

Success is 90% Process

I once had an employee who used to say, “Barbara, you are always thinking about what you’re thinking about!” I don’t think she meant it as a compliment, but I do think it is a valuable way to approach designing and writing a proposal.

I have been working with a client to develop a response to a federal government RFP. It is a very challenging response to write because it requires a very high level of detail about “how would you go about doing what you say you would do.” They want plans. They want timelines. They want to know that WE know how we will deliver what we say we can deliver.

My clients typically find this very difficult. In conversation, one of them said to me, “It’s like they are asking me if I drink water. Of course I drink water! I drink water all day long every day. Drinking water is what I do!” My response is, “They will not give you credit for drinking water all day every day. They will only give you credit for documenting that you drank two liters of water on September 23 2007 in support of Contract #321 which can be verified by the following reference.” This way of thinking is maddening to small company leaders, who are accustomed to diving in and doing whatever is required.

Successful small companies are usually very good at doing what we do. But we are seldom as good at explaining how we do what we do. If you develop the art of “thinking about what you’re thinking about” and “explaining how you would do what you do,” you will find your proposals coming alive and resonating with your prospects. And along the way, you will discover just how expensive it is to do things in your customary seat-of-the-pants manner, and you will find new opportunities for efficiencies. No “efficiency improvements” or “cost reductions” can happen unless you have a detailed process against which to measure improvement.

To illustrate my point, I’m citing just a handful of the requirements from this RFP that we’re working on:

- Include a description of the system(s)
- What are your procedures to carry out the tasks
- What are your performance metrics
- How will you manage subcontractors
- How will you control costs
- How will you ensure timely submission of invoices
- What is your project implementation schedule
- Address all assumptions, risks, and mitigation plans associated with your solution
- How will you meet all of our security requirements

As you think about it, these are all questions that ask you to define specific business processes. In your business, you complete processes all the time. But do you have specific, written-down policies and procedures to define how you do things or how you intend to do things? If not,

starting now to document your processes will move your company ahead of the crowd of small business competitors.

How would you go about doing that? Here's a "process to define processes."

1. Define the process that you need to document. Let's say, for example, "ensure timely submission of invoices."
2. Identify who (name of person or name of role) is responsible for creating and delivering invoices.
3. Explain step-by-step how that person receives information about invoices that should be created.
4. Explain step-by-step how that person creates an invoice and (if necessary) submits it for approval to be delivered.
5. Explain step-by-step who tracks the invoice once it has been created and delivered and ensures that it is paid.
6. Explain step-by-step the procedure for collecting when an invoice is not paid according to its terms.

No matter how small or unsophisticated your company, you already do most or all of the things that a customer would want you to do. You manage personnel and money. You define and deliver your products and services. You deal with problems as they arise and you are creative at figuring out work-arounds and solutions to unforeseen problems.

Now think about how much better you could be if these "things you do" become documented as processes. Methodologies that you can teach to your staff, hand down to new employees, refine and improve over time? Then you would be prepared to put them in front of prospects as reasons to do business with you. You would be prepared for that next important RFP that crosses your desk. Even more importantly, you would be prepared to hold your team accountable for performance against your process metrics.

Oh and by the way, in the case I'm writing about the total available business over 3 to 5 years is \$900 million. Don't you think that's worth inventing and documenting some processes?

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