

COLLINS' WAILING WALL

By James Collins

It was my responsibility, as proposal manager for Kollsman, to put together major proposals, which included technical quality, cost, data, experience, background, and identification of executives and the proposal team. Every paragraph for every section of the documents was my responsibility. I read them all. The success of the proposal meant jobs for all the members of our company. At times, I was brutal. Mediocre writing was not acceptable nor was it tolerated. Each department supported the proposal activity and supplied personnel to write the necessary documentation to support their part of the specification. There was a schedule for delivery of each major document and a setback schedule, which identified when to submit the writing to my office.

We typically had a separate conference room designated for the proposal team with all the necessary computer support, printers, copiers, and secretarial help. Each section of the proposal had a specific day and time when all the contributors would appear with their copy and a member of the proposal team performed an initial edit. Then the team assembled the sections and delivered a copy to my office. I read each one personally and marked them in red pencil for corrections. In some cases, I rejected the submittal out of hand as poorly written or not responding to the specification from the customer. In each case, a 3 x 5 sticky note was marked up with the name of the person responsible, the paragraph, the section identifier, page number and the problem with the original submittal document. Further, I attached a new delivery date, initially a day or two later. As the delivery date approached, I required the new submittal on the same day. Most of the people still had to support the normal day-to-day activity, so they had to complete their corrections after hours. The proposal group often worked until two in the morning.

As a final draft of the proposal came together, yellow sticky notes covered the wall. A line formed at the door and the unacceptable writers stood there with their new submittal. If accepted, their yellow sticky note disappeared from the wall. If not, they had to rewrite and, clearly, they knew what their submittal criteria had to be. They had to return within an hour or two and knew that if it did not pass then, they stayed until it was accepted. This was when the excuses started to arrive. "My son Tommy has a basketball game" – "too bad you are not going to be there". "It is our anniversary. I told my wife I would take her out to supper tonight" – "reschedule to next week". "It's nine o'clock this is my third submittal, I have to go home" – "we are here until two or later. Glad to have you join us. Put your name on the pizza list. You are having supper with us so you can really give us a good written paragraph".

Eventually it came down to about ten sticky notes on the wall. By this time, everyone had an excuse, a disaster at home, or some other scenario created over the last three hours. No excuses were accepted. Too many people's jobs depended on us winning our proposals and we had a proposal success ratio double that of our competitors. The people who witnessed this process gave it its own name. They called it the Collins Wailing Wall.

THE END