SEVEN STEPS TO CHOOSING A SERVICE PROVIDER[1]

1. Define the issue or issues. (Your recommended capacity building assistance and grant award will help here!)

2. Determine what end result is desired from the consultation: a report, a plan, research, mediation, etc (or more than one)? Articulating what is needed is key to determining who will be hired for the consultation.

3. Identify the universe of consultants and pare it down to a handful. (the CBI Service Provider List is a great place to start your search)

4. Gather a number of proposals and references. Look for consultants who have experience with organizations like yours (by service type) and who have plenty of experience producing the kind of final "product" needed. Ask to see a real sample of the report or plan (with the name of the organization deleted).

5. Meet the consultant. In the case of a small consultation meeting the consultant may not be necessary however in the case of extended involvement a meeting is needed to allow staff and board who will be most involved to meet and interview the candidates. This will help determine whether their personal style will fit in with the culture of the organization.

6. Get a proposal from each consultant. The proposal should clearly spell out the responsibilities of participants, the end product, the timeline, and the cost. In order to compare proposals it is helpful for each consultant to submit their proposal in the same format. This may require that a formal Request for Proposals (RFP) be developed. (**this is optional**. if you chose to develop an RFP, tips are on the reverse side – we can also help you with this if needed)

7. Hire the consultant and communicate often. Both the consultant and the organization need to be clear about what the consultant will do; and what the leadership and staff will do. Some consultants come in to do the work; others to help the group define their own work going forward. Some consultants write into the contract follow-up at intervals after the work has been completed to ensure that the plan is moving forward.

Screening questions to use in screening consultants:

- What are your areas of expertise?
- How long have you been in business?
- How large is your organization?
- What experience do you have working with nonprofits?
- What other projects have you worked on that are similar to this?
- Who would work with us on this project? Can we interview that person?
- Can you give references, including the type of projects and outcomes you provided?
- Can you provide samples of your work?
- What type of reports will we receive from you?
- What are your expectations of our board/staff's involvement in this process? What can we expect from you? What do you require of us?
- What does a typical session with you look like, in terms of time and work? How many sessions, typically? What follow-up is there once we have completed the process?
- How would you describe the way you go about a job?
- Will your written scope of work include a timeline and statement of fees?
- What is your fee structure? Is it hourly or a lump sum? What is included?
- Will there be a rate breakdown by task and an allocation of the number of hours per task? How do you relate costs to work completed?
- What is the average size project that you prefer? How many hours? Cost?
- What is your project workload at present? How long will it take to complete our project?
- Why do you think you're the best suited for this project?

Sample questions to use in screening consultant references:

- Were deadlines met?
- Did the project stay on budget?
- Was the consultant's analysis of the problem accurate?
- Did she/he offer solid recommendations?
- How well did he/she interact with the agency representatives?
- How well was the agency's mission understood?
- Who did the work? Who was expected to do the work?
- How well did the consultant prepare for/and follow-up meetings?

Compiled from the Connecticut Nonprofit Information Network. www.ctnonprofits.org/default.asp

RFP Prep: Develop Objectives and Identify Goals:

- What your problems are (define both symptoms and cause)
- What your expectations are; what your group needs
- What should be accomplished by job's end
- What skills are required (what type of consultant you will need)
- Which board and staff members will be the contacts
- What time-frame will be used

Now that you have isolated the problem, you must develop and send out a request for proposals (RFP). This is a document that explains, among other things, the type of work that needs to be done and its objective. It should also establish a general format for the proposals to be submitted by the prospective consultants. This format will allow you to evaluate and compare consultants equally and efficiently.

Creating the RFP (one should include):

- A brief description of your organization - mission, history, programs, facilities, sources of funding,
- A copy of your organization chart and relevant brochures,
- Your requirements, identified through an introductory statement that briefly explains the need and desired response from the consultant;
- A statement of work that provides detailed information concerning the problem you expect to rectify;
- Type of contract (i.e., scope of the work, time commitment involved and payment parameters if desired);
- The names and positions of the people within your organization that the prospective consultant might need to contact, and sources for additional information;
- The end result of the work (e.g., a new system design, a manual, a report on staff response to a training program);
- The desired format of the proposal;
- Any special information or regulations pertaining to your sector that may affect the proposed work;
- The need for progress reports on the other interim products; and
- An explanation of how the proposal will be evaluated.

The key is to offer as much useful information as possible so prospects can develop relevant proposals and accurate bids. At the same time, make sure your format won't require an excessive amount of time and work for the respondent. Remember that consultants are not paid for developing their proposals. If your RFP entails a huge time commitment, it may deter qualified, but busy prospects that simply don't have the time to respond. The best bet is for you to create a format that allows your prospects to answer in a two or three page proposal. Also make sure your design allows for flexibility in the response, making it easier for respondents to present their ideas. And don't design the RFP with the expectation of soliciting conclusions from the consultant. The purpose of the proposal is to specify how the consultant will approach the problem.