

NONPROFIT NEW YORK

Nonprofit Excellence Awards

Model Application Tips: Show How Awesome Your Nonprofit Is

NOTE: these accompany the model 2020 NEA part I application questions, and may be subject to (minor) changes

Hi there!

To help ensure that you submit the best possible application you can, we have created this tip sheet to provide some guidance. Please note, these are just **friendly tips to help guide the way you interpret and respond to the application questions**. They are not the secret code or the answer to the Nonprofit Excellence Awards (we keep that in Fort Knox).

A few main points of what we recommend throughout your application are:

- We love **examples!**
- Highlight what you think other organizations can **learn from you**.
- We love when you demonstrate an **intersectional focus/approach** to the Areas.

1. **Advocacy. How do you share your policy expertise and advocate for your mission with staff and board, your constituents, and key influencers?**

Advocacy is a tool that every organization has and should use to forward their mission. We mean using a public platform to forward your key strategies and solutions. This question is not about lobbying (although lobbying could be a part of your answer). We want to know how you see your responsibility to the communities you serve in the public realm. What tools do you use to address systemic issues - we know that not every organization has a policy staff person, but how do you lift up from your day-to-day and work in coalition with others to bring about lasting, systemic change? How do you translate your own organizational experience into advocacy, testimony and arguments for improvement or change? We want to see that you know you don't operate in a vacuum, and that your organization has a lens on the larger role in can play in changing landscapes. Your organization might not be in legislative halls, or organizing rallies, but we want to see how you are leveraging what you are expert in, and what you can do, to build community and power in unique ways. We see you small organization, who doesn't have the time, staffing, to engage in what the textbook definitions of policy and advocacy provide - you can still answer this question well because although you may not think you are doing policy and advocacy - you ARE: any strategic partnership, collaboration you engage in to address the issues your organization's constituents face is advocacy, the way you build community can be a part of this answer; as well as the way you share your expertise and uplift the experiences of your constituents.

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Do they use public platforms to forward their mission and promote solutions to their issue?
- Do they exhibit responsibility to the communities they serve in the public realm?
- Do they work in coalition and/or partnership with others to address the issues their organization's constituents face?
- Do they share/leverage their expertise with others for improvement or change?
- Do they uplift the experiences of their constituents and/or provide testimony to educate the public in their issue?
- Is the organization's use of advocacy and strategic alliances something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

2. Communications. Are your internal and external communications strategic, effective and build your brand?

Many times, responses to this question focus on either internal or external communications strategies. We want to hear about **both**, so please be sure to address both aspects in your response.

As for external communications, please note that Facebook likes alone are not enough - if you can show how those likes then translate into real action, connection and support of your organization, then that's great. Your external communications are important to communicate your success, identity and mission and we want to know how you do that, and how you know you are being heard. Do you regularly listen to your key stakeholders? How do you promote your brand? How do you develop campaigns and launch them - who participates in the process and how do you know you are being successful? How do you use communications data to inform, improve, and evolve your communications strategies?

We are curious about the internal communications culture as well - how are communications used to bring your people along, and build teams? How does your communications team integrate with the other teams in your organization? We also want to know about how you actually communicate with each other, including your strategies of promoting internal engagement and for resolving conflict, promoting healthy disagreement, and using different communications styles to ensure that your team is heard.

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Does the organization tell its story(ies) in a clear, coherent and compelling way?
- Is there evidence that the organization cultivates an internal communications culture that is open, candid, and vibrant?
- Does it regularly seek feedback and information from its staff, customers or constituents or other stakeholders?
- Does the organization have a strong and positive reputation or brand?
- For smaller organizations, especially young ones, is there evidence that the organization has a definite "footprint" or brand in its community or among its constituents?
- Particularly for smaller or younger organizations, is there evidence of a significant level of influence despite its youth or small size?
- Is the organization's use of communications something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

3. Diversity, equity, and inclusion. How does your organization cultivate and foster a diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplace through its policies and practices?

This question is where a lot of organizations stumble, because they can't claim excellence, or that they've achieved an impressive goal. That's okay, because diversity, equity and inclusion work is never done. We want to see how are engaging in this important, brave work. How do you cultivate diversity, equity, and inclusion in your organization? What are your values, and how do they show up in your programs and policies? Tell us how your board, staff, volunteers put into practice the policies you have, and how your organization embodies these definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. An EEO statement is good, but it is only the start. Tell us about policies and practices that move your organization beyond what's legally required.

How do you intentionally foster the conditions for everyone to be invited to the dance (diversity), that they actually dance (inclusion), and that they also get to play their favorite music (equity)?

You might have a widely diverse representation of people on staff, and that is important, but you should also demonstrate how you are being inclusive as well. Where do those staff people sit on the organizational chart? Are you evaluating your programs and your end users through a lens of equity?

Have you had conversations about how to move forward with all work through a race equity lens? Who leads this work in the organization?

We want to see the work, the goals, and the progress. Do not stop with a policy. Do not stop with your diversity statistics. Yes, those matter, but we want more. We know this is an area of growth for many organizations. There is a reason for that; the impact of racism - interpersonal, structural, historical - is real, and dismantling structures of oppression take time. So we value your honesty and candor on where you are, where you've failed, and what you intend to do about those experiences. Intent alone is not enough though. This work is ongoing and you have to demonstrate your work of converting aspirations into reality.

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Is there clear evidence of specific policies and practices in place to assure diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- Does the organization clearly work to understand and competently involve key constituencies in the areas or communities it serves?
- Does the organization track results in this area?
- Is there clear evidence of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the staff and board levels?
- Is there clear evidence that the organization is in touch with its external community?
- Is there clear evidence that diversity, equity, and inclusion, are expressed values of the organization?
- Are the organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion practices something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

4. Financial management. How does your organization think strategically about finances to support your mission and to integrate financial management with all organization priorities?

Yes, we definitely assess your organization's financial health and outlook. But that doesn't mean that if you have a lien or a bad year that you're disqualified. We want to understand how you think strategically, such as how you manage through unexpected events (good and bad!), and how you coordinate your financial management with all the other aspects of your overall management strategy.

Talk to us about what your budget planning process is and how it embodies your organization's values. We understand that funders come and go, you may have a bad gala, but we want to see how you learned from it and how you made hard decisions. It's not because you might have a trillion dollar endowment and 5 years worth of cash in the bank that you will score well in this category. It's your strategy about what you do with the money you have and your plans for what happens if it all goes south.

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Is there evidence financial management/planning decisions are made in concert with strategic priorities?
- Is there evidence the budget process is inclusive of staff?
- Do audits or financial reviews (if required) for at least the last 2 years reflect favorably on the organization's financial management?
- Is there evidence that required controls and procedures are in place to assure accountability, transparency, fiscal prudence, and ethical behavior?
- Is there evidence that key decision-makers and fiduciaries are well-informed and exercising strong oversight?
- Is there evidence that the organization has taken preventive steps to recover from past challenges and incorporated them into future planning?
- Are there financial management practices that other nonprofits can learn from to reduce risk, assure adequate revenues, reserves and cash flow, and keep all stakeholders well-informed?

5. Fundraising. How have you integrated fund development into your organizational strategies, and what roles do board, staff, volunteers and constituents play in this work?

This is often a question where we get a lot about how much you fundraise and which fund development activities you're involved in. That's great, but we also want to know how your mission drives your fundraising. How do you build and catalyze a culture of philanthropy in your organization? How does your planning include sustainable revenue streams? Are your development plans effective and are they accountable to your donors? How does your fundraising team integrate and work with your programs team? How do you forecast and ensure that your resource development is strategic and positions your organization for future growth and continued sustainability? How do you engage your constituents, clients, program participants in your fundraising strategies?

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Is there strong evidence of effective fundraising practices?
- Does the organization have multiple solicitors/ambassadors leading to a diverse funding base?
- Does the organization regularly communicate with its donors/funders?
- Is there evidence of care for and retention of both large and small donors?
- Is there evidence of diversifying funding sources?
- Is there creative use of in-kind contributions or leveraging of other resources?
- Is there evidence development is integrated into departments such as finance and programs?
- Are the organization's fundraising practices something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

6. Governance. How does your organization's leadership (board and executive) add value to your organization to help it perform better, engage in risk management, set priorities, and be more transparent?

We want to know how your organization's leadership crafts the strategy and vision that your team can then act upon. We look to see how well you demonstrate that the board is engaged in governance and fundraising oversight, and how they are spokespersons for the organization. If you are going to write about your board committee structure, we need to understand more than just that you have a structure; we need the communities' mandates, purposes, and engagement with the organization.

With respect to risk management, we want to see how you evaluate and manage risk while also ensuring the organization takes on exciting and innovative opportunities. We are interested in how your management practices result in setting priorities, as we know that there are many priorities competing for your attention, and limited bandwidth. With respect to transparency, we want to know how you tell your communities about the work that you are doing, and set expectations with your stakeholders. How are stakeholders a part of the vision of the organization? What information is public and how? How do you negotiate expectations with stakeholders?

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Are examples provided of how the board adds value to the organization and helps it become better?
- Is the board fully engaged in required oversight? Risk management?
- Is there strong evidence of board focus on mission? Does the board work well with management to lead the organization?
- Are there exemplary governance and other board practices in place (e.g., board job descriptions, regular evaluations of board performance, regular evaluation of CEO's performance, etc.)?
- Is there evidence of the Board engaging in visioning and forward thinking?
- Are the organization's governance practices something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

7. Human resources. How do you build human capital at your organization while ensuring that your hiring, retention, and leadership practices are equitable?

We are looking at how you value, build, and invest in the most critical resource you have - your people. Please talk about benefits, performance reviews, and the ways you engage with your team - including your volunteers. We like to hear how you invest in the professional development of staff, what your retention rates are, and how you build depth in your organization.

We want to know how you ensure that the way you bring people in, develop their capacity, and, ideally, promote them up and out, is done in a manner that is mindful of the oppressions that we might have to consider and address. Yes, this might sound like it's the diversity equity and inclusion I question, but the people you work with are diverse and hold complex identities and ensuring your workplace thrives requires accounting for that - and we want to hear how you do it, measure your effectiveness, and listen to your team.

We also like to understand how you address power and hierarchy in your team-building work. How does your management or leadership team lead and learn?

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Does the organization demonstrate clear evidence of enlightened human resources policies and practices?
- Does it obviously care for its employees and/or volunteers in exemplary ways, meeting employee needs and protecting them from harm?
- Does the organization have a clearly envisioned leadership pipeline?
- Is there evidence that this organization would be voted a great place to work?
- Is the organization's use of human resources something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

8. Planning and evaluation. How does your organization define, track, assess and use program results to inform its management practices, learn and improve?

Great answers to this question have not just demonstrated how you quantify your impact, but also provided real data points that were then linked to a culture of continuous learning or adjustments of management practices. We're interested in to whom you report these outcomes internally and how they use the results to adjust the organizational management.

A lot of folks answer this question by telling us, "we use Salesforce!" That's great, but we want to know what data you are capturing with it, whether they are outcomes and/or outputs, and what you intend to do with it - from a management perspective - as well as how that data get incorporated into your learning, and how you manage towards effectiveness and impact.

We know there are some social issues that nonprofits address that are hard to measure, but we want to know you have set outcomes, track indicators, establish targets towards those outcomes, and that you can tell the story of your success in clear and strategic ways.

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Does the organization have a strategic planning with explicit activities, desired outcomes, and key performance indicators?
- Is there clear evidence of a strategic focus on results/outcomes?
- Does the organization regularly identify and report outcomes – changes in behavior or condition of constituents, clients or community(ies)? Are they tracked over time?
- Is the organization working to improve its programming/operations and learn from its results?

- Is there evidence of the potential for growth or sustainability?
- Is the organization's focus on planning and evaluation something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

9. Technology. How does your organization manage your information technology resources and integrate them into your short- and long-term strategic and program goals?

Have you ever watched the [IT Crowd](#)? Don't be that organization.

Again, it's so great that you have Salesforce, and can work remotely, and use the cloud, and extra credit for cybersecurity insurance. BUT are you being strategic about how tech can move your mission forward? You could have the most amazing laptops in the world, but if you don't communicate the strategy behind your tech upgrades, hardware, software, policies and use, then you don't get a gold star.

For every programmatic development or strategic plan, have you built out the tech infrastructure supporting it? In the past, great answers to this question have highlighted the integration of tech into the entire organization's work in real, tangible ways. Show us how tech permeates throughout your management, and how it intersects with your organization's program goals.

Please be creative and expansive in your responses because we are also curious to learn how you are being innovative in your use of tech. Maybe you have an off-label use for a system that everyone takes for granted - let us know!

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Are exemplary IT practices in place – e.g. nightly back-up, software upgrades and adding new applications as appropriate?
- Is there evidence of regular analysis and upgrades of software and systems based on organizational and user needs?
- Are there examples of creative use of technology to improve effectiveness and efficiency?
- Does the organization leverage existing technologies and make creative use of free or low-cost technology?
- Does the organization have the appropriate support/staffing structure for IT?
- Is the organization's use of technology something that other nonprofits could clearly learn from?

10. Curiosity and innovation across all areas of management. How is your organization curious and innovative?

How do you foster a culture of feedback, the ability to communicate and question? How do you think outside the box about your management practices? How do you get staff to give and receive feedback or challenge each other in thoughtful, effective, and kind ways? Where has your organization tested new management styles? How do you fail fast? How do you know you're being curious and innovative? We are curious about how you.

How will the Selection Committee score this question?

- Do they exhibit a culture of feedback - the ability to communicate and question?
- Do they exhibit an environment where it is okay to test, fail, and reiterate?
- Do they demonstrate being a learning organization– do they encourage new learning?
- Do they feed intellectual curiosity in their team?
- Do they think outside the box about their management practices?
- Do they explain how they create spaces where staff can question the status quo safely and ideate freely?
- Do they take time and spaces to think creatively and test ideas?
- Do they mention how they used/implemented what their team discovered? Are new ideas received openly?