestones
9. Use quality 3-ring binders when hard copy is required
10. Use freshly designed and tailored graphic as proposal cover page
11. Use an editor to clean up your proposal and create one voice
12. Have frequent short, informal reviews - 3 or 4 times weekly; 15 to 30 minutes
13. Have formal weekly progress reviews – once weekly
14. Reward those supporting proposal activities

Items to Avoid

Don't:

1. Write before solution is defined, roughly priced, and WBS developed
2. Write before outline developed
3. Too quickly consider your solution unique
4. Ever include any cost information in the technical proposal
5. Use writers as the only Pink/Red Team members
6. Use writers for final editing
7. Deviate from RFP's instructions
8. Use client as reference without checking with them 1st
9. Ever use a resume or past performance summary without tailoring it
10. Accept the "I'm almost done" or "I've accomplished a lot" answers
11. Fail to check daily on everyone's progress
12. Use COB as deadline – what time do you really need it?
13. Ever cut corners
14. Assume anything

Bonus – Cost Proposal Checklist

1. Define operational requirements early (extension of PWS/SOW)
2. Define labor categories early
3. Estimate staffing levels early (FTEs/hours/period of performance)
4. Identify salary sources for labor categories early (current salaries, letters of intent, consultant quotes, labor surveys, etc.)
5. Identify subcontracted labor requirements early
6. Identify equipment/ODC requirements early
7. Get quotes for long lead items (ODCs/equipment/subcontractor rates)
8. Identify travel requirements early
9. Pull travel quotes early
10. Identify proper indirect rates to apply and initial profit/fee target
11. Populate and review pricing model early
12. Adjust as required
13. Incorporate supporting documentation into cost/price narrative
14. Review, revise, and submit

Questions or Comments?

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