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A Call For Strengthened Self-Governance Among Consultants

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GPC Competencies:**06. Ethical Practice****Abstract**

The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) Code of Ethics states members are expected *to practice their profession with the highest sense of integrity, honesty, and truthfulness to maintain and broaden public confidence*. Discussions of ethical behavior are, at their core, about self-governance.

Introduction

The author, during college, was informally introduced to the concept of self-governance. College students are notoriously bad at self-governance, but students quickly adopted self-governance to preserve the hands-off approach of the college administration. Using self-control and collective action, students effectively dealt with situations (i.e. hosting a party in a dorm room) without needing to involve student affairs, thus maintaining their freedom. However, this approach also meant a community of people were often punished for the actions of one or two students, if the group could not effectively convince the guilty party to take responsibility. During the author's second year, a student and their guest carried a couch from the shared lounge to the second floor and tossed it out a window. The couch broke and needed to be replaced. While several dormmates were aware of who had tossed the couch out the window, the guilty party refused to take responsibility. The cost of the couch was divided equally among everyone who lived in the building. The author was personally billed for approximately 1/30th of a couch, a small price to pay to learn the lesson of holding peers accountable.

Whether it is personal experience with peers, stories that circulate, or public exchanges on GrantZone, GPA members likely are aware of cases where peers seem to be tiptoeing along the edge of an ethical cliff. The challenges of consulting open additional dilemmas unique within the profession. By focusing self-control and an understanding of best practices in the grants profession, this paper encourages consultants to hold themselves to the highest ethical

standards. This is important because consulting grant professionals collectively pay the price for bad behavior of consulting grant professionals. Trust is eroded. Boards refuse to approve consulting contracts. Organizations try to do it all alone without the support that grant professionals can offer them to be successful.

Context and Trends

A variety of factors make this subject a timely topic to discuss.

1. As people search for more autonomy, higher/fairer pay, or added flexibility in their work life, the field of grant consultancy is growing. “Gig work” is more common and less stigmatized and grant writing lends itself to working from home. Trends appear to show grant professionals turning to consulting earlier in their careers compared to previous years.
2. Grant writing services are in high demand. In many parts of the country, contracted grant professionals are constantly turning down work because they are at capacity. This trend is likely to continue. Contributing to the rise in demand for consulting services, nonprofits are more comfortable with remote and contractual workers.
3. GPA professionalized the field by drafting a Code of Ethics and creating infrastructure for the Grant Professionals Certification Institute. GPA paved a path for this critique. Together, consultants can pave the path toward developing a code of ethics of consulting grant professionals.

Some ethical questions are clear-cut, while others are contextual (Lexon, 2008). Geography, client base, and other factors may impact just how ethical or unethical any given action or decision may be. Below, a few examples are provided.

Case Discussions

Case Facts: Ashley is new to consulting. She spent two years working full-time in grants for a nonprofit, invested heavily in professional development, and determined she was ready to start taking on contract work with the intention to grow contract work into a full-time endeavor. A colleague introduced her to a company, Clarity Ltd., interested in pursuing a *Small Business Innovation Research* (SBIR) grant. She conducts a little bit of research about SBIR and the company in advance of her introductory call with Clarity. She is excited to learn about the technology Clarity is developing. In the conversation with Clarity, she is asked if she is familiar with SBIR and what experiences she has with MedTech. She shares she is familiar with SBIR and her background of working at a research university will help her get up to speed quickly with work Clarity will propose.

Ethical Questions: Should Ashley share directly with Clarity that she has never worked on an SBIR grant before, and in fact, did not even know about the program prior to her colleague giving her the information leading up to the call? Should Ashley accept the work if it is offered to her? Broadly, how direct should consulting grant professionals be about their work experience?

Discussion: As a consultant, the anxiety of signing the next contract is very real, and it is rewarding to find work personally exciting and fulfilling, even if it is outside the scope of a consultant’s experience. According to the Code of Ethics 7: Members shall recognize their individual boundaries of competence and are forthcoming and truthful about their professional experience, knowledge and expertise.

Ashley does not lie to the potential client, but she does skirt their question. A more direct response, and more ethical, would have been “*I have never written an SBIR grant, but I have written several NSF*

grants focused on medical technologies for a research university. This is work I am passionate about, I believe I can do the work successfully, and I am willing to spend time learning more about SBIR. I just want to be upfront with you about my experience."

A similar scenario often comes up when a client asks the consultant if they have experience with [insert name of funder]. If the consultant has submitted an application to the funder, the answer can be "yes" without lying. But beneath that question, which the nonprofit should ask, is, *"Do you have a history of success with this funder, and do you have a history of success with this particular funding announcement?"*

Case Facts: Jorge runs a consulting firm and after many years of consulting has a strong network that he uses to garner business. Like many founders of grant writing firms, the grant writing is done by subcontractors; Jorge spends his time networking and responding to requests for grant professionals. However, unlike many grant writing firms, Jorge submits his personal resumé and a biography to secure work. On application materials, he does not share he has subcontractors; he does not have a website and instead provides links to his personal LinkedIn page.

Ethical Questions: *Is Jorge implying, through omission, that he will be the writer completing the work? If so, is this a direct violation of the GPA Code of Ethics?*

Discussion: If the bid includes a lie – for example, Jorge explicitly states he does not use subcontracted labor – then the answer is simple. However, if the bid questions do not ask about subcontracted labor, then there is not an outright lie, making the behavior questionable, at a minimum. The GPA Code of Ethics does not provide much insight (reference Code of Ethics 7, above). However, technically, Jorge has not lied about his experience, knowledge, or expertise – which are all exemplary. However, the extent to which a client will benefit from this vast experience is unclear as he has not written grants in several years. Further discussion of this case example might focus on whether this is an example best left for self-governance/ethics (Schultz, 2007; Tams, 2019) or whether it should move towards compliance – much like Code of Ethics 19: *Members shall not accept or pay a finder's fee, commission, or percentage compensation based on grants and shall take care to discourage their organizations from making such payments.*

Case Facts: Chris starts a new consulting group, Minnesota Money Makers, and has offered six other grant professionals the opportunity to join as subcontractors. It is a real *who's who* of grant professionals in Minnesota and everyone is very excited about the variety of unique, quality services offered through one consulting group. As Chris starts to draft marketing materials, he asks each subcontractor to provide a short biography, a headshot, a list of the major grant makers from which they have received awards, and the total dollar amount awarded. The subcontractors eagerly provide this information they assume will accompany their profile.

The website goes live and the subcontractors realize the lists of agencies each provided, along with the total grant dollars they had personally raised, are now posted on the website as if Chris' consulting group held sole responsibility for earning the grant money.

Ethical Questions: *Does this approach misrepresent the history and experience of the consulting group? How should independent consultants and consulting groups distinguish between individual and group efforts and how should they talk about successes?*

Discussion: As a new consulting group, it is important to show the intended audience the experience and types of work the team excels in providing to clients. The best consulting groups are greater than the sum of their parts – they offer a new way of getting grant work done or they offer a higher quality of service because of the structures and teams they have in place. Others are merely a loosely structured group of subcontractors that take work from the business owner who charges more than they pay the

subcontractors to pay themselves for finding work. In this case, Chris is using the personal successes of independent contractors to promote their new business. While their intent was simply to bring together several of the area's best consulting grant professionals into one space, the way the website discusses the arrangement is misleading. This could be a simple fix: *"Minnesota Money Makers brings together some of the region's most experienced, unique, and successful consulting grant professionals. Combined, our Grant Professionals have secured \$420 million in federal grant funds to benefit our community."* The discussion here rests on how consulting firms market their services and how work is credited.

Next Steps

Just as the author wanted to maintain their autonomy in college, it is safe to assume grant professionals likely want to maximize their ability to make decisions as a consultant based on the unique context of their work. Could GPA construct a more specific code of ethics or even a compliance guide just for grant consultants? That discussion could be worth pursuing. However, this gray area also requires grant professionals to devise new strategies to maintain and grow trust with the communities and entities they serve. One person throwing a couch out of the window – or, in this case, one grant consultant stumbling along the edge of an ethical cliff – does, in fact, hurt all.

There are likely many ways to make ethical decision-making more accessible to consultants, starting with the following possibilities:

1. Pull back the veil on reporting unethical behavior through GPA through a more robust FAQ page, an anonymous question and answer session at a conference or monthly call, and/or an annual report on potentially unethical grant activity. How many reports are made each year? What types of reports are made? Is there action that can be taken that does not include stripping someone of their membership/GPC? Answers to these questions would help to normalize reporting and provide the opportunity to reinforce the standards that may be common issues.
2. Provide opportunities for GPA members to "be the jury" in case examples similar to the ones provided above. Conversations among consultants about key contextual features can help to develop norms around ethical and unethical behavior.
3. Consultants may not always agree, but in the process, there is the opportunity to reflect on behaviors and hear others voice potential concerns.
4. Normalize asking peers for their feedback on potentially unethical behavior (the consultant's own behavior) and normalize sitting with responses that make oneself uncomfortable or suggest a re-examining of behavior.
5. Create a "body of practice." GPA serves, in part, as a collector/curator of a body of knowledge. GPA members are missing a body of practice to similarly guide consultants along a path of being business owners as well as grant professionals. Consultants can collectively create this resource, but the structures and platform are missing.
6. Build a better network. Many grant consultants work alone, and none can justify writing every type of grant out there. Consultants might identify individual strengths and experiences and ask the following questions: *What type of work should I not be doing? Who do I know that does that work? What types of proposals do I want to gain experience writing? Who do I know that I could collaborate with to gain the desired experience?*

Conclusion

Consultants must have a network to avoid ethical violations. That network provides feedback on ethically ambiguous situations, creates opportunities to best serve clients through referrals, and serves as a failsafe for unethical action. Consulting grant professionals provide such a valuable service to nonprofits. Professional integrity must be upheld. It takes GPA members recommitting to the shared code of ethics, but even going one step further: a commitment to an abundance mindset, a collaborative spirit, and, when necessary, advisement from peers.

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