# SBIR Proposal Writing Basics: Working With Mentors

Gail & Jim Greenwood, Greenwood Consulting Group, Inc.

Copyright © 2016 by Greenwood Consulting Group, Inc.

At the recent National SBIR Conference, there was a lot of talk about the virtues of using mentors to help newbies succeed in SBIR/STTR. Mentors, in this case, are significant SBIR/STTR winners who kindly volunteer their time and knowledge to help newcomers get better at submitting proposals and completing SBIR/STTR projects. We’ve learned a few things about such mentors over our decades in SBIR/STTR, so we’d like to offer a few words of advice this month on this subject.

For starters, let’s talk about the benefits of such mentors. The primary benefit is that they have a depth of understanding and knowledge that is hard to replicate. Like the old joke about the chicken being involved in breakfast (providing the eggs) while the pig is committed (providing the bacon), mentors are committed because they have lived life as SBIR/STTR winners and performers, and have experienced the good and the ugly. Another benefit is that they can provide advice from the small business’ perspective. That’s different than learning from a representative of an SBIR awarding agency, for example, who will give the Government’s viewpoint which isn’t always the same as the small business applicant’s. The mentor also can be helpful in terms of providing suggestions on competent resources that can help with government accounting, intellectual property, and Government contract/grant negotiations.

So what could be the downside of consulting with a mentor? Based on our experience, there are several concerns.

First, the mentor must have relevant experience or they can be more harmful than helpful. The agencies that participate in SBIR/STTR are all different in what they like and dislike, what they want to see in the proposal, how much attention they want to see on commercialization in the Phase I proposal, and so on. It can be dangerous, for example, to have a mentor whose SBIR experience is entirely with the Dept of Defense who then imparts advice on a newbie who is applying to National Institutes of Health (NIH) or National Science Foundation (NSF).

Second, the mentor must have current experience. The SBIR/STTR programs are constantly evolving, and therefore a mentor who hasn’t participated in the past 2 or 3 years may advise on the basis of outdated information. An example would be a mentor who was very successful with NSF 5 years ago but hasn’t applied to their SBIR program since; he/she would have no idea that

NSF now expects the first 5-7 pages of the Phase I project narrative to be devoted to commercialization.

Third, the mentor may not understand that he/she can succeed in SBIR/STTR with a proposal that wouldn’t work for a newbie. When a company has established a reputation with an agency’s SBIR/STTR program for doing superior work, then it can submit a less-than-stellar proposal with a weak work plan and still win. But newbies have no reputation, and therefore they must submit a stellar-or-better proposal that convinces the reviewers that they are viable SBIR/STTR candidates.

Fourth, we occasionally run across mentors who feel they could benefit newbies by telling them how they could cut corners when participating in the SBIR/STTR programs. One mentor, speaking before 35 attendees at one of our workshops, recommended that newbies offer bribes to the SBIR/STTR agency representatives. Another mentor indicated that he didn’t think it was really necessary to keep accurate timesheets for his company and its SBIR/STTR work. At a minimum, following such advice can lead to bad business practices that may come back to haunt the newbie. Worse yet, such advice can lead to new SBIR/STTR competitors who, in the current “fraud, waste and abuse” environment, end up facing Federal criminal charges for their indiscretions and corner cutting. So it is important that a mentor know the law, and encourage the newbie to comply with it.

Finally, care must be taken to not put a mentor in a position of a conflict of interest. It is advisable to find mentors with relevant experience, but care must be taken that they not be competitors with the newbie who seeks their guidance. And recognize that competition isn’t always obvious: for example, if the newbie and mentor are proposing different projects to the US Dept. of Agriculture, but both projects will be considered for funding under USDA’s small & mid-size farms topic, then they are competing for the limited number of awards that will be made under that topic. Maybe that level of competition is acceptable to both the newbie and the mentor, but they should be made aware of it up front.

In conclusion, we believe mentors offer a wealth of knowledge to SBIR/STTR newbies, and we applaud them for volunteering their time to help newcomers be more successful. But care must be taken to ensure that the mentor is relevant but not competitive, current, and squeaky-clean honest.