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GPCI Competency 02: Knowledge of organizational development as it pertains to grant seeking

GPCI Competency 05: Knowledge of post-award grant management practices sufficient to inform effective grant design and development

GPCI Competency 06: Knowledge of nationally recognized standards of ethical practice by grant professionals

Abstract

In fall 2013, the Colorado Springs School District 11 (CSSD 11) Grants Office conducted a Kepner-Tregoe Situation Appraisal (SA) to determine the best steps to resolve issues resulting from lack of coordination and communication with other departments, particularly with the CSSD 11 Procurement Department. The results of the situation appraisal revealed that each department had different requirements to meet in order to be fiscally and programmatically compliant. Neither department understood these differences, nor did they understand why their approval processes were not acceptable for the other department. This resulted in interdepartmental conflict and detracted from effective grants management. This case study examines the issues that prompted the situation appraisal, the steps used in conducting the situation appraisal, and the actions that have been taken by both departments to create a

uniform grant and procurement process that meets the requirements of both departments and leads to optimal grants management. This case study is relevant to grant professionals in many fields who must collaborate with multiple departments and divisions to effectively carry out their work.

Introduction

Two different departments and two different chains of command, all within one school district—Colorado Springs School District 11 (CSSD 11)—led to breakdowns in communication, lack of ownership of errors, and processes and procedures that functioned independently from each other.

In today's economy, public school districts are increasingly dependent on state and federal grants. Over the last five years, from 2009 to 2013, CSSD 11 has sought and obtained competitive grant funding in excess of $25 million annually. These grants often fund the purchase of equipment, curriculum materials and professional services. The CSSD 11 Grants Office is involved in handling grant funding and grant management processes in the school district. This office works very closely with the CSSD 11 Procurement Department when grant funds are used for purchases.

Over time, these departments became so focused on their respective ways to complete their jobs that they did not take into consideration their impact on the other department. It became evident that the two departments, which were accountable to two different chains of command and supported by separate funding sources, needed to collaborate. By doing so, they would be able to maximize grant funding, which would directly impact CSSD 11's ability to obtain grants to provide students the best education possible. The processes for grant oversight and management, purchasing, monitoring, accountability, verification, invoicing, and reporting were very different within each department. The need for understanding these critical compliance requirements for both fiscal and programmatic processes became the focus of a situation appraisal conducted by the grants office.

Conditions Prior to Situation Appraisal

The grants office and the procurement department have been located across the hall from each other; however, by fall 2013, decisions were often made by both departments in isolation. For the grants office, silo decision making often began during proposal development and continued through grant award and implementation.

Grants office employees found it much easier to fall into one of the pitfalls of decision-making rather than risk confrontation. By this time

the "problem" would appear to be too large to tackle. These pitfalls included the following common situations (TregoED, 2013):

- Acting without adequate understanding. Often individuals place importance on acting quickly rather than effectively.

- Embracing the "silver bullet." Becoming prematurely "alternative" driven is a common and failure-prone strategy when stakes and pressure are high.

- Ineffectively using information. If decision-makers use incomplete or inaccurate information, conclusions will inevitably be faulty.

- Failing to clarify upfront the situation requirements and priorities. Individuals often make decisions without adequately understanding a situation and its stakeholders—and without securing agreement on what a solution needs to accomplish.

- Insufficiently considering risk. A proposed solution is so attractive that one overlooks its risks.

The following are examples of differing processes that gave rise to conflict in CSSD 11.

- A grant proposal is written with a specific consultant referenced. Once funded, procurement regulations often require a competitive bid process that may or may not result in that specific consultant's being selected.

- A grant proposal is approved and now the procurement department is requested to purchase the technology specified in the grant. However, the district's information technology (IT) department no longer supports the specified technology or is not staffed to support the technology.

- Before the procurement department can purchase an item for a specific school, it requires the school principal, as the "responsible agent" for oversight and budget for that site, to approve the purchase. However, from a grants perspective, project directors are often on record as the point of contact with funders and, therefore, they are required to approve purchases in the grants office. In most cases the funder holds the project director accountable for the implementation and reporting requirements of the funded project.

- Procurement regulations, monitored by the district's board of education, dictate that specific purchases must be run through a process of competitive selection. Yet, the grants office worked under the assumption that if purchases were specifically referenced in the

project narrative and approved by the funding entity, there was no additional approval required.

Finally, the time between funding notification and start-up is often very short. The need to quickly select consultants, purchase equipment or schedule trainings is often critical. However, procurement competition thresholds and timelines often created conflict. Conflict often led to poor decision-making. Knowing that the current situation had to change, the director of grants led the grants office through a Kepner-Tregoe Situation Appraisal in October 2013.

Situation Appraisal: Stage One

The Situation Appraisal Process (SA) developed by Kepner-Tregoe is an analytical tool for evaluating problems and determining how to resolve them by showing a person where to begin, how to recognize situations that require action, how to break apart redundant and confusing issues, how to set priorities, and how to manage a number of simultaneous activities efficiently (Fajar, Rahman, & Sunitiyoso, 2013). The SA also removes much of the emotion clouding a situation.

The grants office began by looking at the issues. The team then clarified what was meant when the issue was identified. It was during this phase that the team members realized that they were joint owners of the conflict that had been created. Were the needs of the grants office surrounding contracts, purchases, and invoiced documents clearly communicated to its internal customers, including the procurement department? Were these processes even consistent among team members? The collective response to these questions was "no."

Clarifying the issues reframed the situation and the underlying problem became more evident. Complex issues are often made up of several sub-issues. For example, one of the issues was "documentation," but what was it about documentation that was an issue? This step in the SA allows the team to understand the issue and what sub-issues make up the larger issue. The team broke down "documentation" into multiple items which then made the issue less overwhelming.

Once all team members had a chance to provide input and share their perspectives, the issues were clarified and then prioritized. All issues may be worthy, but frequently it is impossible to address them at the same time. The step of "assessing priorities" asks the team to rate as high, medium or low the priorities of seriousness, urgency and growth. Seriousness looks at the gravity of the priority and how the issue will affect others. Urgency reflects how time-sensitive the priority might be. Growth is determined by the potential for significant positive or negative trends to occur. The group's consensus determines these ratings.

Through the SA process, the team identified that the internal lack of consistency influenced the respect (or lack thereof) that they received

from other departments, in particular from the procurement department. The conclusion led to the final step of the SA: "Name Next Steps." This step requires teams to ask questions such as "what choices do we have to make?" and to establish clear roles, accountabilities, and timelines. Too often teams identify problems but fail to address the steps that need to be taken to mitigate those problems. Without taking the time to determine next steps, the attention stays focused on the issues instead of determining how the team may be able to alleviate those issues. All members of the grants office team volunteered to use the work from the SA to refine their internal office processes. The actual SA from this stage of the process is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: CSSD 11 Kepner-Tregoe Situation Appraisal

What issues/concerns need to be considered when developing a procurement process for the CSSD 11 Grants Office?			
See the Issues	**Clarify the Issues**	**Assess Priorities**	**Name Next Steps**
1. What seems to be important about this situation? 2. What threats and opportunities do we face? 3. What bothers us about this situation?	1. What do you mean by ___ [issue]? 2. What about this issue bothers you? 3. What else about the issue concerns you?	1. What is the seriousness of this issue (importance)? 2. What is the urgency (deadlines)? 3. What is the potential growth (trend)? (High/Medium/Low)	1. What needs to be done next? By whom and by when? 2. What decisions do we need to make? 3. What's gone wrong and why? 4. What changes or plans do we need to implement?
There are inconsistent documentation processes.	Process to set up POs (checklist). Process for contracts. Process for invoices.	H/M/M H/M/M H/M/M	CP will bring first draft to 10/28 team meeting for feedback.
No one is sure about appropriate signoffs in the grants office.	No clarification needed.	Assessment in progress.	Update at biweekly team meetings.

(continued on the next page)

Table 1: CSSD 11 Kepner-Tregoe Situation Appraisal (continued)

There are multiple requirements for grant compliance and these are not communicated well.	Are we compliant from the grant language standpoint? Are we being fiscally compliant? Includes communicating proper account and ensuring funds are available.	H/H/H H/H/H	RN/KL will work on both issues and will present to team on 10/28. Share with procurement department by 11/18.
Invoice process seems to change and sometimes occurs outside the grants office.	Invoices must come through the grants office before being processed by the procurement department. Who from the grants office is required to sign off?	H/H/H Team agreed on signoffs for items already in process.	TH will write up notes from team discussion on 10/11 and share with team by 10/18.
Who is our contact person within the procurement department?	Need an updated list to be distributed when changes are made.	L/M/L	Request updated list from procurement department. Clarify how updates to list will be communicated.
Grants office has inconsistent processes.	Develop consistent process for email approvals.	M/M/M	By 10/28, CD will provide a template for seeking email approvals.
Procurement department has inconsistent processes.	Beyond our control to impact.	Assessment being conducted by procurement department.	Next steps being determined by procurement department.

Situation Appraisal: Stage Two

After the initial stage was completed, a joint grants office/procurement department meeting was held in November 2013 during which the members of the grants office shared the Situation Appraisal process that they had conducted. Instead of creating a situation where fingers were

pointed at the other department, the meeting instead opened the door for both teams to understand the needs and expectations of the other. The grants office team presented its work and the procurement department team provided feedback which resulted in further clarification of the process and a higher level of understanding from all in attendance.

Outcomes

The joint session between the grants office and the procurement department resulted in outcomes in several key areas.

Purchasing Phase

Since the SA, the grants office has created a process to share a copy of the grant narrative and budget with the procurement department once a project is funded. This allows the procurement department to start the procurement planning process, regardless of the type of funding. This helps the department to clarify timelines and fiscal years, as well as gain a better understanding of project requirements. As a result, the department is able to better write a solicitation and inform the project directors of other approvals needed in the procurement process, such as from the superintendent, board, IT or facilities departments, or principal.

Example

Grant funds are designated to purchase a new STEM curriculum for a middle school lab that will be used as an exploratory class. The curriculum is online and is provided by the company specified in the proposal. Before anything can be contracted, this technology must be approved by the IT department, the curriculum content facilitator, the board of education (Policy IJJ), (CSSD 11, 2007), and the facilities department to ensure the data and electrical loads are in compliance with the site's load capacity. Prior to the SA, the grants office did not partner with the procurement department to document the proper approvals, nor did it fully understand the ramifications of missing approvals.

In addition, several state and federal grants require audit reviews. The procurement department followed federal acquisition regulation requirements that must be included in any acquisition with federal funding. These include compliance with competition requirements and thresholds (Porter, 2010, pp. B-84) and verification prior to contract award that a vendor is not on the Excluded Parties List System (EPLS) (GSA, 2005). While the grants office was following best practices regarding fiscal compliance, it often used the federal award letter as validation that the requested purchase was acceptable according to federal standards. The grants office team now understands that all purchases within CSSD 11 fall under federal and district competition requirements.

The grants office learned that the procurement department's writing of the requirements document for the solicitation is critical to meeting accountability requirements in any resulting contract. For grant projects that require commodity type purchases (i.e., computers, furniture, or exercise equipment), writing a solid requirements document relies heavily on the salient characteristics of the commodity. For those grant projects that require a service, professional or otherwise, writing the requirement document relies on the grant itself.

Example

Instead of including a section on a specific external evaluator, the narrative of a grant proposal now includes language such as, *"An external evaluator, such as Jane Doe (biosketch attached), will be used to assess the student achievement outcomes of the newly implemented on-line math curriculum. The evaluator will be selected through a competitive bidding process but will at a minimum hold a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction, be an established business for at least the last five years, performed similar type evaluation reports in the K-12 environment within the last three years, and can provide sample reports for viewing as part of the solicitation response."*

The grants office achieved a better understanding of CSSD 11 board policy requiring a competitive selection process. Board Policy DJ (CSSD 11, 2013) and the District Acquisition Regulation, Part 4 (Simplified Purchase Procedures) (CSSD 11, 2012) establish the following competition thresholds:

- "Professional services and independent consultants will be competed above $50,000" (total contract value). Professional services, as defined in the Colorado Revised Statute 24-30-1402, (CSSD 11, 2012) include "…architecture, engineering, land surveying, landscape architecture, environmental, legal, medical, accounting, auditing…" and other highly technical professional services.

- "All supplies, services, equipment, hardware and software, software license, installation and maintenance purchases above $25,000."

The grants office learned that even if a funder approves spending more than $25,000 for specific services, board policy still requires a competitive selection process.

Solicitation Phase

By including the grants office staff in the procurement department's evaluation process, along with the project director assigned to the grant, everyone gained insight into the procurement process (issuing a solicitation, communicating with vendors, and evaluating proposals) and had an opportunity to share information.

Example

In a recent source selection, grant requirements included very specific reporting outcomes and measures that the director of grants needed to include in the funder report. Because the director of grants is now present during procurement evaluations and negotiations, she identified that the report was omitted in the solicitation requirement document. Resolving this during the pre-contract phase of the process is much better than after the contract award, or even after performance has already started.

Another benefit to having the grants office staff present in source selection is to assure or remind the project team of what can and cannot be purchased with grant funds. The project director is able to make important scope decisions in "real time" and the resulting contract can begin to be filled in with those details which previously were often not included or not known.

Contract Award/Oversight/Accountability/Payment Phases

In the past, many conflicts between the grants office and the procurement department arose during the final phase of the procurement process. From a grant compliance perspective, it is important that the grants office monitor the issuing of contracts, purchase orders, and invoices for payment. The process implemented as a result of the SA now keeps all parties informed throughout this phase.

Example

A purchase order (PO) is issued for grant-funded professional development that takes place over the course of the school year. Invoices are submitted at the end of each academic quarter. Before being executed by the procurement department, the grants office must now sign off that the PO is programmatically and fiscally compliant. Should an invoice be submitted to the procurement department, it is now rerouted to the grants office to ensure that the services provided are delivered according to the scope of the grant and that funds are in the appropriate line item to pay the invoice. This process also now requires the project director's approval that the services met the grant requirements.

The collaborative efforts of the grants office and procurement department have resulted in a number of other positive outcomes. Early in the development of a grant proposal, the project team is encouraged to seek input from the IT, procurement, facilities, and instruction and support services departments. This information is then taken into consideration in timeline development, budget requirements, and staffing needs. When proposals are funded, the director of grants holds a kick-off meeting for all projects, regardless of whether the project director is new

or seasoned. As a result of the SA process, the procurement department is now included in this meeting, which enables a common message to be communicated to the project team and for staff in both departments to be on the same page regarding the grant and procurement requirements.

Conclusion

A Kepner-Tregoe Situation Appraisal (SA) helps teams identify, understand and prioritize issues, and work collaboratively to create solutions (Richetti, 2001). In CSSD 11, the grants office realized that change was needed and a better understanding of the issues was critical. As a result of the SA carried out in October 2013, collaboration and collegiality is improving between the grants office and the procurement department and project directors are benefitting from the improved relationship. In a joint team meeting held one month after the SA, the two departments determined that one of the next steps should be a project director training hosted by the grants office, and including other stakeholders—such as the procurement department—as equal partners. The procurement department will be an important team member in this process, as this training is designed to improve customer service for project directors, reduce the opportunities for errors within both departments, and thereby reduce the chance of an audit finding. This increased compliance will positively impact the reputation of CSSD 11 as it seeks additional grant funding.

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