

Bring... me... a... rock!

by Roger Dean

“Oog,” said the cave clan leader, “bring rocks. Great Leader wants nice rocks for warriors, keep us safe from other clans. You, Oog, Moog, Uggh and other mighty hunters, go, get rocks,

I take to Great Leader. I choose best rocks and polish them so Great Leader will like our rocks best.”

This seemed like a simple request. Prehistoric hunters used rocks all the time. Rocks were about the only tools they had and they knew rocks better than anyone else in the clan.

So Oog and the other hunters began their search for rocks. Each looked for what he knew to be “the best” rocks. Oog hunted with a spear so he looked for the finest flint that could be split into sharp blades. Moog hunted with a club, so he looked for rocks that were heavy and wouldn’t split when they struck something. Uggh was skilled with his new weapon, the sling, so he sought small, smooth, round rocks that would fly straight and true. They found some rocks near their cave, but had to search long and far for others. This was hard on them and their families. But each time they brought a carefully selected rock to the cave clan leader, the answer was always the same. “Nice rock, but... wrong rock. Get different rock.”

As time passed, everyone became more and more frustrated. The quality of rocks declined as the hunters began to suspect that any rock would be rejected, hunters were late in bringing rocks, and some hunters began to criticize their leader, saying that he wouldn’t know a nice rock if one hit him. The cave clan leader was also frustrated. He now had hundreds of rocks but none that was exactly right. He berated his hunters for failing such a simple task. And everyone in the cave clan — including families — complained about the many wasted hours and about the large pile of rocks that now littered their cave. It was not the best of times.

So what was the problem? Everyone knew that the cave clan leader was wise and that Oog and the others were skilled hunters and skilled rock users. All the hunters did know “nice” rocks when they saw them. But the hunters didn’t know some very important things:

- What the rocks would be used for and how.
- What the cave clan leader thought was a “nice” rock.
- How their cave clan leader would polish the rocks for delivery to The Great Leader.
- How The Great Leader and his warriors would judge “nice.”

In other words, the hunters didn’t know what the “right” rock was. All they had was the basic request, “Bring me a rock.” But they did know one thing: If they didn’t get some meaningful guidance soon, they would run out of time and the cave clan leader would have to accept their rocks or find his own. Then they would all run the risk that some other clan had spent its time finding exactly the right rocks and polishing them so finely that all others would pale in comparison.

Not exactly the best way to run a cave clan... or a proposal.

Process, leadership, and proposal rocks

On a proposal, there can be one cave clan leader or several, depending on how the proposal team is structured. The Capture Manager is most often the cave clan leader, but others — including senior company managers and managers from partner companies — can also play important leadership roles. Everyone else on the team is a hunter and responsible for bringing the “right” proposal rocks to proposal management.

“Proposal rocks” encompass the complete range of proposal materials, from Win Themes and Strategies all the way to finished proposal text and graphics. Each proposal rock is important, but the most important rock—and the most difficult to get—is the first draft of the proposal. This is the rock that will be polished and eventually delivered to The Great Leader (your customer, if you haven't caught on by now).

Getting a usable first draft is the “moment of truth” when authors must actually transform all their ideas and planning into specific words and pictures and say to management, “Take *this* rock to The Great Leader.” This is not only the most difficult step in any proposal, it is also one whose difficulty is directly affected by how the proposal team prepares to find the rocks. The proposal management team can tell the authors exactly what sorts of proposal rocks to bring for review and polishing, or they can simply command, “Bring me a rock.”

Two factors determine if the frustrating and inefficient *Bring Me A Rock* management approach (I'll call it “BMAR” for short) will dominate proposal development: The first is whether the proposal hunters and cave clan leaders use a disciplined process to decide what rocks to get before hunting for them. The second, and *far more important*, factor is the ability and willingness of cave clan leaders to guide the clan, to tell it what sorts of rocks to gather, how the Great Leader will use the rocks, and how the Great Leader's warriors (the evaluation committee) will judge the rocks. In other words, whether you encounter the BMAR syndrome is determined most by whether your proposal leaders will actually lead!

Good rock-gathering process is first step to minimizing frustration

First, let's cover the role of proposal process in helping prevent BMAR. Without a proposal process of some kind, companies *guarantee* BMAR and all its frustrations and inefficiencies.

It starts when someone assumes the role of the cave clan leader. He or she takes the RFP, makes an outline, assigns sections to various authors, and commands, “Start writing!” (“Bring me a rock!”) The only good thing about this approach is that everyone working the proposal should immediately recognize that BMAR is at work and will likely continue. The task then becomes how to minimize the cost of finding the right rocks.

The amazing thing about this approach is that it is practiced not only by people who truly don't know any better, but also by people who would never dream of such an approach in their “normal” jobs. Engineers, for example, routinely use a disciplined, progressive approach to designing and building things. Their normal jobs involve lots of planning, early and continued involvement of decision makers, and progressive development of ideas so that errors are caught early and those that aren't caught early have minimal quality, cost, or schedule impact. They would never dream of using BMAR to develop a complex product. But for some, things are much different when it comes to proposals. They forget that a proposal is, in fact, a product to build, and their approach becomes, “Here's the spec (the RFP), now start building (writing).”

Fortunately for most proposal rock gatherers, the practice of “Here's the RFP, start writing” seems to be diminishing. More and more companies recognize that a good proposal process can help them produce a better product, faster, and at less cost. Managers in these companies know that strategies and storyboards—in almost any form—encourage dialog among the proposal's cave clan leader and the rock gathering authors to help define the desired proposal rocks. These tools help prevent BMAR because they define the company's specific ideas on what are the right rocks and how, exactly, they should be polished for presentation to the customer. Since I've covered strategies and storyboards in other articles, I'll move directly to management's role in BMAR.



Nice rock... but wrong rock!

It's management's job to define the right proposal rocks

One serious downside to a blind dependence on “process” is that some forget that *process* by itself cannot obviate the dangers of BMAR management. Even the best “evolutionary” proposal processes employing detailed strategies and/or comprehensive storyboards *will only prevent BMAR if there is someone who can and will lead the process*. It is only through the active involvement of informed cave clan leaders—managers who 1) understand what your prospective customer really wants and 2) will take the time to work with the proposal team throughout the process—that your proposal teams will be certain to find the right rocks early enough so there is time to polish them for delivery to The Great Leader.

There are lots of reasons for cave clan leaders practicing BMAR; some are inadvertent and some quite deliberate, but all have the same debilitating effects on your proposal team. At one end of the scale are those managers who implement BMAR because they don't have time to do anything else. They are so overworked that there is just no time to get involved. For them, “BMAR happens”... it's the best they can do. Close by on the scale are weak managers who are uncertain about customer needs, uneasy about making decisions, or afraid of looking bad or, worse, failing. They know that the less specific the guidance, the less chance there is that anyone important will find fault; it is hard to fault generalities that cover everything. A weak manager who knows he is weak can use BMAR to mask those weaknesses. Further along the scale are those managers who believe there is just no reason to do all the early work of strategies or storyboards because it never makes any difference anyway (a dangerous, self-fulfilling prophecy). On their proposals, the first draft is always a throwaway; it's something to let them get really serious. They think that BMAR is the most efficient way to get the right rock. Next to them on the scale are those managers who see themselves — either consciously or unconsciously — as company saviors... only they know enough to keep the company on the straight and narrow road to success. For them, BMAR is a way to make sure that things are done exactly their way, and share in the credit if the rocks are good rocks or blame others if the rocks are rejected. Finally, at the far end of the BMAR scale are those “managers” who like to wield control over their hunters. They know that information is power and they want it all. The less they tell their hunters, the less power they have. BMAR management allows these tyrants to claim all the credit for everything while avoiding recrimination if things go wrong.

In any event—overworked manager, genuine tyrant, or someplace in between—BMAR managers allow their proposal teams to waste both time and money. Even if they implement a process employing strategies and/or storyboards, these are often meaningless because team members lack insight into what constitutes nice rocks. If a BMAR proposal wins, it is usually for reasons totally outside the control of the proposal team. But if it loses, the hunters need look no further than their cave clan leaders for responsibility.

Recognizing BMAR is relatively easy if you know what to look for

The first step in minimizing the damage from BMAR management is recognizing its symptoms early enough for the cave clan leaders or hunters to do something about it. The first clues can come quite early in the proposal. For example, trouble is on the way if the proposal cave clan leaders start talking about Win Themes and Strategies but no one can pinpoint what these are. The signs are even clearer if some hunter suggests candidate Win Themes as early proposal rocks, and all the proposal leadership can say is, “Well, that's close... but not close enough.”¹

The same problem can appear in the outlining process. While the top-level outline must always be driven by the RFP, there is always some interpretation required to get it right. It gets even worse the farther down into the outline you go. If the outlining process drags on and on, through seemingly countless “churnings,” BMAR is hard at work. And so on through strategy development and storyboarding... “Close, but not quite right.”

¹ In this case, the whole team should start to worry about wining. If no one can say clearly, “Why us?” early, then it's likely the team will continue to have trouble throughout the proposal.

If your cave clan leaders can't or won't guide the hunters along the way to a successful proposal—if all they do is provide vague ideas about rocks in general and about how important it is to find the right rocks—then the hunters must do something to improve the situation.

Minimizing the costs of working in a rock-gathering situation

Regardless of whether your proposal is the “Here's your RFP, start writing” kind or the step-by-step “strategies–storyboards–draft” kind, almost everyone on the proposal team can take actions that will produce a “nice rock” and minimize the time, effort, frustration, and B&P cost.

IF YOU ARE A MANAGER who realizes you've created a rock-gathering situation, and if you really would like to do something different, here's what you can do:

Understand your role as leader. There are lots of ways to lead a clan of rock gatherers, but none of them is “do nothing.” Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie is reputed to have first said, “Lead, follow, or get out of the way.” If you are the leader, understand that leadership demands action. If you really don't know what is going on, find someone who does and have him or her help you. Or, just name that person as the proposal cave clan leader from the start.

Acknowledge the situation. Admit that you don't know all the answers yet—your team will have figured this out, anyway—and convert rock gathering from trying to hide the fact that you do not know exactly what to do into a true team effort. The true measure of a manager's strength is his or her ability to say, “I don't really know.” Let your hunters know what you really do know and what you don't, and invite them to help solve your (actually, everyone's) problem. Admission of weakness is a strength, not a weakness!

Form a real team. Less confident managers confuse BMAR with brainstorming or participative management. They implement team-building exercises, but never really follow through. After the team building exercises, work with the team to define the best rocks. Once team members know that their ideas will be accepted and acted upon, you're well on the way to having an effective team instead of just a group of people working in the same area.

Define interim parameters. If you cannot define the right rock then do things to narrow the search scope or to define rock gathering parameters. Redefine your end objective in terms of successively more precise interim ones. This changes rock gathering into true brainstorming. Ask your team to bring you lots of different rocks. Let team members know you don't necessarily expect them to bring you exactly the right rock the first time, but if they happen to stumble upon it, you'll certainly reward them. As your hunters bring you rocks, work with them to develop a common understanding of what might be a “nice rock” and share this knowledge with the other team members. Strategies and storyboards serve exactly this purpose by helping to define interim parameters. They are models of the real rocks, models that are lighter in weight and easier to find and carry because they don't demand the writing effort of even draft text.

Make decisions. Obviously, the synthesis of ideas into new and better ideas demands timely decision making. This is especially true on a proposal where time is at a premium. My father once told me, “If you are supposed to make a decision, make it. You can almost always correct things later if you are wrong.” He knew that people respect leaders who are not afraid to make decisions. He also knew that if you make too many wrong decisions, or wrong decisions with irreversible consequences, you won't be leader for long. So, if you are one of the proposal's cave clan leaders, make those decisions and lead the process of narrowing the scope of possible nice rocks. Tell your proposal rock gatherers what sort of rocks to gather. Change “Bring me a rock” to “Bring me **this** rock.” By taking an active, continuous role in the development of your proposal rocks, you will eventually get the right rocks rather than having to settle for whatever rocks you have when time runs out.

IF YOU ARE AN AUTHOR or Volume Manager faced with the prospects of BMAR management, you can still minimize your frustration and contribute to increasing the efficiency of the proposal effort. There are basically three options:

- Change the way your cave clan leader works (unlikely, at best).
- Find the fastest route possible to learning what he or she thinks the right rock is.
- Define the characteristics of the right rock yourself and then convince the cave clan leader you are right.

The first and last are risky and unlikely to succeed. So, with apologies to Lewis Carroll², I'll start in the middle. To find what the right rock is...

Ask questions to narrow the scope of possible rocks. It is the rarest of managers/reviewers who will take the trouble to write down all their thoughts. If they could, you probably wouldn't have this problem to begin with! So even if you get detailed comments on what is wrong with your first draft and specific suggestions for improvement, ask more specific questions about the scope, content, format, organization, and anything else you can think of to learn just what your manager wants. Separate subjective issues/criteria from the objective ones. Focus on the objective criteria first, using the dialog these questions prompt to probe subjective criteria. Define the universe of possible rocks and try to learn what rocks are not acceptable.

If you discover your cave clan leader really doesn't know what the right rocks are, you can use these questions to help him or her learn what the answers should be or to find someone who does know. Ask what they want or help them figure out what they want. And go directly to the source. If the Capture Manager is the one who rejected your first rock, try to discuss the major problems with him or her directly and not just with the Volume Manager. "Nice" is subjective and can be like the game of telephone where the real meaning changes slightly from person to person as the story is relayed.

Keep asking questions. If proposal management distances itself from the writing process, especially during the first draft, find ways to keep them engaged in the process. Make sure they have some ownership in the outcome. The way to do this is to continue to ask questions during the entire rock gathering process. No matter how busy they may be, few proposal managers will reject requests for discussions about key points, especially if you try to keep the discussions short and to the point. In addition, they are more likely to give you useful guidance if you give them something short to comment on, rather than asking them to write from scratch.

Bring several very different rocks for consideration. After the first rock is rejected, the worst thing you can do is to keep bringing rocks that are only slightly different from ones you've brought before. Find two or three rocks that are very different from the first and very different from each other. And don't spend a lot of time polishing these new rocks; their only purpose is to help define characteristics of the real rock. What you are really doing is redoing storyboards. But there is an inherent problem with this advice: it is exactly opposite from what human nature demands. You obviously thought the first draft was good, or you wouldn't have turned it in—you put a lot of effort into it, and you believe that the right draft must be only slightly different from the first one. Nonetheless, regardless of what you think, small variations on the first rock are a waste of time and effort! Unless you were almost on target with the first rock, it will take longer than you have to find the right rock or learn there is no right rock.

One more thought here: Don't keep bringing the old rocks back with the new ones, but don't throw them away, either. Stash them somewhere because they might be useful tomorrow. Or, as the real-life story in the sidebar on the next page shows, they might have been the right rocks after all!

² "Begin at the beginning, the king said gravely, and go till you come to the end; then stop." Louis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)

Show the rocks to others; get their opinions. Unless you are working alone, there will be others with whom you can discuss your ideas. No, they won't solve your problems for you because they'll have their own jobs to do. If they're on the proposal team, they probably even have their own rock problems. You can go to peers, functional experts, other managers in the company, or, perhaps, your proposal's review team. The idea is not to criticize your cave clan leader to these people but, rather, to seek the benefit of their insight and experience to help you get closer to the right answer.

Define the rock gathering standards yourself. The last approach to learning what the right rocks are—discussing your interim rocks with other managers—is also probably the best way to go about taking the lead in defining what the right rocks are. If you discuss your ideas with enough of the “right” people, you may be able to do an “end run” around an intransigent cave clan leader and create your own criteria for the right rocks that will be imposed on your cave clan leader by others. To do this, however, your discussions with other company managers about these rocks must include a substantial sales component... you are really trying to get their approval of your ideas. As with any good sales approach, you must make sure you relate your understanding of the problem, tell what your rock is and does, and explain why it is the right rock for your customer. Experience shows this third option for attacking BMAR from an author's vantage point can be a long uphill battle, but if you are unable to engage your cave clan leaders in helping you learn what rocks to gather, it may be your only choice.

Doing nothing about BMAR is the wrong answer

As with our prehistoric hunters, Bring Me A Rock management in proposals—or just about any other business endeavor—can be deadly. It robs the team of morale, it wastes time and Bid & Proposal funds, and it undermines the quality of the ultimate proposal. Sooner or later someone always says this is what I really want; sooner or later someone says, “Bring me this rock,” or goes and gets the rock himself. If company management is going to allow these people to get their own rocks, then why not take that path from the start? But if your proposal is really going to be a team effort, then it is incumbent on every member of the proposal team to find ways to prevent BMAR.

If you are a manager who thinks in terms of participative management, brainstorming, and empowerment, ask yourself if you are really leading or simply following where your people go. If you are a volume manager or author and know you aren't getting any meaningful leadership on a proposal, try to find out who will ultimately say, “Bring me this rock.” Then find ways to discover what their ideas are for what makes for a nice rock. You may not always succeed in changing things, but you owe it to all on the proposal team to try. Doing nothing about BMAR management is the wrong answer... for prehistoric hunters and today's proposal teams.

Don't Throw Away Any Rocks! *A true story by Dave Herndon*

As Manager of Business Development for a Virginia service contract business, I was responsible for both marketing and proposal preparation for the company's various service contracting areas. The CEO and founder was a brilliant workaholic with many talents and achievements in both the scientific and business fields. He was heavily involved in all areas of the company operations, including proposal development. I thought I had seen about everything when it came to proposals..., until I encountered my own rock-gathering exercise.

I was managing a proposal to the EPA and wrote the Executive Summary, working very long and hard to make certain that I covered all major themes and discriminators. I thought it was near perfect. Knowing the CEO's personal interest in the company's business development, I asked him to review my draft. I gave it to him early one morning expecting glowing praise later that day. Later that day, he gave me my “near perfect” draft back. It was covered with red ink and included a big notation that it wasn't what he wanted. So I rewrote the draft, making all the changes he suggested, and handed it back to him. Once again, my Executive Summary came back covered with red ink and suggestions. Again, it wasn't what he wanted. This went on for at least four more drafts. By then, I had become very frustrated and I'm sure he was, too. But in my frustration, I had a brilliant idea: The next draft I gave him was my original submission..., no changes.

To my surprise, his only comment on this draft was, “Perfect, this is just what I want.” It wasn't until many years later that I told him that the “perfect” version of the Executive Summary was my original submission; by then we could both enjoy the good chuckle that this story deserves.

By the way, the proposal *did* win.