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# BrainTrain - Compression Planning® Tips and Stories

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## Compression Planning raises success rate for grant requests at Sinclair Community College

*"Let me tell you the secret that has led me to my goal. My strength lies solely in my tenacity."*

*Louis Pasteur (1822 - 1895)*

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Dear Friends,

Lots to share with you in this BrainTrain.

A point of reflection ... in the past 6 weeks I've interviewed five Compression Planners (CPers) for special BrainTrains. Their stories are so interesting. Many people commented on the first special edition of BrainTrain where we featured Jim Norman, from Phoenix, Arizona and how he used Compression Planning (CP) in a personal court case he was involved in. At first, I worried about the length of the article and then I realized there was so much solid content that I'd shortcut you by editing just for the sake of brevity.

The BrainTrain is for people who are "serious about helping groups move from talking things to death to getting meaningful things accomplished...quickly."

So in that light, I am telling you that many BrainTrains will be long. If we believe the content will help you, or us, become better Compression Planners, then it's staying in. Just know you will receive some incredible stories of Compression Planners this year.

This issue is about a seasoned CPer who refined the process in his work as the head of a two-person department where he uses CP on ALL major grants. Neil Herbkersman and his teammate, Karla Hibbert-Jones, raise money for Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. Having raised \$101 million for his school more than qualifies him to teach all of us a few things about CP.

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We have two upcoming CP Institutes at the Regional Learning Alliance in Cranberry Township, PA.

1) The first is the general Institute for people who want to learn how to design and lead CP sessions on critical business and organizational issues. It will be held April 18-20. For more information contact Stephanie at [stephanie@compressionplanning.com](mailto:stephanie@compressionplanning.com) or call 724-847-2120.

2) The second specialized CP Institute is for grant developers who face the continual challenges of helping people focus their ideas into coherent competitive concepts supported by the appropriate details to write winning grants.

It will be held April 24 - 26, 2007 in Cranberry Township, PA. Please share this opportunity with those you know in the grant writing field who might be interested in applying The Compression Planning Advantage to their work. For more information contact Stephanie at [stephanie@compressionplanning.com](mailto:stephanie@compressionplanning.com) or call 724-847-2120.

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The grant writers "learning lab" is the first major move in a new joint venture with the KnowledgePoint Academy of the Regional Learning Alliance of Cranberry Township, PA.

Visit <http://www.therla.com/training.html> for more information.

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Now, our featured interview...

**Background:**

Neil Herbkersman, from Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, is known as "Mr. Grant Developer" among his community college colleagues. A 21 year veteran at Sinclair, his department successfully brought over \$101 million to the college. He uses Compression Planning throughout the development and writing processes of all major grants.

**Jerry:** Neil, share what happens when you get a request – How does a request come to you? And, how does CP fit into the process that leads to a grant proposal?

**Neil:** First, we receive a request for a proposal (RFP) from an agent or sponsor, such as a federal agency. Then, I check to see if it relates to something that we do at the college.

A perfect example is the National Science Foundation Advanced Technological Education Program, and a solicitation issued in January. The proposal is due in March. The focus is on high-tech areas, to improve instruction and programs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Next, I contacted our aviation technology department chair because I knew he's interested in expanding aviation technologies. We decided to submit a proposal related to diesel aircraft engines and fuel.

Currently, most of the small airplanes flying around the country are private or small commercial ones. They use what's called Avgas, or aviation gas. The only manufacturer in the world is in Scotland. Prices range from \$5 - \$15 a gallon, depending upon where you live.

Gradually, gasoline engines are being replaced with diesel engines in Europe, and that's starting to happen in the United States. Eventually, there'll be an evolution to 100% diesel.

We need the equipment and curriculums to teach the future aviation maintenance technicians who will come to our school how to repair diesel aircraft engines. So we began to develop a proposal related to that.

**Jerry:** Now how did you go about developing that proposal?

**Neil:** First, I met with the department chair to explain the opportunity and what the sponsor needs. That was my design session. My goal for that meeting was to determine the outcomes...what we want to have at the end of the planning session. Really, what two, three or four things we want to 'flesh out' through CP.

In a second meeting, I pull together key people, and we conduct a CP session.

**Jerry:** Who were the players in that session?

**Neil:** We invited 6 participants - the department chair and faculty who teach the aviation maintenance programs plus people from companies who will hire our graduates.

**Jerry:** Describe how you prepared for that session.

**Neil:** When I met with the department chair we did an analysis - what we need to put into the proposal, and then, based upon the sponsor requirements, determine what outcomes we want to achieve in the CP session. Also, what we want the sponsor to pay for. So, we'll brainstorm what that could be.

**Jerry:** That would be your Header.

**Neil:** Yes, "What are the deliverables?" Then, we'll do the first part of the CP session using Pure Form Thinking and capture the notes on cards. In this case, it will be in the area of curriculum development and obtaining equipment.

We'll benchmark best practices. I think in the U.S. there's only one pro-

gram in diesel engine mechanics in aviation, yet it's quite prevalent in Europe.

Those are the kind of things that I would expect to come out of deliverables. There'd be a whole range of ideas and we'll take a break and re-group to categorize using one of the methods of focusing like dots, and grouping similar ideas.

**Jerry:** Let's say I'm a faculty member - what do I see on the storyboard when I walk into your office?

**Neil:** Oh, we've got blue storyboards sitting in the office and the standard, McNellis design posted on them.

There'll be blue, pink, yellow & green cards. The Background and Purpose of the Session, and Overall Project Purpose will all be on a storyboard.

**Jerry:** What do you see as the Overall Project Purpose in the Avgas situation?

**Neil:** In this case, it would be "To develop a successful proposal to the National Science Foundation."

**Jerry:** At that point, do you know how much money you'll ask for?

**Neil:** The solicitation states the maximum amount we can apply for, along with the due date, the types of things we can do; plus the overall odds of success.

**Jerry:** Oh, they tell you that in the grant RFP?

**Neil:** Sometimes...the odds are pretty darn small, under five percent. Occasionally the agency will provide information stating, "Last year, the funding odds for this solicitation were 15-20% percent."

**Jerry:** What do you think the average odds are for a proposal to receive funding?

**Neil:** The odds for success are bleak. A typical scenario is that someone receives a program solicitation and it sits on their desk for a month.

Then, three weeks before the due date, they get into frenzy and work 70 hours a week trying to pull something together.

At Sinclair, we take a more measured approach and we start with early planning. That's why CP gives us a competitive edge. We carefully plan everything from beginning to end, and move along more quickly than those who operate in the 'frenzy mode'.

We'll start in January for an April or a May submission date and work me-

thodically, using CP. And those two strategies give us a competitive edge, which puts our odds for funding up into the 75 - 80 percent range, when the traditional is 15-25%.

**Jerry:** Wow! You give credit to CP, but that credit belongs to you and Karla (Karla Hibbert-Jones is Neil's assistant director).

**Neil:** The early start combined with planning through CP gives us the 'edge'. I've got to be a little arrogant here. I work at the finest community college in America, and we have vast resources that other community colleges don't have. Our faculty and staff are committed and passionate. Our formula for success is a combination of a grants office that understands the process, forces early timelines, and uses CP.

**Jerry:** Let's go back to your example. How long are the planning sessions and how many do you run?

**Neil:** We try to keep them short because faculty and staff don't have time to commit to a half day or all day retreat.

So, one and a half to two hours, with 5-8 people at most, because if the group is too large, it becomes difficult to coordinate.

Depending upon the complexity of the project, it could range from several CP sessions up to 10 -15 sessions. Using this Avgas example, we might run 2-4 sessions. For a seven-figure proposal we'll pull together multiple partners with several community colleges and that requires more planning sessions.

So, it's directly related to the complexity and the dollar amount.

**Jerry:** The maximum you've ever done?

**Neil:** The maximum was in 1994, when we applied for \$5M to become the National Center of Manufacturing, through the National Science Foundation. We had three teams, with eight people on each team. We held four CP sessions per week for over a month.

**Jerry:** And you were going after five million dollars?

**Neil:** Yes and no one at the college had ever done anything like that, so we were trying to be very methodical. One team met and focused on the curriculum aspects of advanced manufacturing. Another group worked on faculty development, another related to advanced manufacturing.

Then, a budget team looked at the results of the other sessions and what resources we needed to pull it off. It was extensive planning.

We received the five million dollars. We're now pushing nine million dollars on that project. It actually developed into a program and there's no

end in sight. We've had multiple funders, grants, and sponsors from the National Science Foundation.

And we've received many grants from the State of Ohio, Department of Education, which expanded into pre-college initiatives, working with dozens upon dozens of high schools across the state. It's blossomed significantly, but it all began with CP sessions in a conference room right here on campus.

We've impacted a significant number of high schools across Ohio as well as many community colleges across the United States.

**Jerry:** What do you mean by that? What's the impact?

**Neil:** I mean our curriculum is used in high schools across Ohio.

**Jerry:** That you developed, as a result of that grant?

**Neil:** Yes, some of it we developed, and some we leveraged from partners that we collaborate with, such as the Ford Motor Company. Once you have success in one area, others are interested in working with you. Now we have national collaborators.

**Jerry:** Sinclair and its grant office are extremely well known among community colleges. How would you describe yourself in the grants business?

**Neil:** I don't know how to answer that one, Jerry. First, I approach it from the point of view of a scientist, which is what I am, so I methodically break it down into small nuggets and then attack each nugget. And by taking a very disciplined approach to it, and breaking it down into small units and attacking them, you can have a tremendous amount of success.

**Jerry:** That's why I think the people who are best at CP tend to be those who have very logical minds, yet know how to break loose and explore in "pure form thinking". Does that make sense?

**Neil:** Oh, absolutely. I think scientists have to think creatively, but then, follow an orderly process to make sure that creativity is tested and executed properly, and causes no harm to people, and does the good that you want.

But, there is absolutely a creative part to it, which must be expressed.

Then it must be managed through a systematic process. That's why CP really appeals to me. It offers both aspects.

**Jerry:** You started as a technical writer.

**Neil:** Right. I started out in graduate school at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. And in 1967, in one of my classes, we had to write a grant

proposal, so I've been working on proposals since then. First, as a project director for federal grants at Miami University; then, in the private sector as a technical writer; and, then for my own company. We essentially wrote proposals to companies and then did the work for them. I've been at Sinclair for nearly 21 years, helping faculty and staff get funding for their projects.

**Jerry:** What do you find are the toughest parts of doing CP?

**Neil:** Spinning is the hardest for me – trying to get those raw thoughts honed down. What we end up with is a lot of raw thoughts that may take one more CP session to perfect. If I were more skilled at the spinning part, maybe it would cut the planning time down even more.

That's a weakness that I see in what I do, but I think I've overcome that weakness fairly well.

**Jerry:** How has CP grown in your organization?

**Neil:** Our faculty and staff have embraced CP completely. They expect that when they come into our office, we will have the storyboards out and we will be doing CP.

**Jerry:** It's just amazing. People who are brand new at CP frequently go through this – wondering, "what will other people think of me?"

**Neil:** They will find it's delightfully different and delightfully odd and absolutely productive. That's one of the reasons I like CP.

**Jerry:** What advice do you have for others?

**Neil:** Just do it. The standard business meeting typically is ineffective and does not produce sufficient results. I cannot stand sitting through those meetings when I'm not facilitating. We'll discuss something until the cows come home and never reach a conclusion or a point, whereas, in a CP session, you can come to that point probably within 20 minutes and have it all honed and resolved, creating an action plan and a communication plan.

That's why we've adopted CP as our mode of operations. We have storyboards where we track all our projects with due dates. Then we have two storyboards set up all the time for our CP sessions. It's just the way we do business.

**Jerry:** I know you've told this many times, but please share the abbreviated version of your first exposure to CP.

**Neil:** The first exposure was in 1990. I was invited to attend a meeting at the Ohio Board of Regents in Columbus.

A group of community colleges were joining to plan a \$3.5M dollar grant

application.

We were going to plan this whole thing in three sessions, each running for 3 ½ hours. I thought that was the biggest joke I ever heard in my life.

When I left for Columbus, I told my wife that I wouldn't be home until late that night. But, I promised that at 10 pm, I would leave the meeting no matter what because I knew I wouldn't be able to stand it anymore.

So, I arrived and there's a woman from the Ohio Board of Regents who had these blue boards, push pins, and multi-colored cards. She led us through a CP session and we determined the goals and objectives, the deliverables. We carved up Ohio's 88 counties into 10 service delivery areas, decided who would be the principle agent, who would be the evaluator and who would write the proposal. Then we all left at about 3:30 pm! That all took place in about 2½ hours and we won the grant.

I had never seen anything like that in my life, nor had I ever participated in a more productive meeting.

And I said, "I've got to learn more about this!" The facilitator gave me the phone number of the McNellis Company and I called you on Monday. And my approach to my work has changed ever since.

After attending your Institute, my first CP session took six hours to plan. I was nervous and wanted to do it right.

There was a vice president and a couple of deans and directors. That started the whole thing. The next one was easier and the next one was a lot easier. And now, the 200th ones are very easy.

It's just the way I think now; it's the way we do business in our office. It absolutely revolutionized the way we do business here in Sinclair's grants office.

We're competing with what a federal or state sponsor puts out as a request or proposal. The criteria for success are outlined by the sponsor. We don't think about, 'oh, man, we're competing with Ivy State Community College in Indiana or Valencia Community College'. That doesn't even enter our minds.

We try to respond as effectively as possible to the criteria, and that produces success. We compete against criteria.

**Jerry:** How often does someone on your campus have an idea and come to you looking for money?

**Neil:** That occurs quite often. But, it is a very difficult thing to do. It's detective work. You hunt for a sponsor with money who's willing to give it up.

**Jerry:** I imagine many of those requests are often fairly undefined?

**Neil:** Absolutely. Karla and I use the term "maturity". Some people come with very mature concepts. And some come with very immature concepts or cloudlike thoughts.

Our job is to take that cloudlike thought and convert it into a fundable project with goals, objectives, activities, timelines, and management structure. That's what gets funded. Cloud-like ideas don't. We spend a lot of time with people who have fuzzy thoughts and help convert them into a project.

**Jerry:** Do you use CP on those?

**Neil:** Absolutely. That's the mechanism we use to get the fuzzy thoughts out of people. We capture those thoughts and then later, rank order, group them, whatever.

If dreams are fuzzy, they have to be turned into a project and then written into a proposal to be funded.

We have a mission statement for our office, and our office is just two people, Karla and me. Our mission statement says, "We help Sinclair faculty and staff turn dreams into projects and fundable proposals."

**Jerry:** Thanks Neil. I am proud of our friendship.

**You can contact Neil at ...**

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When we initiated the Grant Writing Compression Planning Institute, I called and invited Neil and Karla to join us and share their insights and experiences as part of the presentation team. He looked at his calendar and told me they had four major grants due that week.

In a short time, he called back and said they adjusted their schedule and would be there to help.

It will be an extreme privilege and joy to work alongside Karla and Neil for three days.

Best wishes!

Jerry

P.S. Rich Grehalva, MEDSEEK Vice President of Strategic Services will be the featured Compression Planner, in the next issue of the BrainTrain.

Rich's interview will focus on strategic planning. One idea I learned from him, which is in the interview, made our conversation very worthwhile! MEDSEEK, of Solvang California, is a leading provider of enterprise e-health solutions, with 500-plus hospital clients around the country. Rich heads its Strategic Services practice. In this role, he assists hospitals in the development of effective strategies for utilizing information portals and web-based clinical data access to improve communications and information exchange.

I am reading his newly released Unleashing the Power of Consultative Selling...Selling the way your customer wants to buy...Not the way you want to sell!

<http://www.richgrehalva.com>

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**Free Subscription!**

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If you are not presently a subscriber to Jerry McNellis's insightful, practical experience based e-letter, The BrainTrain, written specifically for leaders who are serious about getting groups to move from talking to action. Sign up for free by visiting [CompressionPlanning.com](http://CompressionPlanning.com).

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**Have a Question for Jerry McNellis?**

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Want to know more about the many uses of Compression Planning? Have a perplexing business problem? Simply e-mail Jerry at [jerry@compressionplanning.com](mailto:jerry@compressionplanning.com)

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**Need a Speaker for a Special Event?**

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To inquire about Jerry McNellis speaking to your group, drop a line to Dianne Miller at [dianne@compressionplanning.com](mailto:dianne@compressionplanning.com)

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Please pass this issue to your friends and associates! Just keep the entire issue intact and unaltered.

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For editorial comments, inquiries and questions:

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