

On the 12th Day of Christmas, My Ineffectual Proposal Manager Gave to Me...

12. Processes that do not advance solution or content
11. Old ideas from previous, unrelated efforts
10. Totalitarian rules in a creative space
9. Inconsistent sets of feedback
8. Engineers writing while doing their day jobs
7. Checklists replacing iteration and reviews
6. Authors working remotely
5. Bench dwellers being used as proposal reinforcements
4. Uninspiring graphics
3. Artificial constraints based on arbitrary deadlines
2. People prematurely focused on "writing"
1. Slavish adherence to "percentage complete"

An Agile Approach to Proposal Management

- 🐾 Compliance was sufficient to win in an era of LPTA price shootouts and "everybody wins" protest resolutions, but those days are gone
- 🐾 Outdated methods – employing meta-work and lockstep processes – rarely generate compelling content or powerful themes
- 🐾 Your proposal tank should be vibrant and purposeful and not resemble a jury – a group of people who had nothing better to do that day
- 🐾 The best Proposal Managers are expert in not only organization and leadership, but content creation as well
- 🐾 Proposal operations must be nimble and creative, with a focus on iteration and refinement, in order to achieve a winning outcome
- 🐾 Compliance is still important, but it is at most an ingredient in the finished dish; the goal is to be compelling, not just compliant

We Wear the Chains We Forge in the Tank

The winter season is upon us, providing a desperately needed respite from the proposal madness that dominated the fall. As we recover from the selling season, we must reflect on the current state of proposal tanks around the Beltway and how they need to retool to be competitive next year. What has worked in the past is a poor predictor of future success and doing things "the way we always have" is unlikely to result in many competitive wins. Many treat their proposal teams as modern day Bob Cratchits, mechanically churning out volume after volume. Their Proposal Manager taskmasters

have morphed into process junkies who set arbitrary deadlines, hold sway over writers, and prize compliance over compelling content. However, like Scrooge before them, it's not too late to repent for proposal sins and adopt an iterative, agile approach to proposal management – just in time to save their souls and position them to win.

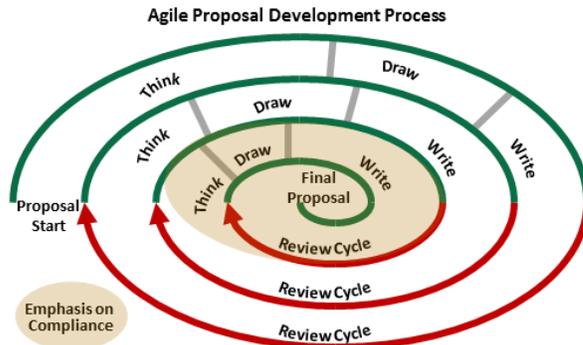
Ghosts of Proposals Past

After several years of LPTA dominance – where compliance and a low price won – the market is recovering, Best Value is resurging, and what once got a passing grade will no longer suffice. Another crutch of poorly written proposals – protesting in hopes of forcing awards to every bidder – will likely wane under the new administration. This means that winners in the coming years will be decided by ideas. Linear thinkers inhibit idea generation with slavish adherence to process. Likewise, their obsession with showing "progress" and filling out milestone worksheets impede the ability to create differentiated win themes. Unfortunately, Proposal Managers that came of age with these habits are more adroit at producing a robust CYA or clearing the next internal funding gate than actually winning a bid.

Decrease the Surplus Population

The first step to making amends for poor past proposals is to get the right Proposal Manager. Too many of them are merely traffic cops. Real proposal management requires being the idea generator, innovator, and leader that a proposal needs to succeed. The best are also content creators who are ready to step in at a moment's notice and pick up the pen to buttress a weak section or coach a struggling writer. Equally important is surrounding the Proposal Manager with the right talent in the tank. No two teams are the same – and success comes in many shapes and sizes – but you can spot a doomed

proposal the moment you set foot in the tank. Look for the career proposal stringers and the disinterested benchwarmers who know nothing about the bid, but needed a charge code to soak until they find billable work. If there is no content on the wall and most people are working remotely, shut the bid down.



Think-draw-write, coupled with iterative review cycles, drives our agile content creation process. As iterations are completed, the time required for each phase decreases and content tightens into compelling (and eventually compliant) prose. Source: Wolf Den Associates

Sponging the Writing from the Stones

The right talent is not enough to win. You also need an adaptive approach to generating winning content. Assembly line and cut and paste approaches no longer work. Each Agency, RFP, and problem set is different and requires a unique solution and a differentiated "why us." After initial theming and solutioning, let your solution, rather than arbitrary gate reviews, provide the end goal. Then, give authors leeway to think about, create, and develop content with regular iteration. Fluid content reviews should take the place of rigid gates, and initial thoughts on page allocation can shift as you create compelling content. The compliance matrix should be a set of guardrails instead of a roadmap. Rethinking proposal management in these ways can help avoid the fate presaged to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Future.