

Proposal Paradoxes

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Paradoxes remain a fundamental reality of dealing with almost any subject or situation. Some people intuitively understand paradoxes; some don't. Regardless, we all need to understand how paradoxes influence important aspects of our daily life. Nowhere is this more important than in our role as proposal professionals. Paradoxes abound in the proposal world. Failure to understand and leverage proposal paradoxes has resulted in many losses that could have been victories. I am certain there are more than 10 significant proposal paradoxes we need to be aware of. However, I have selected the 10 I have found to be the most befuddling and useful over my 22-year proposal development career.

1. *Strategic thinkers kill proposal efforts*—I can hear the protests already: Proposals are the culmination of strategy. Strategic thinkers give the proposal its meat. Wrong. **Strategy is an element of proposal success. You must have a win strategy.** We all know that. Once you have a cogent one, then get the strategic thinkers out of the way. The rest is a matter of execution, of tactics. How do I translate good strategy into real solutions and a real proposal? The best strategic thinkers often simply cannot get down to the tactical level and do the detailed planning and the detailed execution of

specific tasks. They get in the way. They constantly want to revisit the strategy to validate their position. They waste proposal and management time with second guessing and often want to tweak the strategy to the point that a strong strategy leading to precise and undeniable solutions and discriminators gets transformed into a “me too,” as conservatism triumphs over creativity and passion.

2. *The shorter the time to react, the greater the need to plan in detail*—How often have you heard “The proposal is due in two weeks. We don't have time to do a detailed proposal plan, storyboard, and have a Red Team Review?” This team is well on the way to a loss. **The less time to submittal, the more important up-front planning becomes, because you have no recovery time.** When you have only a couple of weeks or 30 days, detailed planning becomes the most critical aspect of the proposal. Everything, and I mean everything, has to be choreographed in detail right from the beginning. Make sure the detailed plan exists; make sure every one clearly understands their role; and make sure everyone knows the deadlines and adheres to them. If you use one quarter of your time to plan and the execution is nearly flawless, you stand a

good chance of winning. If you react and fail to plan adequately in these situations, you will surely lose with a bad product.

3. *Smaller teams produce better proposals*—I once had the illustrious role of being assigned to rescue failing proposals. I used the same management pattern for each one. I would show up on Friday and send everybody home (under protest). When they came back on Monday, I would cut the proposal team in half. The worst situation on a proposal is to have 40 people running around with no leadership and no clear understanding of what they need to do. Small teams rarely have this problem. **That's why exercising the core team concept in this business is so important.** I can think of no proposal where we really needed more than the core team of four—Capture Manager, Proposal Manager, Marketing Manager, and Technical Manager—to make all the decisions and fully manage the process. If you have a proposal in trouble, get rid of people to get it under control. If you have a proposal that is doing well, do not add people to the team without compelling reasons.

4. *To gain control, you have to give up control*—The number of proposal managers (and corporate executives) who cannot fathom this simple principle

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continuously surprises me. As a proposal manager who always want to make sure my proposals are under control, I ensure that roles and assignments are clear, that people know what is expected of them and perform, and that they are responsible and accountable. I trust and verify. I trust them to complete their assignments as prescribed and I verify progress and performance at every daily status meeting. **The control of the individual task, however, resides with the person assigned.** I have given up some measure of control to them so I can manage the whole effort effectively.

5. *The time to complete the proposal is never as great as the time to achieve the solution*—Proposals are easy. It's arriving at the solution that will enthrall the customer that's hard. **Allocate the time necessary to define and document your solution to the customer's mission need.** If you allocate a week and you don't have the right answer, but begin proposal development anyway, you will lose. Not only will you lose, your development efforts will remind your team of movies such as *Scream*. If the solution is good and well-defined, you can turn out a dynamite proposal in a week with no problem. Without the right solution, one that is well-documented, 12 months won't be long enough to turn out a good proposal.

6. *The shorter the proposal period, the longer the kickoff meeting*—This relates directly to paradox 2. If you have only 2 weeks to get the proposal completed, your kickoff meeting better take almost all day and there should not be any questions or issues to be resolved at the end of the day. On 60-day proposals, kickoff meetings generally last about 3 hours. **The fundamental truth is you have no time to waste, and all motion must be productive motion.**

7. *Technical graphics don't communicate to technical experts*—I have often heard the complaint from engineers that the graphics don't contain enough technical depth for the evaluators to understand the concepts presented. At debriefs, I generally hear, "We couldn't understand your graphics because they were too dense with too much technical information. We were overwhelmed and gave up." Technical experts want the same thing as any other evaluator—information. **Imparting information is best served by simple graphic concepts that back up a stated conclusion.** Even the most complex functional block diagram or network architecture can be partitioned in a way that allows for the communication of information—how the system works and why your concept is better—rather than the display of superfluous detail. If you think you have built a

graphic that communicates well to your engineering or solutions counterpart, then start over. Your graphic is probably way too detailed to convey information about your solution.

8. *Simple concepts yield complex results*—This is the corollary to paradox 7. If you want your evaluator to really study your solution, give them a simple picture with all the conclusions drawn for them. They will reflect long and hard on your idea. This is what you want them to do. Generally, the more time they spend with your solution concept, the more comfortable they become with it, even when it does not match their perspective. **The complex result is that you get selected because the evaluator could understand (not always agree with) your solution.**
9. *The more mundane the proposal, the greater the need for creative inspiration*—A really good system tends to engender creativity in the presentation of the design as well. A good management process engenders sleep unless we force ourselves to focus on the creative aspects of our process, aspects that enable us to manage a project better than any competitor. I have seen many recent debriefs that cite mundane processes and state that, "The offeror demonstrated nothing creative or unique." Sounds like a good place to get points to me. We consistently make the mistake

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of assigning our most creative talent to the technical proposal. Then, we lose in the management proposal. **Begin assigning your more creative solution developers to the mundane sections and you will suddenly have significantly improved processes that rate highly with evaluators and current customers.**

10. *Declare Friday afternoon and a weekend a “holiday” right before or after Red Team to improve productivity* – I have seen the mere suggestion of this reduce mature proposal and capture managers to blithering idiots in a matter of seconds. We have a tenden-

cy to forget that the final push is much easier with a rested team that has had a weekend brain break and an opportunity to take care of personal matters that have probably been distracting team members from the proposal anyway. **Once they have a couple of days off to think about where the proposal is and what needs to be done, you can’t stop them.** Also, all their anxiety about family is gone as well because they have had time at home and the opportunity to say, “Only a couple more weeks and we’re done.” When they come back from their weekend liberty, just get out the way and

let them go. You will be absolutely amazed at the results and lack of complaining and whining.

There are certainly many more, maybe even hundreds, paradoxes that apply to our chosen profession. I have selected these 10 because I have used them over the course of my career to ensure survival. You can use them, too, but first you have to develop an awareness that paradoxes govern our business successes and failures more often than we would like to admit. ■