



# TUTORIAL #5

## Talking with Topic Managers

### OVERVIEW

Small companies that are successful in winning SBIR and STTR awards tend to have open lines of communication between themselves and representatives of the awarding agencies. One agency representative with whom communication is important is the **topic manager (TM)**. Within the Department of Energy (DOE), different titles are used for this person including **topic author (TA)** or **program manager (PM)**. Basically, you can think of the TM as the individual who, in all likelihood, has written the topic and with whom you, the small business applicant, can have a conversation if you have questions regarding the topic itself.

### REASONS TO TALK WITH THE TM

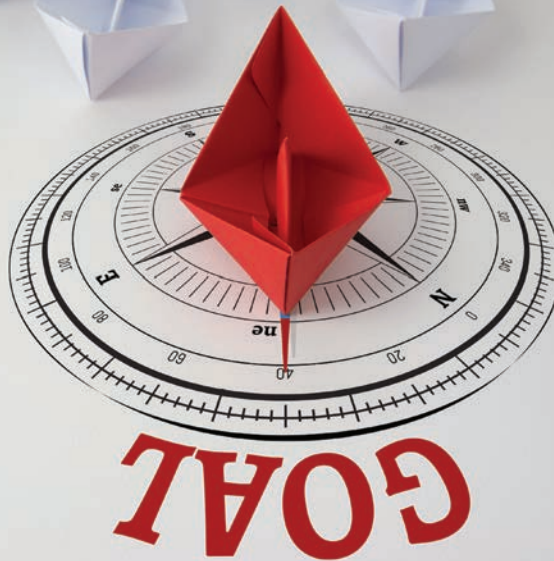
The primary reason to speak with the TM is to glean additional insights regarding the topic. Agencies are often constrained in how much detail they can put into the solicitation/funding opportunity announcement (FOA). Therefore, some topics are broad and may leave lingering questions in the potential applicants' mind. Another reason that a topic may be broad is because the agency may want a diversity of responses — so a conversation will be very helpful in gaining the needed clarity.

Another reason to have a conversation is to help you make a decision which topic to respond to when it appears that there are multiple topics that seem appropriate. The TM often understands the true intent or priorities of one topic versus another and may be able to share that information with you, as well as offer some advice on common mistakes that applicants make.

Communication is a two-way street. This initial call also provides you with the opportunity to introduce yourself and your company to the TM. Decisions about you and your proposal will not be made during this conversation, but a favorable interaction can help “break the ice” that otherwise might exist between you as a newcomer, to the SBIR/STTR program or to this agency, and the TM.



**The goal of the phone conversation is to understand what the agency wants and doesn't want.**



**Call the TM to:**

- » **Glean additional information about the topic**
- » **Determine which topic is appropriate to respond to**
- » **Help 'break the ice' and provide and opportunity to introduce yourself**

**DOE-HOSTED WEBINARS ON SBIR/STTR TOPICS**

Many newcomers to the SBIR/STTR processes are reluctant to call a TM, as they are uncertain what they can and cannot ask. This is one of the reasons that DOE began to host webinars on all of their topics. It is recommended that you attend the webinars and ask questions or listen to recordings of the webinars at any time. Recordings of the webinars can be found on the DOE FOA site. If, after listening to the webinars, you have any lingering questions, it is recommended that you call the TM.

**CONVERSATION GOALS**

In DOE's topics, the agency has been fairly specific about what it is looking for, so your questions should be focused on gaining a better understanding of the agency's need and the "fit" between their needs and your thoughts regarding a solution. Your goal for the phone conversation is to end the call with a clear understanding of what the agency wants and equally important, what the TM doesn't want and/or is not interested in. In this way, you can assess whether your innovation will satisfy DOE's need. The TM can be helpful in providing insights and information that will allow you to make the determination of whether or not you can deliver what the agency truly wants. Paraphrasing one specific-topic agency representative: ***"give us what we asked for, not what you think we need."***

**HOW TO SET UP A PHONE CALL**

You are encouraged to set up a conversation with the TM via an introductory email. Indicate you are interested in submitting a proposal on the topic for which the TM is responsible, but that you have some questions. Ask if they would be willing to speak with you for a brief period of time, preferably by phone, at their convenience, in the next few days. Be specific about that "brief" time period — we suggest asking them for 10 to 15 minutes, as this indicates you respect their time and recognize they have other responsibilities. It is preferable to ask your questions via the phone, as it often leads to a richer dialog and makes it easier to ask clarifying questions — you may also benefit from the way in which your questions are answered — but realize the TM may require or prefer to correspond via email.

**PREPARING FOR THE PHONE CALL**

Develop your list of questions in advance of the TM conversation so you won't leave out anything of importance. Try to keep your questions brief and to the point, so more of those precious 10 to 15 minutes are left for the TM to provide answers. **You learn when the TM speaks, not when you do.** You may want to briefly explain what you are planning to propose and seek the TM's concurrence that it fits the topic. However, refrain from doing this until you've asked enough questions to know whether your innovation is generally consistent with what they are looking for or not.



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not when you do. Be prepared with  
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so anything of importance is not  
left out.**



### **What Questions Should Be Asked?**

Be sure you don't ask questions that are readily answered by the agency's solicitation/FOA, or information on its website. To do so tells the TM that you haven't done your homework, and the TM can be disappointed that you are taking his/her time with such questions. So be sure to review the background information thoroughly before you have your conversation with the TM. Even if your communication with the TM covers only 10 to 15 minutes, you will be surprised how much you can learn during this brief time. Again, how much you learn will depend on being disciplined to ask brief questions and then pause to allow the TM to respond.

### **When To Make The Phone Call**

Some agencies have limitations on when you can speak with TAs about SBIR/STTR topics. In fact, some agencies don't allow TM conversations once the solicitation is released and proposals are invited. The DOE allows these conversations to occur at any time. You should have the TM conversation as soon as possible after the topics have been announced, for two reasons:

- » First, you want to know as soon as possible whether a particular topic represents an opportunity for you, so you have as much time as possible to prepare the proposal.
- » Second, DOE requires that you submit a Letter of Intent (LOI) approximately six weeks before the Phase I SBIR/STTR proposal is due and three weeks after the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) is released. That LOI should clearly indicate the relevance of your proposal to a specific DOE topic/subtopic.

### **CALLING OTHER ENTITIES**

Finally, realize the TM is only one of the Federal government parties with whom you may want to correspond during your Phase I SBIR/STTR proposal submission process. With the DOE, for example, you may want to contact the Grants.gov Help Desk, the SBIR/STTR Help Desk, or the DOE SBIR program office.

### **IF THE TM IS UNAVAILABLE**

Now, sometimes a TM may not be available for a conversation. In this case, it is highly recommended that you listen to the webinars that have been recorded by the TMs in which they have highlighted their research interests and that you carefully read all documents referenced in the relevant topic description. The topic webinars are available from the links on the DOE FOA page and are listed right underneath the topics document.