



After Award Debrief as a Tool for Winning Proposals

You submitted your proposal, and then waited anxiously to hear whether you won or lost. You had your hopes up, and maybe got exactly what you were wishing for: the contract is awarded to your company. You have millions of things to take care of since you now need to start up the program.



You may not even have enough time to plan your win party because you are so busy. Or, maybe you have lost and are thoroughly disappointed. After all, you have given it your best, spent scarce resources and sleepless nights, and witnessed heroic efforts from your entire team putting the proposal together. Whether you won or lost, however, you cannot consider your proposal effort complete until you have asked the government for a debrief. You are bound to win a lot more proposals if you consider lessons learned after each pursuit to improve your proposal management process, your knowledge of your customers, and your offers.

So, what is a debrief? The government is required by FAR 15.506 to provide official feedback on your proposal to your company if you make a request within three days of the notification. During the debrief, the government contracting officer, with support from other evaluators, discusses strengths and weaknesses in your proposal, provides the overall evaluated price and technical rating of the winner, offers a summary rationale for the award, and provides “reasonable” responses to “relevant” questions.

It makes sense that a debrief after a loss is a way to understand what you missed and what you could have done better, but it may seem redundant to ask for a debrief when you won. Obviously, they loved your proposal and chose you, so what more could you ask for? Besides getting reassurance

that you got things right, there are a couple of important reasons you should ask for a debrief.

- **One reason is that you may be surprised as to what the government thought was the most compelling part of your offer.** What swayed them to your site may not have been what you thought was the most important part. Now that you have a vested interest in keeping them happy not just as your evaluator but as your full-fledged client, this information is vitally important to make sure that your company meets and exceeds client expectations. You also need to share this information with your business development team to replicate the successful techniques in your next proposal to this customer.
- **Another reason is that even winning proposals have weaknesses, and you'd better know about yours.** If this is an open competition contract, you are never secure from a scorned, losing competitor finding a legitimate reason to protest and get the proposal re-competed. Since it is a normal practice for a losing competitor to get a debrief, they are guaranteed to get information on their proposal weaknesses, and would then have a chance to make informed changes in the next go-round. If, simultaneously, you fail to get a debrief because you were a winner, and assume that all you need to do is resubmit your old proposal with minor tweaks because it has already won, think again. It is not totally unheard of to lose in the second go-around. Proposals are not read, they are scored. Even if yours got the higher score and won, you may still have had some weaknesses or some areas that were rated "good" but not "outstanding". Your competitors will have corrected weaknesses in each section to get the highest score. You will have made no changes because you didn't know that some of your sections may have gotten an average score. Think how frustrating and unfair it would be to lose what you had won.

If you have lost, request a debrief immediately, no matter how uncomfortable it may seem. It may feel like going willingly to a session where the government gets to add an insult to an injury. Debriefs are often tense and formal, and not particularly forthcoming with information because

many government employees have concerns of their own. First, there may be a simple human aspect of not fancying being the “bad guys” because many understand that it takes money, sweat, and blood to prepare a proposal – so the natural tendency is to keep the encounter as short as possible. Second, the government always worries about your launching a protest based on what you learn in the debrief, so they have to watch their every word. Protests are an overwhelming concern because of the resulting project delays, endless paperwork to investigate and adjudicate, and possible questioning from the Hill.

In order to make the best of your debrief, you need to assuage the government’s concerns about your launching a protest. You also can put people at ease by not acting on the natural temptation to express sour feelings or act defensively. You need to put yourself and your colleagues in the right frame of mind to think of the event as an important milestone in a long-term relationship. Your attitude going in should be forward-looking, with sincere curiosity and good sportsmanship. You’ve hit a snag and would like the government to provide some insight into how you could better meet their expectations in the future. Tell the government that while you lost a proposal this time, you have full intention of continuing to work with them and you value your relationship. Phrase your questions to be entirely focused on lessons learned and constructive resolution. Smile, look the government straight in the eye, hold your head up high, and take detailed notes.

At the same time, do not let the government get away with glittering generalities that you do not understand or that they fail to fully explain. Prepare specific questions on the features of your offer to verify whether your assumptions were correct, and if and why the government liked or disliked each key feature of your offer. Draw information out of them concerning what they think would get the specific sections scored higher; what would be the ideal offer that you could provide, even if it is unrealistic; what benefits they would like to see that weren’t obvious; and how you could improve your writing, graphics, and features. You should leave the meeting with a clear understanding of what you need to do to be more competitive in your next solicitation.

In summary, requesting a debrief after you have won or lost a bid is a proposal management best practice. Come to the debrief well-prepared, having reread the proposal, and bring a copy with you for quick reference. Take detailed notes to share with your colleagues and management, and conduct formal lessons learned sessions shortly thereafter. You will be surprised how much your win rate goes up.

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