

## A Baker's Dozen of Proposal Aphorisms

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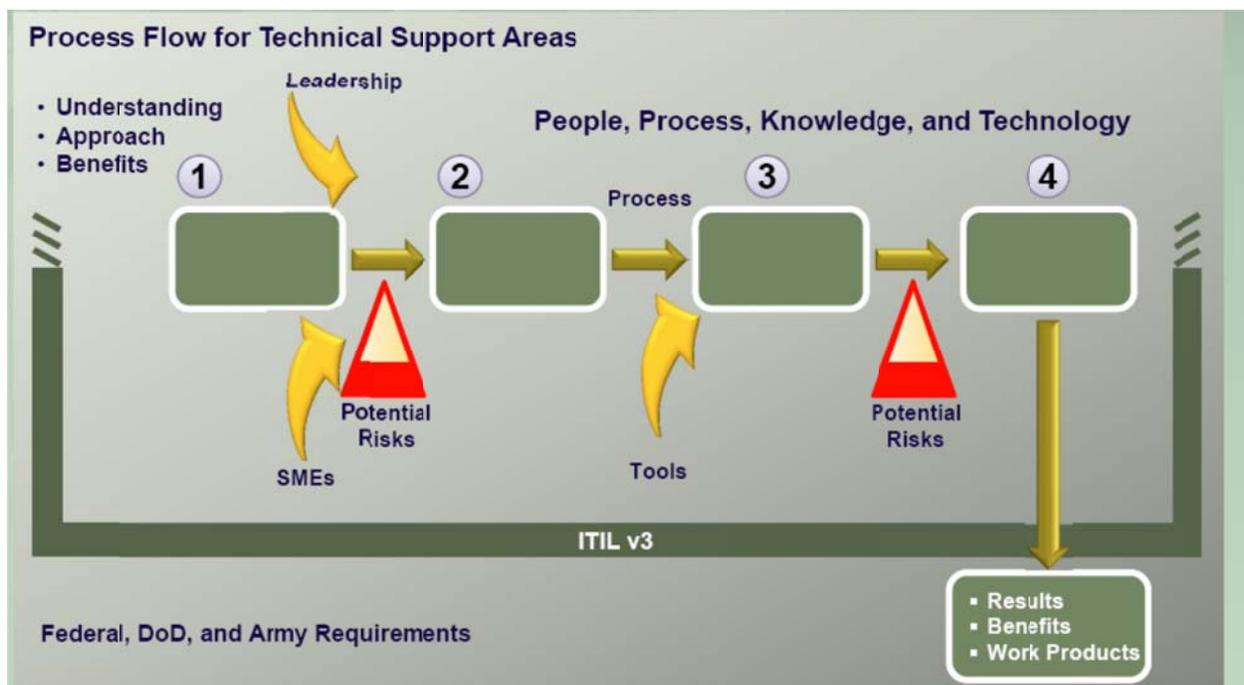


Working in proposal development both as a full-time employee and business consultant with small, mid-tier, and tier-one corporations in the Federal marketplace during the past 25 years, I have gained a broad spectrum of insights, and also lost most of my hair! This article distills many of those insights gained through hands-on experience into 13 (a Baker's Dozen) brief statements of key principles.

### 1. **Blue Team is far more important than Red Team.**

This key aphorism is linked closely with its sister adage, "*Do the thinking before you do the writing.*" Seems like everyone wants to be a Red Team reviewer—the company president, the senior vice presidents, the division directors. Some companies choose to bring in outside proposal consultants and technical or programmatic subject matter experts (SMEs) for the expressed purpose of Red Team review. Direct experience with proposals during the past two-and-a-half decades has demonstrated that Red Team is far too deep in the response lifecycle to effect meaningful changes in the direction, solutions, and fundamental content of the proposal. Sustained executive engagement early in the proposal process is critical in order to gain "buy-in" for and approval of key elements of the solution set, such as number of key personnel and the associated staff skill mix, project organizational structure, and company investments in such areas as staff training/technical refreshment or corporate certifications, which will then be described within the proposal. Over the years and to this very day, there has been far too much time, energy, and emotion expended during Red Team reviews explaining to senior management why the organizational chart is configured in a specific way, why the team includes Company

ABC and not Company XYZ, and why 30 days of phase-in support activities are being offered to the Government at no direct cost, along with countless other important decision gates. It is far more effective and efficient to have socialized and gained concurrence for all of the elements that comprise the technical, management, subcontractor management, staffing and key personnel, phase-in/phase-out, past performance, and cost/price solution set at Blue Team. A proven way to vet the entire solution set is through well-constructed proposal work products that encompass elevator speeches; process flow diagrams (**Exhibit 1**); quadrant diagrams that depict Understanding/Approach/Benefits/Validation; and listings of major Strengths



**Exhibit 1. Use process flow diagrams to illustrate your company’s approach and the direct benefits that it brings to the Government.**

that your proposal offers to the Government in terms of quality, schedule, cost, and risk mitigation, which must *exceed* the basic requirements of the Request for Proposal (RFP) or Request for Solution (RFS). No full narrative should be generated for or reviewed at Blue Team. Instead, robust, meaningful graphics and tables coupled with high-impact blocks of text (e.g.,

elevator speeches) allow reviewers to validate that the proposal is on the right path for moving forward. Full-scale narrative is far too challenging to decompose at the Blue Team stage. Indeed, in an increasing majority of cases, total proposal page count is very limited (20 – 30 pages) and Performance Work Statements (PWSs) and Statements of Work (SOWs) are lengthy (100 – 250 pages) and complex. One Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Request for Quotation in early 2012 had a 65-page PWS, but a limit of 40 pages for the entire Technical, Quality, Transition, and Staffing response. What this means in a practical sense is that *you cannot write your way to proposal success*, another corollary truism. Proposals must be built on meaningful and carefully constructed exhibits (graphics, figures, tables, and illustrations), with the key exhibits connected by text, rather than the other way around.

## **2. The solicitation drives outlining, not Microsoft Word.**

Follow the Government’s solicitation for proposal outlining, not the default settings within word processing applications or your internal company documentation standards. On a recent Department of Defense (DoD) opportunity, the RFP used upper- and lower-case type for evaluation factors for award. In addition, lower-case letters as well as numerals were used for the structure of the evaluation factors (e.g., **a. Technical/Management Approach; 4. Subfactor 4, Staffing; b. Part Performance**). A mid-tier company responding to this particular solicitation experienced significant internal challenges with the Government’s framework. That firm’s inclination was to do the following for the three specific examples listed above:

### **A. TECHNICAL / MANAGEMENT APPROACH**

#### **4. SUBFACTOR 4. STAFFING**

#### **Volume II PAST PERFORMANCE**

Anytime that a contractor requires Government evaluators to “connect the dots,” that company increases its risk of losing. If the Government uses a lower-case “a” as an outlining element within its solicitation document, the contractor should use a lower-case “a” as well. If the Government is looking for past performance under a section denoted “b.” and industry uses a Roman numeral II, the level of alignment goes down between the proposal response and the RFP. Default settings in MS-Word result in the use of ALL CAPS and SMALL CAPS in headings and subheadings. In many cases, these do not apply, and should be manually overridden. And simply because a company has as a tenant within its corporate documentation standards that all outlines will begin with 1.0, 1.1., 1.2, etc., this does not translate into optimal compliance traceability for every RFP.

### **3. Collaboration tools do not equal communication.**

Collaboration tools and Document Management Systems (DMSs) such as Microsoft SharePoint 2010, SpringCM Privia, Intravation Virtual Proposal Center (VPC), and Active Innovations InfoRouter have become increasingly important enablers for secure document sharing, proposal configuration control, and Knowledge Management (KM). But they are tools only, and they do not equate to genuine collaboration and meaningful communication. Some companies display a significant and detrimental over-dependence upon these types of tools. *It’s in SharePoint, so we must be collaborating.* or *The auto-generated email went out to everybody on the permissions list, so we must be communicating.* When there is a large number of reference and background documents on a proposal portal for a specific opportunity, there is also a pronounced tendency among the proposal contributors not to revisit and leverage the good materials that have been collected over time. In addition, there is clear evidence within some

organizations that “feeding” and maintaining the collaborative tool replaces to an extent the thinking, brainstorming, and idea-sharing so necessary for increased probability of winning ( $P_{win}$ ). During the past 5 years, I have had the unique opportunity of seeing deeply into the nuances of more than 50 organizations’ business cultures. Those that build a strong competency in organizational knowledge-sharing and effective multi-level communication have a stronger and more sustainable proposal development process, and a higher proposal success rate.

#### **4. Focus on proposal results, not proposal process.**

Many contractors, both large and small, demonstrate a sense of *process* urgency versus *results* urgency. Kickoff meetings focus on logistics and compliance issues. Color reviews and their associated dates drive the proposal process rather than solutions that add tangible or intangible value to the Government in ways that are meaningful to the specific Federal agency, and which contribute to winning. Often, there is far more time and attention given to daily status calls than to how the particular information technology (IT) requirements in the RFP or RFS map to the Government’s business objectives and mission goals, or how past performance must validate the management approach. Face-to-face and virtual meetings languish for hours with no clear agenda, no update on previous action items, and no clear and documented pathway forward, only to be repeated multiple times on different days of the proposal response lifecycle. Astonishingly, many teleconferences begin with no introductions of the names or roles of the people on the call or physically in the conference room from which the call is initiated. Participants inquire constantly if a given person is on the call. The amount of Bid and Proposal (B&P) money consumed during meandering, ill-planned meetings is overwhelming. And

sometimes business owners are the most flagrant offenders, joining meetings late in the session, which requires backtracking and repetition of material already addressed.

**5. Compliance is necessary, but not sufficient to win.**

The primary focus of so many proposal professionals as well as executive management is on compliance with the solicitation document and all of its stipulations. To be sure, you must comply with all font, margin, page count, and other documentation requirements. In addition, you must also address what is being asked for, and what specifically will be evaluated (Section M) as part of the source selection process.

Yet for a single-award competitive contract, there is precisely *one* winner. And in 2012, there may be 100+ offerors for this one contract. The vast majority of those 100+ proposals will be compliant. So what makes the difference between winning, and coming in second or seventy-second? Certainly not compliance.

There is an oft-repeated adage that winning results from merely “answering the mail” and “having a low price.” In general, “answering the mail” will earn you a “C”—the Government is looking for and expecting to see much more than that. In addition to compliant, the proposal must also be *credible*, that is, validated by facts, and *compelling*, with your solution set aligned exactly with what the Government sees as meaningful and important. *Compelling* also extends to high-impact, on-target graphics and narrative.

**6. Many proposals are lost before being submitted.**

Winning a contract is the result of 50% externally focused effort (i.e., Business Development, Operations, and Recruiting), and 50% internally focused effort (i.e., Capture

Management, Proposal Development, Contracts/Pricing, Finance and Accounting, Human Resources, and Quality Assurance). Mr. Ron Trowbridge, former owner of RS Information Systems, Inc. (RSIS), made this assertion 14 years ago, and it remains valid today. A stellar proposal without effective customer relationship building and management, along with outstanding past performance, will not have a high  $P_{win}$ . Transactions are personal—people buy from people, and people buy from people they know and trust. If key source selection evaluators and decision makers within a Government agency do not know your company, or have a negative impression of your executive management, key personnel, and/or business practices, do not expect to win a given proposal. The latter is particularly true in situations wherein you are the incumbent. As my colleague and fellow instructor, Dr. Terry C. Tarbell, has observed correctly, re-competition for the follow-on contract begins at the win party celebrating the initial contract award. It is critical for Business Development staff to work shoulder-to-shoulder with project-level leaders on the Operations side of the house to keep the Government customer set fully satisfied in terms of Quality, Schedule, Cost, and Risk Mitigation through the entire period of performance, not just at re-competition time.

**7. Themes are not important to the Government, STRENGTHS are.**

This will be a very challenging aphorism to accept for many proposal professionals. *Wait a minute!* you might think or say, *themes and discriminators are what we've been taught to be important.* Thematic messages that connect the elements of your proposal response are indeed important from a proposal development and writing perspective. But Government evaluators do not think in terms of common themes, unique themes, discriminators, or even value propositions. Their focus is on Strengths, Weaknesses, Deficiencies, and Uncertainties, as well as a Risk Rating for your proposal in its entirety as well as its component parts.

In reviewing a number of official Source Selection documents from several different civilian and defense agencies, the following cross-section of “real-deal” examples of Strengths that Government evaluators documented in their findings for various companies’ proposals emerged. Obviously, Strengths are unique to specific companies and specific proposals, but these will give you an excellent idea of what the Government actually identified as being important to them.

- Comprehensive workforce skills management approach for assessing and retaining employee skills.
- Integrated, timely monitoring and reporting of costs for both prime and subcontractor.
- Award Fee employee bonus program.
- Integrated approach to all aspects of IT systems management.
- Integrated management approach with common policies, procedures, salary, and benefit structures (across the Team).
- Implementation of an innovative user interface for work control and asset management.
- Approach to provide certification programs for Project Management.
- Demonstration of a strong commitment to small business utilization through enforceable agreements, exceeding the Government’s goal of 30% small business.
- Offeror provided a tangible plan for real cost savings through innovations and efficiencies without substantial impact to service level.
- Comprehensive and cost-effective risk analysis and mitigation for all required areas.
- Fully functional task order management system tailored to the Government’s ID/IQ environment, with sound security features.

- Proposed performance metrics and fee sharing were consistent across all subcontractors.
- The first significant strength was the Company's surveillance methods which intimately involve Government personnel in the development of meaningful metrics, the ability to capture key performance metrics, feedback through proposed customer surveys, and access to data via an online management tool.
- Synchronization of communications about assigned work.
- Customer-facing organization with a well-defined process, a well thought-out performance improvement process and risk rating methodology, and several proactive methods for staying current with problems and maintaining overall control.
- The Phase-In Plan consisted of a comprehensive, detailed, and realistic timeline and sequence of events.
- Factors used in determining skill-mix diversity were comprehensive and well-developed.
- Excellent automated tools will assist tracking availability and assigning resources to eliminate underutilization of employees.
- Staffing will be dynamically based which provides for flexibility in changing workforce environments.
- Thorough cross-training and staff development policies.
- Highly effective and integrated Total Compensation Plan, which includes supportive benefits and flexibilities that will improve stability in the workforce.
- Proposed detailed and comprehensive Phase-In Plan that demonstrates an excellent understanding of the challenges associated with ensuring statement of work requirements are fully operational on contract start date.
- Proposed technology summits and innovation implementation processes.

- Comprehensive approach regarding financial reporting and business management support.
- Company *XYZ* proposed a highly qualified Program Manager with over 3 decades of experience with the Government Agency managing programs with staffing levels comparable to project *ABC* and with multiple subcontractors.
- Extensive and highly qualified group of key personnel ... that will be dedicated 100% of the time, providing excellent management of the work activity.
- Company *XYZ* proposed an extensive plan to handle workload fluctuations through external partnerships, training, cross-utilization, and using an on-line skills database that will enable response to workload fluctuations in a timely manner based on customer requirements.
- Proposal shows strong presence at other agencies and suggests substantial reach back capability. This further reduces risk since the offeror would take advantage of established processes and procedures and be effective at contract award.
- Clear use of performance metrics will lower performance risks by ensuring measurable and reportable process performance.

Consider using textboxes entitled, “Evidence of Key Strengths” in Executive Summaries and each major module of your proposal response. Make it easy for evaluators to locate and document the Strengths resident in your offering (proposal).

**8. Solutions are not just for the technical sections anymore.**

Every one of the multitude of *decisions* that you company makes regarding all aspects of your proposal response constitutes an element in your overall solution set. Think of solutions as

results of selecting certain “forks” in the road we might call “Proposal Highway.” For example, you can select Remedy/BMC 7.5 as your proposed help desk support tool, or you can select FrontRange Solutions Heat, or LiveTime Help Desk Software, or other Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) help desk solutions. The decision that you make in this regard is part of your technical solution.

The very same concept applies to your management solution. Will you propose a Program Manager (PM) and a Deputy Program Manager, or only a PM? Will your PM report to a Division Vice President, or to the Chief Operation Officer of your company? Will there be any unpriced, niche subcontractors? Will you use American Systems Corporation Risk Radar *Enterprise*, or some other automated risk management tool?

For past performance, which specific citations will you reference, given that the RFP allows only three from the prime contractor, and you are the prime? In citing a large, task-order type contract, will you separate the major tasks as separate past performance citations, or combine them?

When aggregated, these and hundreds of other decisions comprise your overall solution set.

**9. Every part of your proposal must fit with every other part.**

Much like the dovetail joints of a hand-crafted drawer for a wooden table, each element of your proposal must fit together precisely. The strength of this particular example of woodworking joinery is derived from the carefully interlocking pins and tails. These are analogous



to the technical, management, subcontractor management, key personnel, staffing, quality assurance, phase-in/phase-out, past performance, past performance questionnaires (PPQs), bases of estimate (BOEs), and cost/price sections of a proposal. Too many times, past performance and the past performance questionnaires are prepared in isolation from the technical and management sections. Two unfortunate things happen: (1) the past performance citations do not validate and substantiate the technical and management approaches that are being proposed for the new contract, and (2) the parameters that the Government views to be important as expressed in the framework of the PPQs are not reflected in the proposal itself. For example, PPQs frequently focus on Quality of Service, Timeliness, Cost Control, Business Relations, Risk Mitigation, and Customer Satisfaction. These are the elements that a given Government agency is asking other Federal agencies (and commercial firms) to assess with regard to your company's performance. Clearly, these are the very items that the Government deems to be of value in helping them make their source selection decision on the new contract. So it seems to be a very good idea to reflect those same items in your past performance citations, Executive Summary, technical approach, and management approach.

Another example—a given company may emphasize its use of an Integrated Project Team (IPT) approach in the management section of its proposal. However, in the past performance citations, there is often no mention of the successful application of an IPT for other Federal agencies. When dovetailed together effectively, the past performance citations should provide real-world validation for what you are conveying elsewhere in your proposal.

**10. Executive engagement is much more critical *earlier* than later.**

How many times have you seen it? The president or executive vice president requests a copy of the Red or Gold Team version of the proposal. Sounds innocuous enough. But many

times the result is proposal pandemonium. Why does the cover look the way it does? Why were the specific labor categories selected? Why do we have five Task Leads rather than three? I don't like the color palette of our graphics. Why don't we begin our Executive Summary with information about our company and when were we founded? (*not a good idea, incidentally*). The list goes on. So deep in the proposal process, things change course, perhaps by 180 degrees. People who have been working day and night on the proposal may experience a decline in morale. Effort has been wasted; B&P dollars have not been optimized. And the cycle repeats itself on the next proposal.

**11. When you think you have enough validating metrics, think again.**

Compelling proposals are built upon evidence—*quantitatively* and *qualitatively* rich graphics and narrative. Too often, we in industry write and present information graphically in very generalized terms. We say, “industry-leading best practices,” “proven methods and techniques,” “established standards,” and “demonstrated processes.” We talk in terms such as, “saving the customer time and money,” “increasing productivity,” “decreasing project-level risk,” and “all deliverables have been submitted on time.” Even when we do include some quantitative evidence, such as “We submitted 24 deliverables on time,” there is no validation or detail behind that statement. What was the timeframe being highlighted—6 months, 2 years, or 5 years? Were these interim *and* final deliverables, or interim *or* final deliverables? Were all of the deliverables deemed to be acceptable by the Government's Contracting Officer (CO) or Contracting Officer's Technical Representative (COTR)? Much more powerful would be the statement,

“During the past 1½ years on this mission-support, performance-based contract, we submitted 100% of the required 24 interim and final deliverables on time. Importantly, 98.7% of the interim deliverables were accepted on the first submission, and 100% of our final deliverables were accepted by the CO. Our exemplary record of providing timely deliverables is validated further in our Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System (CPARS) rating on this contract for the 6-month period ending 12/31/11.”

**12. The goal of executive leadership is to locate talent and break down barriers.**

Executive management will benefit their organization substantially by seeking top-quality proposal talent, and then breaking down internal impediments to their productivity. Twenty-five years ago, proposal development was often conceived of as an administrative function. For companies operating in the hyper-competitive, highly commoditized Federal market of today, successful proposals are the lifeblood of the organization’s present and future. Proposal professionals must be empowered, enabled with appropriate tools and facilities, incentivized for proposal winning, and held accountable for results to which they contribute. These encompass 100% on-time proposal delivery or upload, >90% of all proposals being selected for competitive range, >60% of all contract dollars pursued through proposals being award to the company, and >50% of all full-and-open competitions being successful.

**13. Speaking the same proposal language is more important than English.**

Leadership and staff within a given organization often come together with diverse business backgrounds, corporate cultures, and understanding of and expectations associated with the proposing process. Executive management should invest the time and dollars necessary to ensure that senior corporate and project-level managers, key Operations staff, and select

infrastructure personnel have been trained such that everyone speaks the same proposal “language.” That Blue Team and Red Team mean the same thing company-wide in terms of upfront preparation, work products, and review expectations. That rich quantitative and qualitative details validating all claims and assertions are systematically collected and provided to the proposal/capture team for every proposal. That information for many baseline modules of a proposal—such as resumes, project citations, cost control mechanisms, schedule control tools, and so forth—can be collected in advance of the time when an RFP is “live” on the street.

*Now let's go win stuff!*

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Dr. Robert S. Frey is Principal/Co-Owner of the consultancy, Successful Proposal Strategies, LLC, which was launched 5 years ago in Northern Virginia. In this capacity, Dr. Frey has supported customers attain \$3.359 Billion in funded, multi-year contract awards with civilian, defense, and intelligence agencies. Dr. Frey brings 25 years of sustained proposal development excellence in proposal design and architecture. Author of five editions of *Successful Proposal Strategies for Small Businesses* (Boston: Artech House, 2008; Sixth Edition is scheduled for release June 2012), Dr. Frey has taught 3,000+ small business representatives in proposal development. He is a 2006 Fellow of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals.

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