

Proposal Writing for Government Contracts

Essential Truths

There are far more losing proposals than winning ones

Proposals can lose for reasons beyond the writer's control

--- Most lose due to problems in writing

Proposals

A proposal is

A good proposal is a good idea which solves a problem, well expressed, with a clear indication of methods

A proposal is a marketing document

It is often a legal and binding contract

Should be a “companion book” to the solicitation

A communication process

A relationship building exercise

Proposals

A proposal is not

“All about ME”

Anything, anyone really wants to read

Something that can be successfully thrown together at the last minute.

The Government Contract Award Process

- Tell 'em what you're gonna do
- Do what you said you'd do
- Eliminate unfair advantages
- Suit Government's best interest
- Stay IAW FAR



(In accordance with Federal Acquisition Regulation)

Government Objectives

- Good product
- Timely delivery
- Fair and reasonable price

TRANSLATION

- Want EVERYTHING
- at an impossible schedule
- for an unrealistic price

Goals

Planning Efficiency and Accuracy

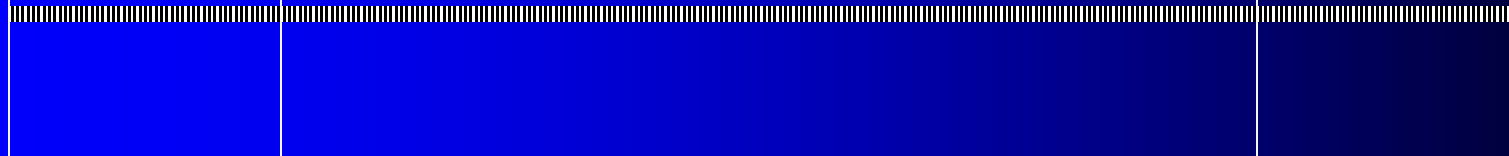
Writing Create a document that is compliant with the RFP, accurate, competitive, well-presented, with winning bid strategies, and do it under deadline pressure.

Review Validation !

Proposal
Planning

Proposal
Writing

Proposal
Review



What's Out There?

- **IFB** *Invitation for Bids*
 - Requirements easily defined
 - Only concerned with price
 - Public opening of sealed bids
- **RFQ** *Request for Quotations*
 - Primarily concerned with price
 - Possible “Best Value” considerations
 - No negotiations; Perhaps no contract
- **RFP** *Request for Proposals*
 - Generally most comprehensive
 - Allows for negotiation of final contract

What's Out There?

- Sources Sought
 - Government “tests the water”
 - Feasibility or New Technology
 - Need for Competition
- Notice of Intent
 - Intention to award a contract without competition
 - “Sole Source” Award
- Various types of competition
 - Sealed bid (low bidder)
 - Best Value
 - Two Step

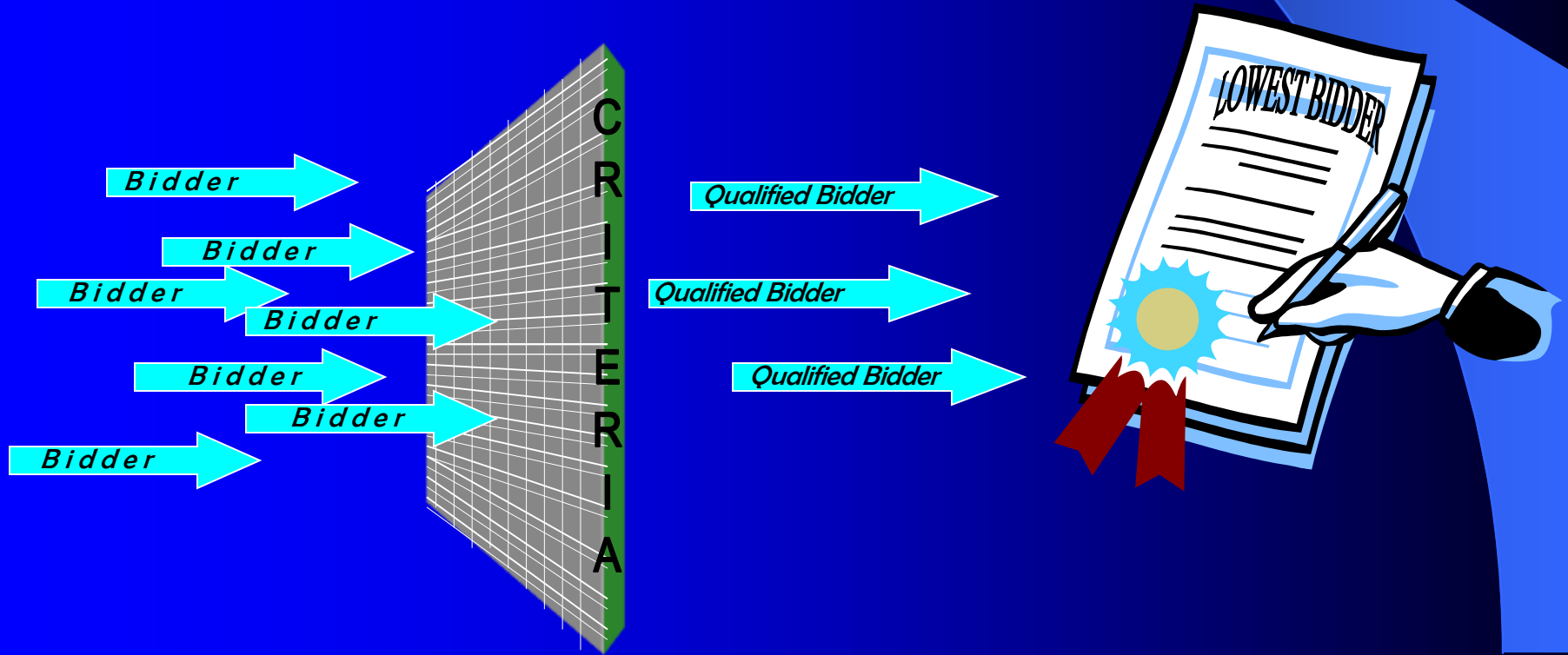
“Two Step” Award

Also “Lowest Price Technically Acceptable”

- Technical evaluation followed by low bid award

STEP 1: Verify Specific Qualifications (Filter out unqualified bidders)

STEP 2: Low-Bidder Contract Award

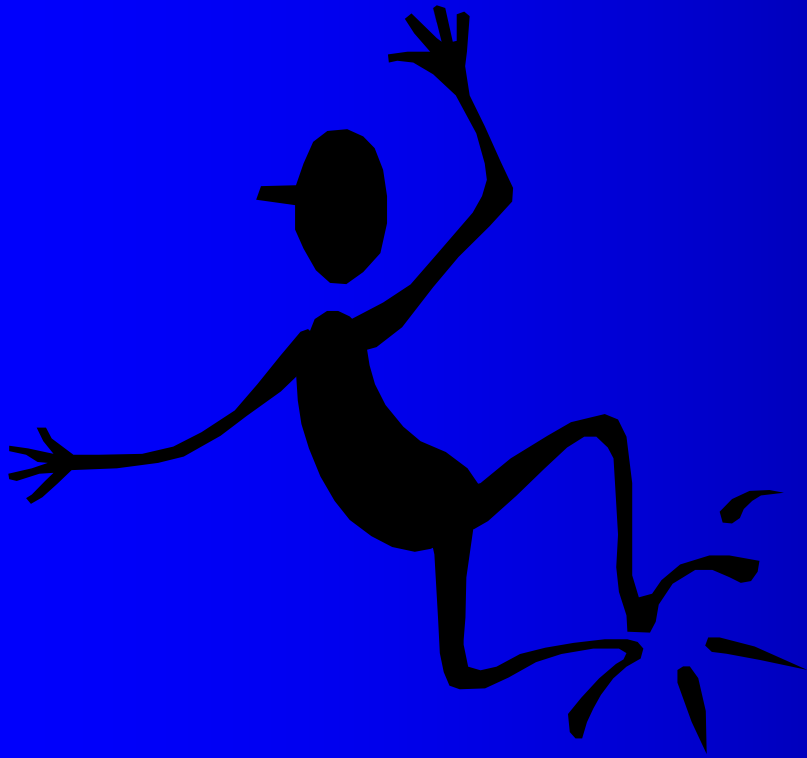


Best Value Award

- Award not based primarily on cost
 - Cost is one of several factors
- Non-cost areas can be significantly more important than cost areas
- Requires extremely thorough evaluation of non-cost areas of the proposal



So You've Found a Bid Opportunity!



- Fed Biz Ops
- Electronic Posting System notice
- Agency Web sites
- Bid search engines
- Florida Purchasing Direct
- County Bid Boards

Some Basic Data

- Solicitation Number
- Due Date for Proposal
- Type of Solicitation
 - Sealed bid? Negotiated?
 - Simplified Acquisition or Not?
 - Commercial products/services?
- Issuing Agency
- Contracting Officer
- Set aside?

Before You Go Too Far...



- Is this a “match” for me?
- Can I honestly say “I will not fail?”
- What risks am I undertaking?
- Read the solicitation
 - Word for word
 - Sentence by sentence

What is the Scope of the Effort?

- Product or service required
- Specifications
- Timeframe for delivery or performance
- Where/How delivered?
- Acceptance requirements

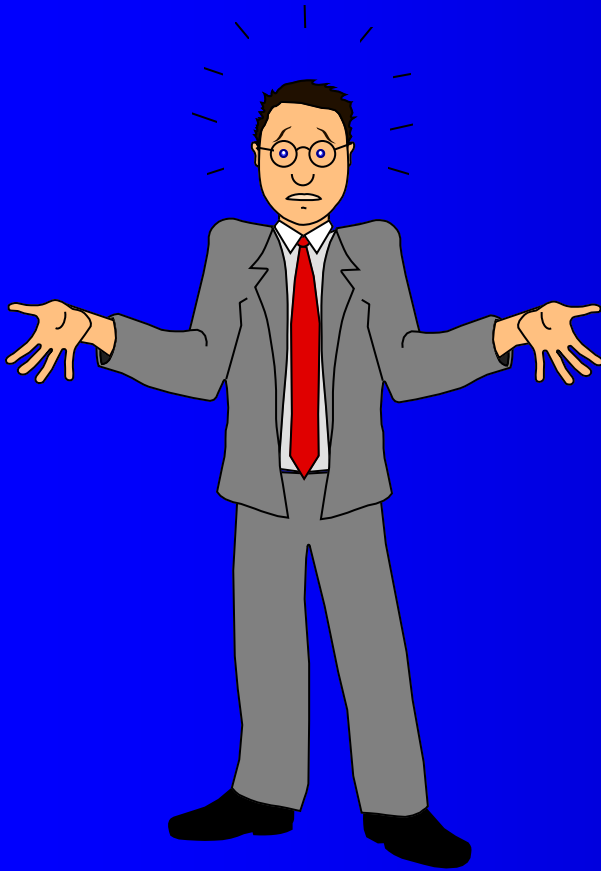
Personnel & Facilities

- What skills/personnel are required?
- Qualifications of in-house staff
- Would additional people need to be hired?
- What facilities/equipment are required?
- Would additional facilities or equipment be required? What? How many?

Evaluation Criteria

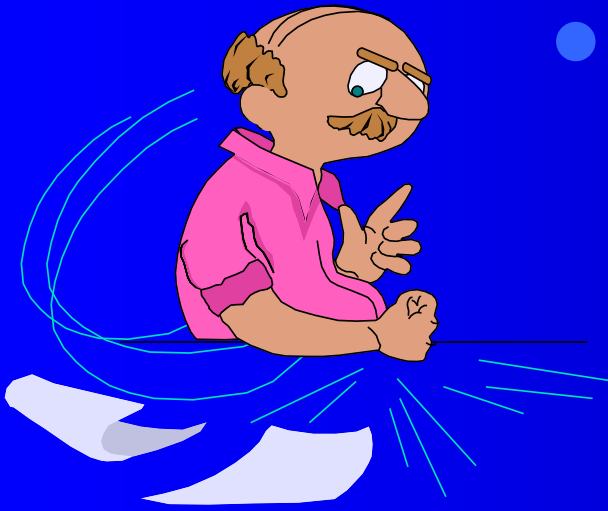
- Technical
- Management
- Past Performance
- Cost or Price
- Relative importance?

To Bid or Not to Bid - That is the Question

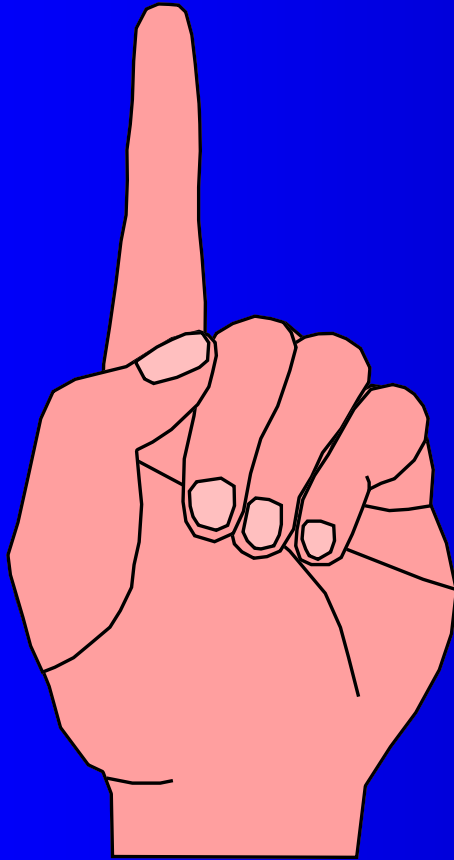


- Do we have the needed personnel, facilities and equipment, or can we get them?
- Is there enough time and personnel to prepare a successful bid/proposal?
- What is our probability of success?
- Bottom Line: *Is it worth it?*

Let's Go For It!



- List tasks you must accomplish
- Set up a Time Line
 - Work backward from proposal due date to establish when tasks must be accomplished
 - Identify critical dates: question cut off date; site visits, etc.
- Start to build the proposal shell (annotated outline)



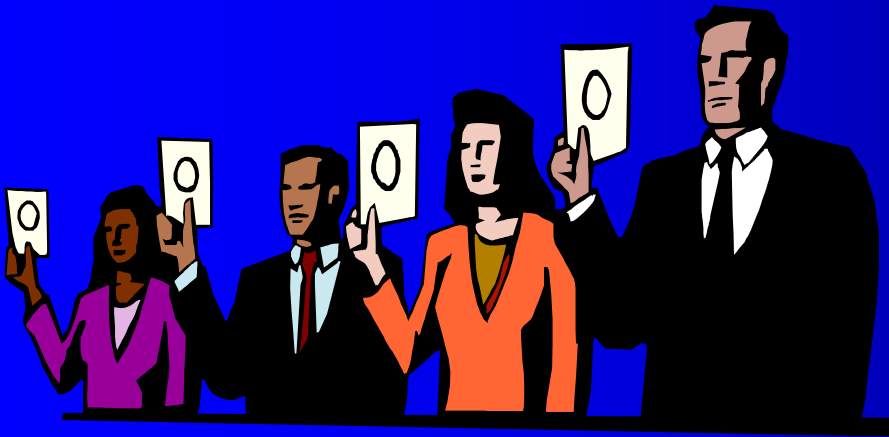
Rule #1

- Read and Understand the Solicitation!

Rule #2

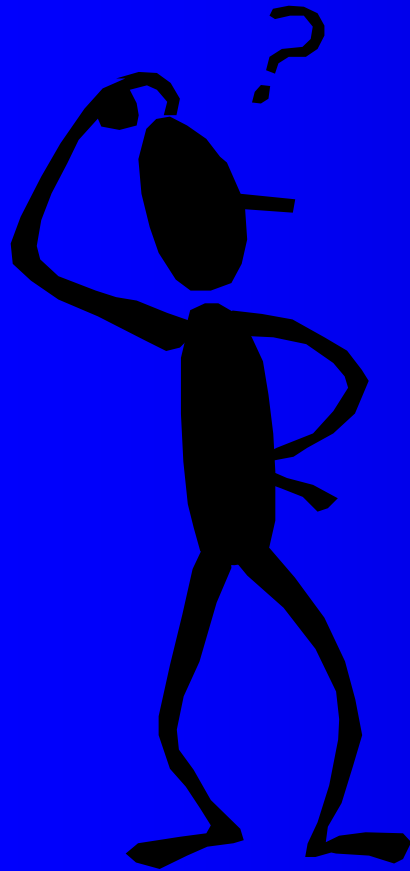
- Repeat Rule #1

Why Proposals Lose



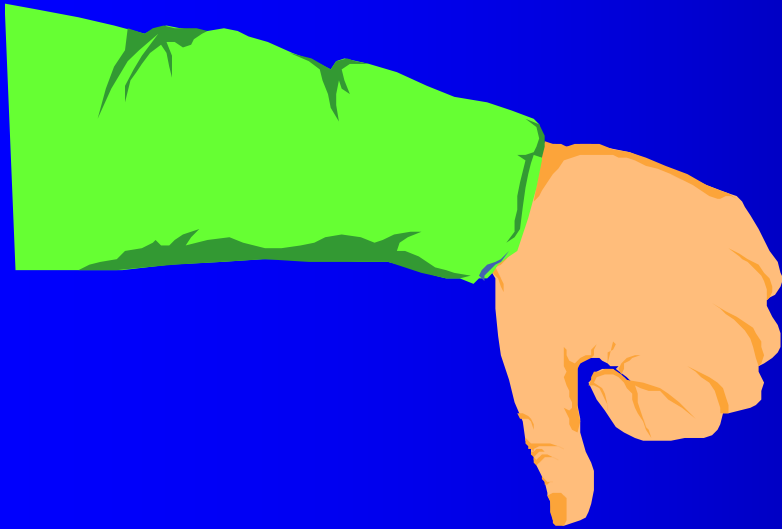
- Inadequate understanding of requirements
- Incomplete response
- Noncompliance with specifications
- Insufficient resources

Why Proposals Lose (Con't)



- **Poor proposal organization**
 - **Can't correlate proposal to solicitation**
 - **Can't correlate the technical approach with the proposed tasks**
 - **Can't correlate with the proposed costs**

Why Proposals Lose (Con't)



- Unsubstantiated or unconvincing rationale for proposed approaches and solutions
- Wordiness
- Repeating requirements w/o discussing how they will be performed

Why Proposals Win

(Yes, Some do win....)



- Prove what they are saying
- Include practical examples
- Show clear evidence of the bidder's superior capabilities
- Avoid grandiose, sweeping, unsubstantiated claims

Winning Proposals Convince!

The Evaluator must be convinced that you...

- Understand the problem
 - Relevant experience
- Can solve the problem
 - Have a detailed plan
 - Identify Issues
 - Risk reduction
- Can deliver the solution
 - Well qualified and dependable
- Provide good value



Where do we start?

The Solicitation: *Your roadmap*

- Read it thoroughly
 - What is the Gov't really asking for?
- If a Draft RFP has been issued, offer suggestions or corrections
- Attend pre-award conferences, Industry Day, site walk down, etc
- Build a proposal outline based on the RFP instructions
- Build a schedule



The Request for Proposals (RFP)

Documents the intended contract tasks (Statement of Work; Statement of Objectives)

Documents how the award decision will be made

Documents all requirements of “responsive” bidders

The Request for Proposals (RFP)

Don't assume....

- The Government Team knows what it's asking for.
- The Government Team is knowledgeable about the required work
- The authors of the RFP and the evaluation team are one and the same
- The RFP is complete and error-free

The Request for Proposals (RFP)

- Format determined by FAR
 - Sections A – M, plus appendices
- Section A : Includes proposal deadline
- Section B : Pricing Instructions
- Section C : Statement of Work (usually)

The Request for Proposals (RFP)

- Section L : General Instructions for Offerors

Read !

Understand !

Comply !

- Section M : Evaluation Description

Basis for award: Best Value, Low Bid, etc

(Tell 'em what you're gonna do)

Questions about the RFP

- If you don't understand it....
...ASK! (in writing)
- Be sure your questions are succinct
- Word questions carefully
- Verbal information provided by Government is **NOT BINDING!** Ask the Issuing office to publish response with Q&A's to all recipients.

First Steps

Get Organized

- Assign a Proposal Manager
 - Put the RFP in a 3-ring binder
 - Use tabs, “Post-It” notes, highlighters, etc to mark important pages and paragraphs
 - Develop cross reference matrix and check off entries as completed
 - Critical information may be scattered among many different sections of the RFP, but all essential information is in there

First Steps

Start Writing

- Proposal Outline –
 - Prepare an annotated outline which includes important points from the RFP as well as your own information on what you are planning to say in each section
 - Copy the outline above, delete the original wording, and you have a basic outline for your proposal

First Steps

(Cont)

- Proposal Outline (Cont.)
 - Indicate the estimated number of pages for each section/subsection of the outline, and the evaluation points.
 - If a team is writing the proposal, indicate who is responsible next to each section/subsection and hold them accountable.
 - Put important instructions on the first page or top of outline, such as: prop due date/time; number of copies; page limits; etc.

The Schedule

- Proposal Schedule--
 - MAKE ONE and stick to it!
 - Leave plenty of time for copying, binding, and delivering the proposal.
 - The copier knows that an important document is being copied, so it will break, jam or smudge.
 - Have a backup plan
 - Make sure everybody on the proposal team has a copy of the schedule, and understands his/her role in meeting it.

Proposal Preparation

- Make sure you are familiar with the Instructions to Offerors (Section L)
- Study the evaluation criteria, and the points allocated to each section (Section M)
- Stick to the Government's outline in the solicitation
- Typical Sections:

Technical

Personnel

Cost

Management

Past Performance

Technical Approach

- Needs to answer...
 - Who?
 - What?
 - When?
 - Where?
 - How?
 - Why?

Management Approach

- Depends on instructions in RFP
- May contain discussion on --
 - How you will manage the overall project
 - How you will manage/oversee the work of your staff and subcontractors
 - Your organization chart of the project
 - Position descriptions of project staff

Personnel Section

- Depends on instructions in RFP
- May contain discussion on --
 - Experience and skills of your proposed staff members
 - Resumes of key staff may be required
 - Tailor them for this purpose
 - Consider... Why were these specific individuals chosen for your team?

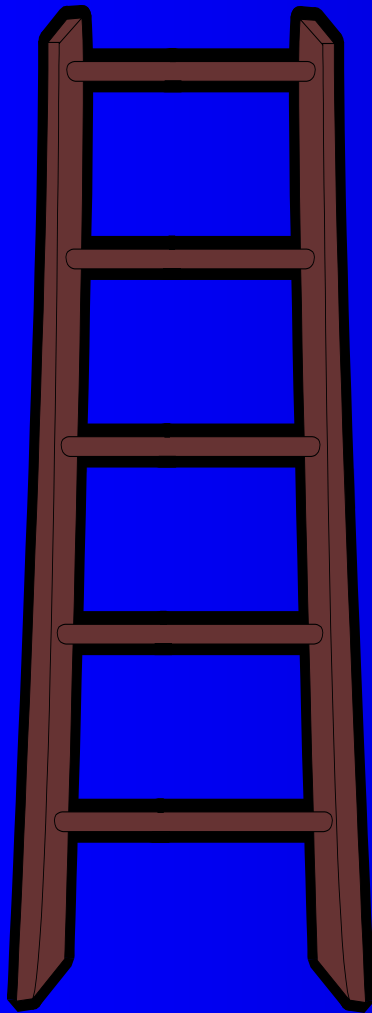
Past Performance

- Read carefully what's being asked
- How is it relevant?
 - Similar services, location, constraints
- Demonstrated successful performance
- Compliments other proposal areas
- Be truthful – The reviewer will see “the other side of the story” too

General Guidelines

- Remember the Problem / Solution aspect. Get to the heart of the problem. Ask “what are they worried about?”
- Provide solutions that will leave the evaluator worry-free
- Write proposals that include information that is
 - Relevant
 - Compelling
 - Solutions based
 - Supported with facts/details

Climb the Ladder!



Meeting the
Organization's Needs

Providing a good solution

Meeting the Criteria

Responsive Bidder

General Guidelines

(Cont)

- Tailor your proposal
 - Ensure your proposal is tailored for this specific solicitation
 - The unique problem presented by this office
 - Mention the soliciting agency or office frequently
 - NEVER use the term “client”
- Use professional language; be strong and confident
- Repetition for emphasis– use sparingly
- Keep an eye on the page count throughout

Configuration Control

The Art of Keeping Control Despite Changes

- You must have a version control system
 - Easy to understand; Easy to work with
 - Limits, controls, and records changes
 - Provide a complete and thorough audit trail
 - File naming system, Back-Ups, Dates
- A good system will
 - Document every change (author & date)
 - Confirm changes made as planned
 - Prevent more than one person from accessing files at the same time
 - Tightly control the “master”

Flow & Traceability

- All statements and claims in the proposal should be traceable to a requirement...
...and flow to a result
- Ask... “Why is this in my proposal?”
and... “So what?”
and.... “Who cares?”

Flow & Traceability

Test Your Proposal

- Do the following really contribute to your proposal?

When you were founded

Who the founder was

How much you have grown

How long you have been in business

How big you are

How many employees you have

How many locations you have

What your mission is

About your other customers

Where you are located

We're ISO certified

We're certified in...

- Only if they address a requirement or provide benefit back to the Government

Flow & Traceability

- A good proposal will correspond to the RFP & Statement of Work
- Cross reference tables are acceptable
- Combining requirements can save time and paper

Substantiate Every Claim

- Be careful of the following...

State-of-the-art technology

Top firm

Great reputation

Premier

Low risk

Excellent customer service

Best value

Respected

Our customers come first

We are the only ones

Leading edge

Quality focused

Uniquely qualified

Innovative

- Without backing these phrases up, they are hollow and worthless

Costing

- Don't wait until the last minute to gather cost information
- Understand the type of contract you are bidding:
 - firm fixed
 - fixed fee
 - cost-plus
 - time and materials, etc.

Costing (con't)

- From Technical and Management portions, develop checklist of costs to be included
- Review the solicitation for “hidden costs.”
 - Special insurance requirements
 - Minimum wages established by law
- Be sure your proposed budget is consistent with your proposed effort

Costing (con't)

- Be explicit: What's included & what's not included
- Comply with data / format requirements
 - Government cost team may need to manipulate your data to fit their models
 - If uncertain, ask to submit a sample for testing
- Gov't will check for completeness, reasonableness, realism

Other Information

- As required by RFP, such as--
 - Executive Summary
 - Discussion of your Understanding of the Problem
 - Oral presentation
 - Sample of product

Oral Proposals

- At discretion of Contracting Officer
- Can be
 - Combined with written proposal
 - Instead of written proposal
- Usually structured
- Common with demonstration of product



Oral Proposals

(Cont)

- Gather as much information as possible
 - Room layout, equipment, audience
- Remember, the oral proposal is a proposal!
 - Clear and Convincing
- Practice, Practice, Practice
 - Rehearse in presentation room



Graphics

- A picture is worth a thousand words -- use tables, charts and graphics to summarize information or to break up your narrative
 - *but don't overdo it !*
- Anything vital to understanding your proposal should be in both text and graphic form
- Captions – Steer, focus, emphasize, describe

Don't Assume

- Anything!
Got a question... *Ask!*
- That the Government knows your organization's capabilities, staff or the projects you have done.
 - Even if you've performed work for this office in the past
- That the Government team is all that smart

Proposal Review

- Validation! Check statements, check math, check format
- Have Red Team conduct a review prior to submittal or if you have a small organization have an outside party review your proposal for you.

Red Team Dilemma

Red Team provides independent validation of:

- Compliance with RFP
- Well written
- Sound
- Accurate facts
- Competitive

But.....

Can easily eat days out of schedule

Must leave contingency days to recover

Red Team Dilemma

(Cont)

Can perform many checks and reviews in parallel with proposal preparation

But.....

Red Team loses independence and “full picture” view

Proposal Review

(Cont)

- Consistency (good) & Redundancy (bad)
- Spelling errors
- Flow, Uniformity, Logic, Continuity
- Page numbering
- Section/Subsection numbering or lettering
- Appearance of headings, subheadings, font types and font sizes
- Each copy contains all pages, in the proper order

Check Your Costs

(Re) Do the Math!



- Check and recheck your numbers and formulas
- Document any assumptions and include them in proposal
- Don't make the government guess

Almost done ...

- Edit to fit page requirements
 - Aim for “maximum minus 10%”
 - Are graphics necessary?
- Page Limit Panic !
 - ~~Last minute editing may be necessary~~
 - ~~Find, eliminate and remove any useless, redundant, and unnecessary words or paragraphs~~
 - Adjust hyphenation
 - Careful not to violate format requirements



Make Sure You Have...

- Filled in all the forms in the RFP that you must return
- Answered what was asked not what you think was asked.....
- **SIGNED** and Dated your offer unless Electronic submittal is authorized.

And of course...

- Get it there **ON TIME!**
- USPS, FedEx, UPS
- Hand Delivery
- Call to verify receipt



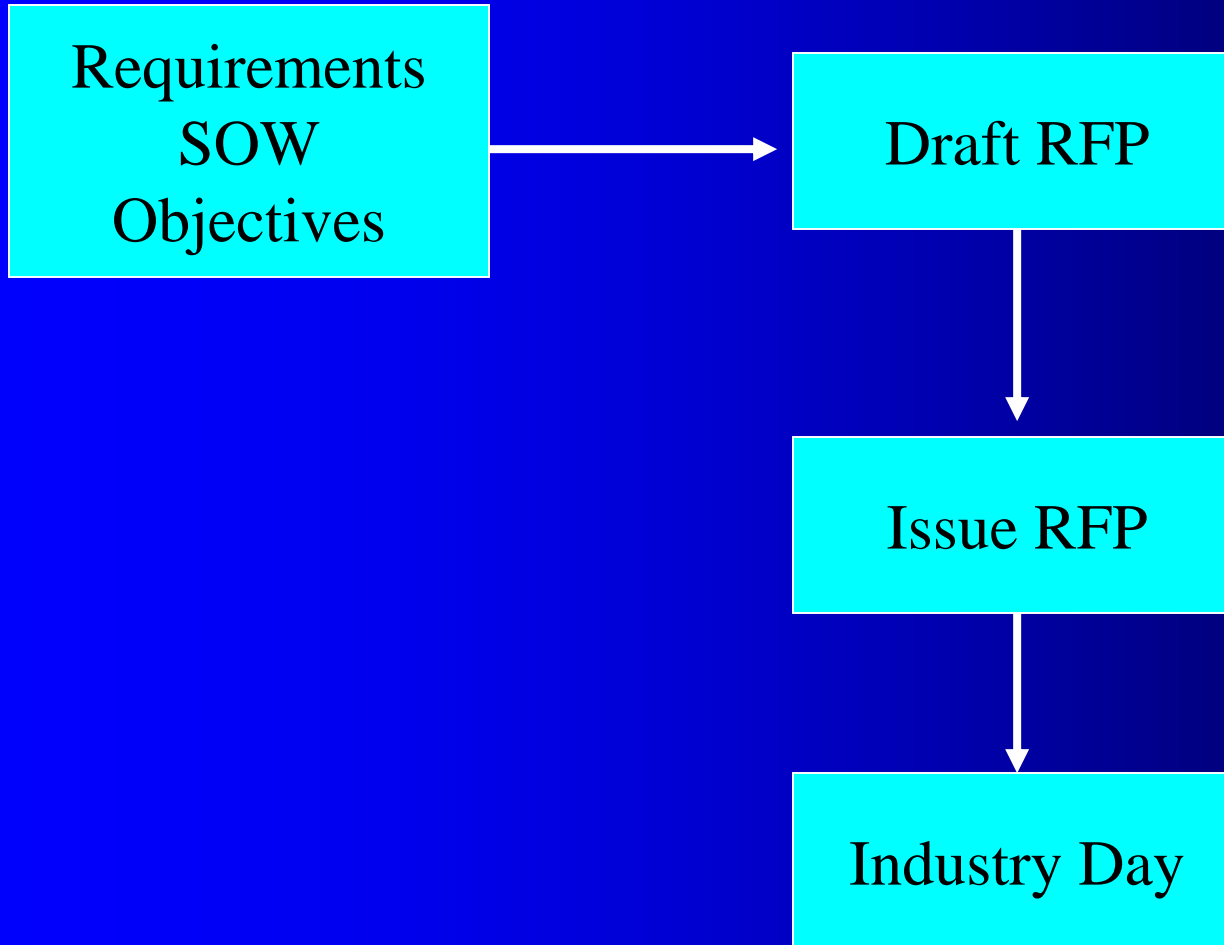
And then what happens?

A look inside the Government's Contract Award Process



SOURCE SELECTION PROCESS

(Best Value Example)



The Draft RFP

Question:

Why does the Government issue a draft RFP?



Solicit industry feedback

Increase industry awareness

Encourage questions, comments, suggestions

Better RFP yields better product !

Industry Day

Question:

Why does the Government conduct an Industry Day ?

Opportunity for Q & A

Provide offerors information not contained within the RFP that *may* be beneficial in preparing the proposal

Better proposal yields better product !

Industry Day Dilemma

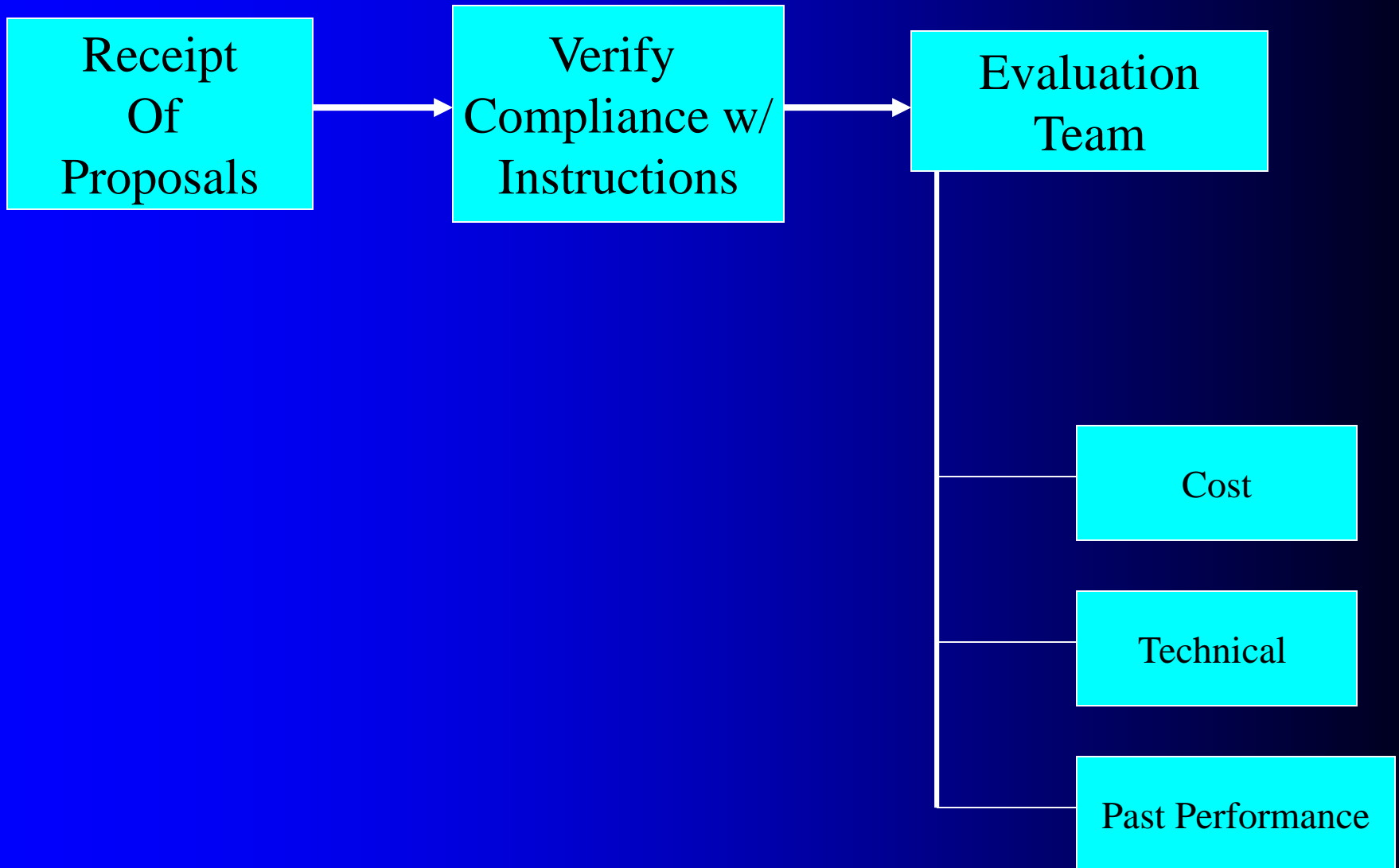
- Offerors get to size up the competition
- Offerors hesitant to ask questions (risk of “tipping their hand”)



.....*Government receives no benefit*

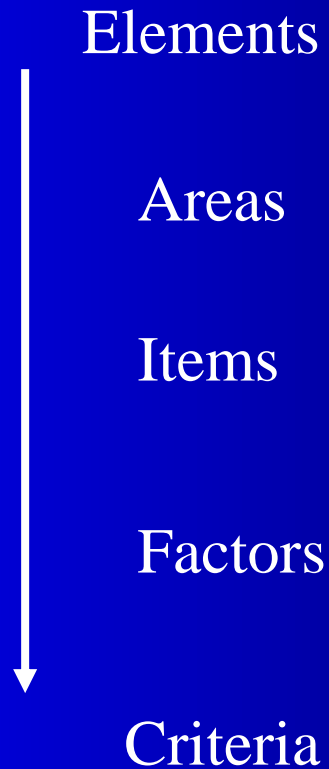
SOURCE SELECTION PROCESS

(Best Value Example)



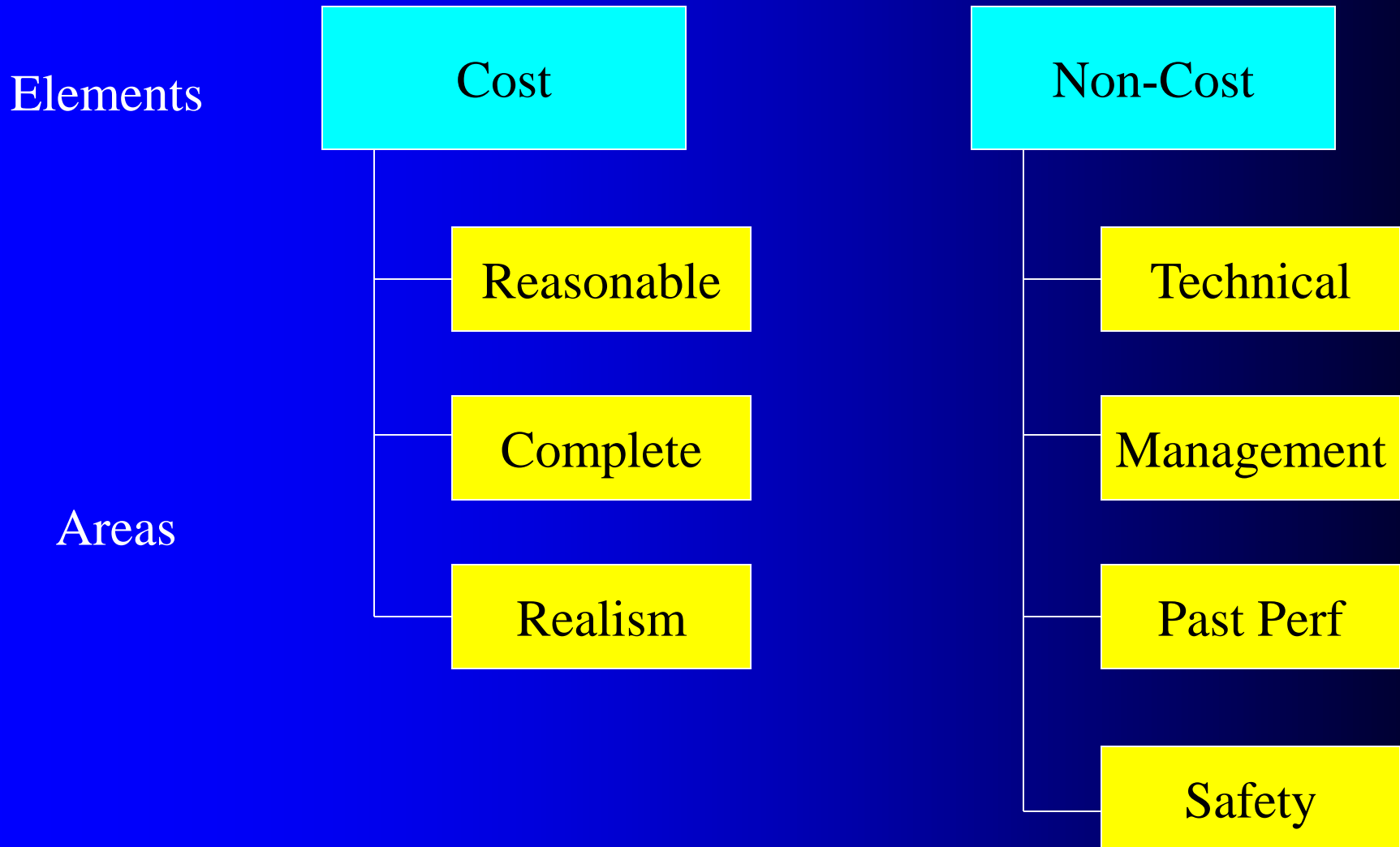
EVALUATION HEIRARCHY

(Example)



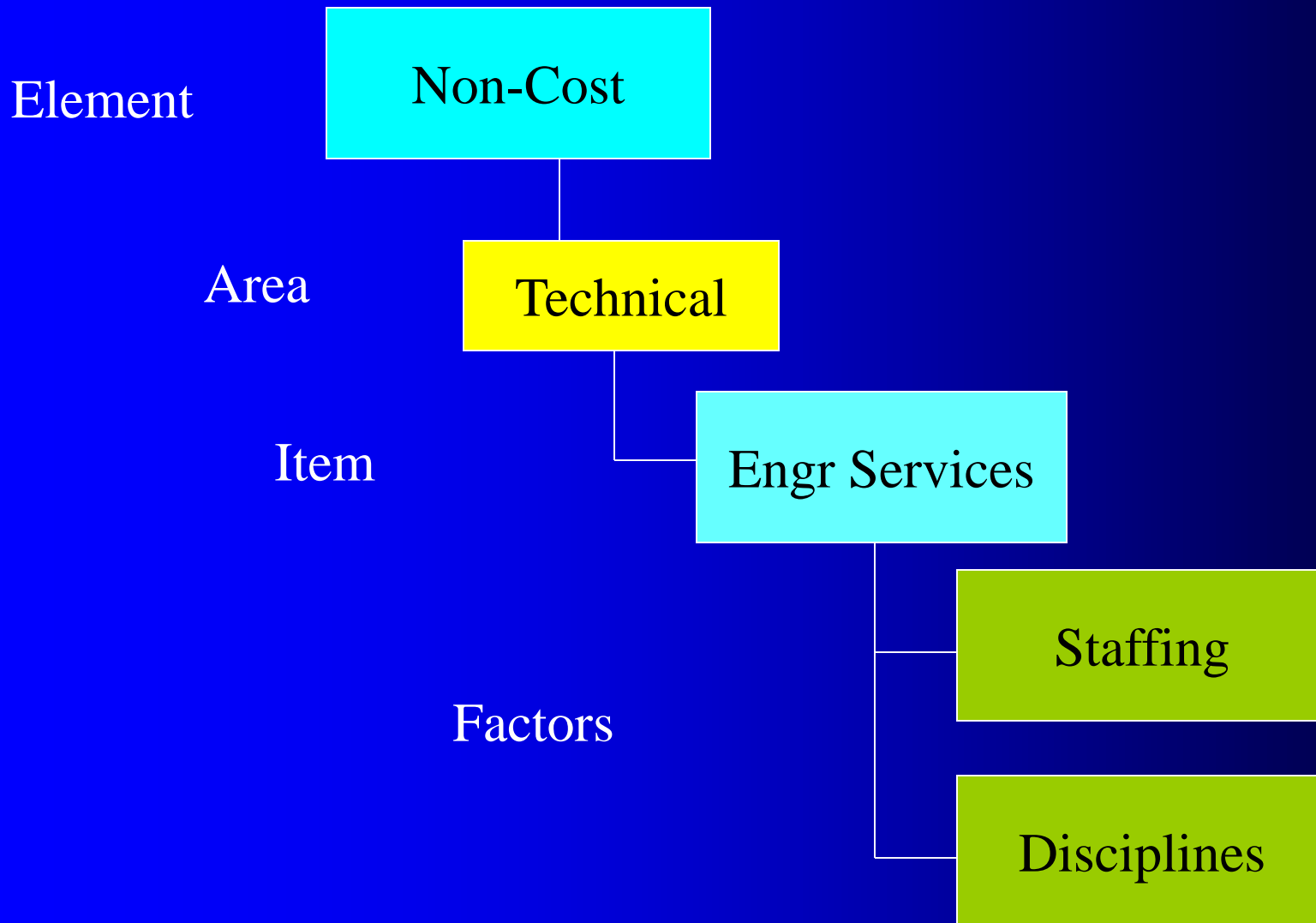
EVALUATION HEIRARCHY

(Example)



EVALUATION HEIRARCHY

(Example)



Evaluation Criteria

Every factor has criteria for assessment

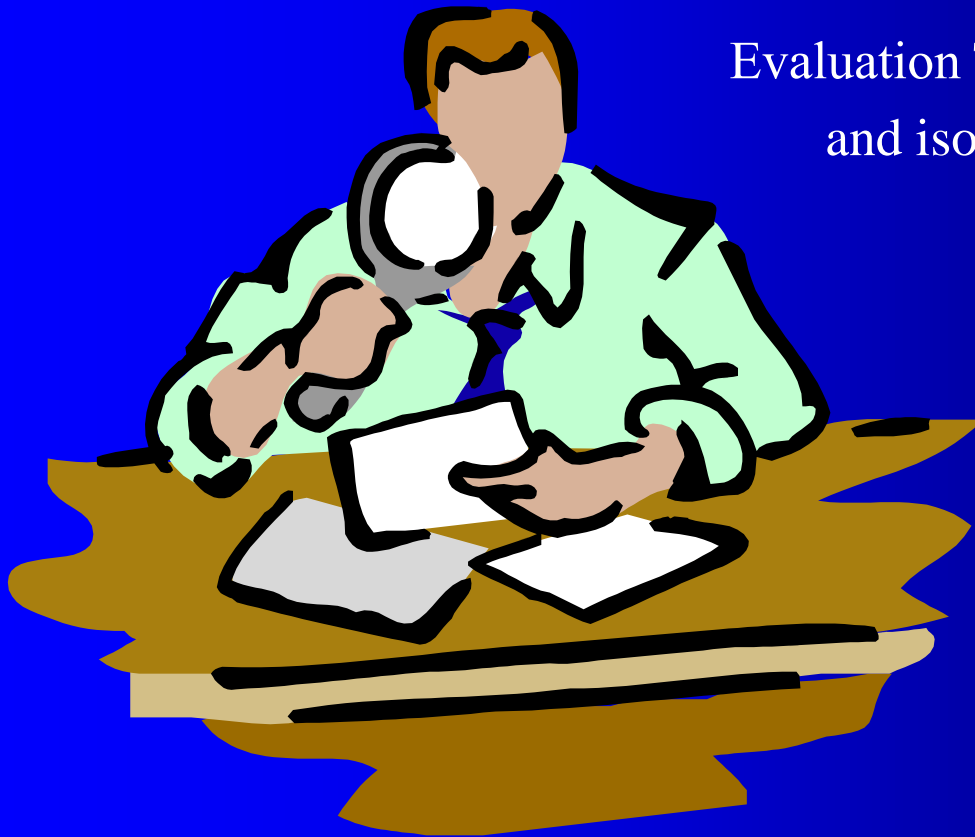
Underlying question: Does the offeror understand the requirements?

Offeror must convince the evaluator that the requirements are understood, and the approach is sound

- Substantiating every claim
- Providing background information
- Tie approach to requirements

The Evaluation

A whole lot of fun now!



Evaluation Team is “sequestered”
and isolated

Team has access to advisors
and Past Performance
sources

The Evaluation

A whole lot of fun now!

Every proposal evaluated separately, w/o comparison

- Strengths, Weaknesses, Score, Risk
- Proposals are not scored relative to each other. No comparison between offerors is permitted

Every factor evaluated separately; Risk assessment may be included in evaluation

- Factors are evaluated and scored by individual team members

Evaluation Team convenes to discuss and reach consensus

- Resulting score is NOT just an average! Score is the result of discussion, argument, persuasion, and debate

Evaluation Consensus

After every proposal evaluated (strengths, weaknesses, score, risk) first “comparison” made between offerors

Comparison looks for consistency in evaluation scores

Evaluation Team reaches final consensus

-- although it may take some time !



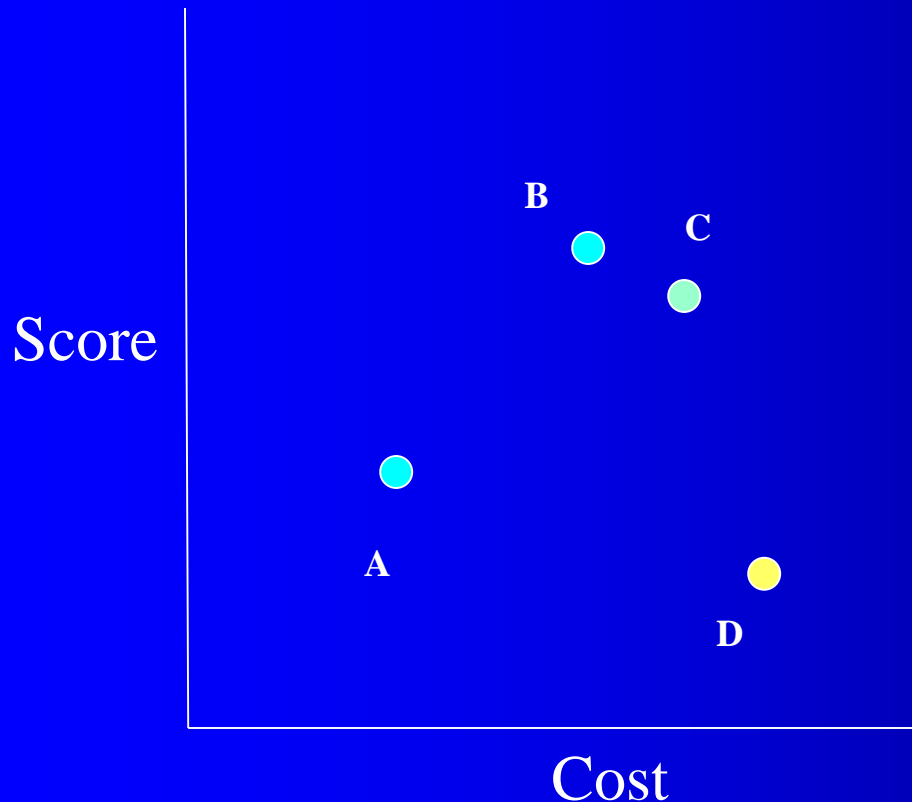
Evaluation Results

(Example)

		Offeror A		Offeror B		Offeror C		Offeror D	
	Weights	Score	Risk	Score	Risk	Score	Risk	Score	Risk
A. Technical									
A.1. Design	20%	6	Low-Med	8	Low-Med	7	Low-Med	3	Med-High
A.2. Deployment	12.5%	5	Low-Med	8	Low	9	Low	4	Med-High
A.3. Transition	7.5%	5	Low-Med	7	Low	6	Low-Med	3	Med-High
A.4. Use of COTS	5%	6	Low-Med	7	Low-Med	6	Low-Med	4	Low-Med
A.5 Software Architecting	5%	5	Low-Med	6	Low-Med	8	Low-Med	3	Med-High
B. Management									
B.1. Software Management	10.5%	6	Low-Med	7	Low	6	Med-High*	5	Low-Med
B.2. Key Personnel & Relevant Experience	10.5%	5	Med-High	8	Low	6	Low *	3	Med-High
B.3. Program Plan	7.5%	5	Low-Med	6	Low-Med	5	Low-Med	4	Med-High
B.4. Corporate Commitment	1.5%	6	Low	8	Low	8	Low	4	Low-Med
C. Past Performance									
C.1. Corporate Past Performance	7%	6	Low-Med	9	Low	9	Low	5	Low-Med
C.2. Software Management Past Performance	7%	5	Low-Med	6	Low-Med	7	Low	7	Low-Med
C.3. Info Warehouse Past Performance	5%	7	Low-Med	8	Low	8	Low	6	Low-Med
C.4. Cost Control Performance	1%	6	Low	6	Low	5	Low-Med	2	Low-Med
$\Sigma=10$ max	100%	5.55		7.43		7		4.035	

Evaluation Process

Cost evaluation combines with non-cost evaluation results for integrated comparison across offers



Results presented to the
Source Selection
Authority (SSA)

Final Award determined
by SSA

Process Integrity

- Evaluation Team must reach consensus on all scores
- All results presented to SSA for decision
- Substantiating information also presented
- Results and basis of award rationale presented to offerors in formal de-briefings

Award Debriefings

- Describes Government's Source Selection Process
- Provides feedback on strengths and weaknesses
- Releases where offeror "finished" compared to awardee
- Provides useful information for future efforts

Remember....

Not an opportunity to challenge Govt's decision

No point by point comparisons

Winning Proposals

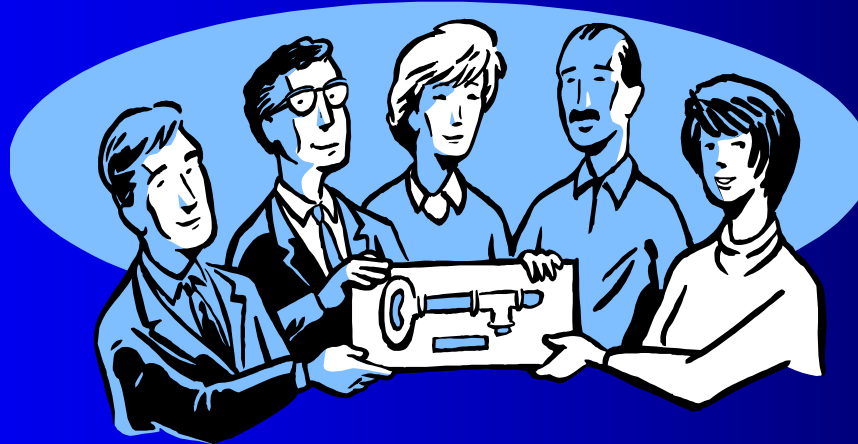
- Respond to the needs of the Agency
 - Where documented? RFP, Agency's Goals, Mission, Vision, Literature, Strategic Plan, etc
- Satisfies the 5 C's:
 - Clear
 - Complete
 - Comprehensive
 - Concise
 - Convincing

Reminders on Preparing a Successful Proposal

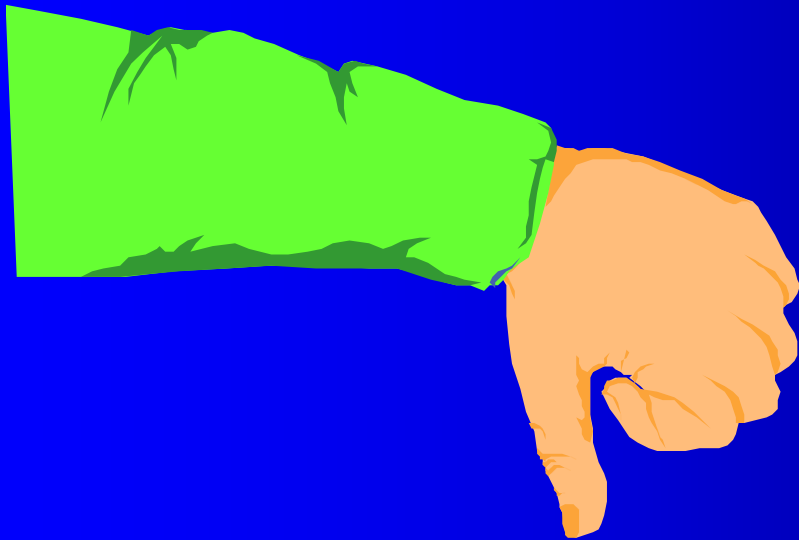
- Do it yourself; teach your own staff about proposal writing. But if you hire a development person or consultant, stay on top of it; proposals exclusively written by development people usually don't make sense because that person isn't familiar with the project.
- Be realistic about the amount of time necessary to assemble the proposal
- Plan ahead; allow plenty of time for those involved to meet, discuss, and review progress in the proposal writing process.

Reminders on Preparing a Successful Proposal

- Most important....
 - Your greatest asset is your people
 - Treat them properly; Reward them
 - Working people into the ground may win a contract, but lose in the long run



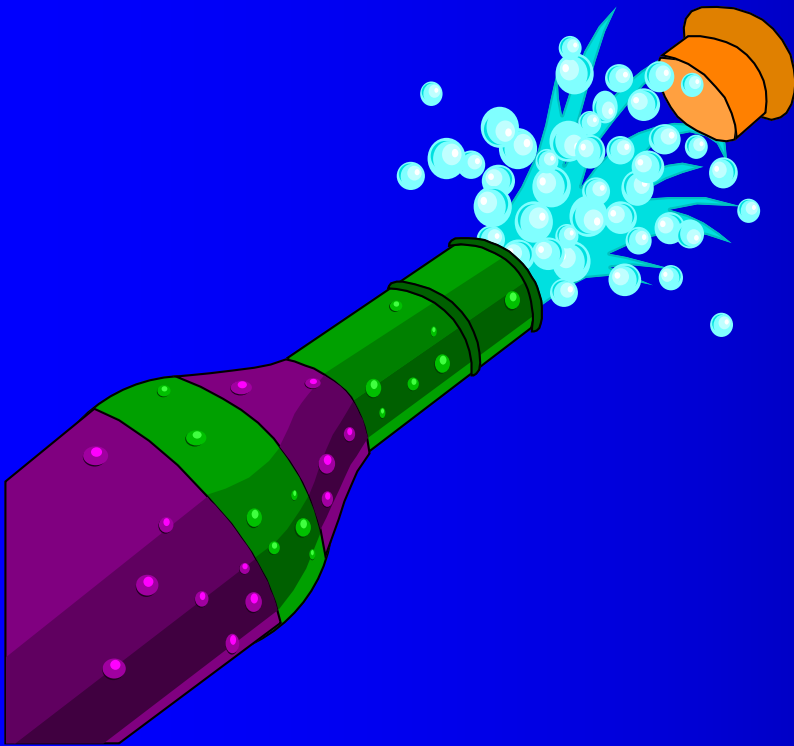
If You Lose



- Don't get discouraged
- Call the Contracting Officer for debrief
- Learn from your experience and apply it to your next bid

If You Win

- Celebrate!
- Call the Contracting Officer for debrief
- Learn from your experience and apply it to your next bid
- *And don't forget* -- now you have to actually manage and implement your project!



Essential Truths

*A successful project begins before
contract award!*



Good Luck!

... And Good Hunting

Questions ?