

Brief Brief on Bebriefs

Many contracting officers dread the post-RFP debrief: unhappy bidders asking difficult questions about why they didn't get the contract. What many contracting officers may not appreciate is that the bidders often dread the debrief too. Facing one's own shortcomings is never easy. And because they know the debrief is unpleasant for the contracting officer, the bidders don't want to be seen as troublemakers by asking for debriefs. Causing trouble might negatively influence their chances next time around, especially in a small market.

Years of experience as a contracting officer and bidder have shown an easy way out of this confrontational system. Some up-front work can turn the post-RFP information exchange into a positive experience with many side benefits for everyone. One of these benefits is eliminating the need and desire for face-to-face debrief meetings.

This all starts in the RFP design stage, well before the post-RFP period. This is how it goes.

1. **Design your RFP evaluation criteria objectively so that bidders can score themselves** even before submitting their proposals. Bidders see right away if they stand a good chance of success so they can avoid wasting everyone's time with low-scoring proposals. See the example criterion in the short paper *Proposal Length: No Limits* <https://timmit.ca/tools/lib/index.shtml#NOLIMIT>. Doing this well has several important components but key among them is reducing the evaluation scale from a continuous range (e.g., 0–100%) to a small number of well-defined discrete objective steps (e.g., 0, 60%, 80%, 100%). These are linked to what the bidders must *demonstrate*, not something they can just *guess, look up, or say*.
2. **Create your evaluation guide/scoresheet.** Actually, this is nothing more than a reformatting exercise at most because you use only the information contained in the RFP. There is no supplementary marking information and no secret list of things that will garner points.
3. **Conduct your evaluation as a consensus process** using only the evaluation guide, which is drawn directly and only from the RFP. Converging on consensus is quick and easy because the members of the evaluation committee only have to agree on which one of the small number of well-defined evaluation levels applies for each criterion.
4. **Document the evaluation result.** Because the evaluation is a simple consensus, there is *one* result for each criterion in each proposal, not one from each evaluator. This is different and much simpler than Emanuelli's enhanced consensus—see *No Need for Anarchy* <https://timmit.ca/tools/lib/index.shtml#ANARCHY>. The actual documentation process for each criterion is fast and simple too. It comes down to documenting which one discrete evaluation level in the RFP matches the specific detail in the proposal that demonstrates that level... and that detail is there because the bidders knew ahead of time exactly what you were looking for.

5. **Provide a copy of each bidder's scoresheet proactively to that bidder** at an appropriate time. This is usually when you award the contract to the successful bidder. Add a brief covering message to each bidder giving a qualitative comparison of their proposal with the winning proposal showing where they were stronger and where they were weaker.

And that's it! If any bidder wants more feedback, they're out of luck. You have given them everything you have on the evaluation of their proposal. Therefore, the bidder doesn't have to worry about annoying you with a troublesome request for a debrief. In any case, the scores you gave them should not be significantly different than the scores they calculated themselves before submitting their proposal, so your proactive feedback to them is confirmation, not surprise. That removes the motivation for any bid protest as well.

As a contracting officer, I used this process with many real procurements. I received many thank-yous from unsuccessful bidders for the useful feedback that I presented openly and up front. On only one occasion did an unsuccessful bidder ask for a formal debrief. That bidder was a large company and they had their senior management attend. Line by line, I went through the scoresheet and qualitative comparison that I had already provided: nothing else or nothing new because there *was* nothing else or nothing new. By the end, they were not any happier with the result but they were fine with the objective approach to deciding that result. Later side information from the company indicated that not winning the contract had triggered some internal finger-pointing exercise that the in-person extra debrief served to settle conclusively.

The key to making this work is the design of objective evaluation criteria (step 1 above). Without that, the whole process fails. Creation of highly objective criteria is not an unrealistic dream. A tested six-part methodology exists and it gets easier with practice.

Extra work up front in objective criterion design has many payoffs downstream. Making the RFP debrief much simpler for everyone is just one of those payoffs. Why would you want to do it any other way?

Discuss with TimmiT how objective criteria can eliminate post-RFP unpleasantness... and more!