

# INSIDER REPORT 2016

---

**DEBRIEFINGS AND  
BID PROTESTS**

## Table of Contents

Introduction/Welcome	3
The Value of Contract Debriefings	4
The Power and Peril of Bid Protests	5
Alternatives to Bid Protests	7
The Importance of Internal Processes	8
The Path Forward	9
Conclusions	10
Appendix: Respondent Profile	11

## INTRODUCTION

Getting a debriefing after losing a competition is part and parcel of government contracting. A company bids on a contract and loses, and the next step is sitting down with the agency and hearing the particulars about why the bid fell short.

The company then takes that information, gathers lessons learned and identifies any changes it needs to make on future bids. It is a way of hearing concrete feedback from your customer on why you fell short and how you can improve.

In a perfect world, that's how the debriefing process is supposed to work, but in our latest Insider Report, we found that the reality of debriefings falls woefully short of the ideal.

In our research, we surveyed government contractors and asked them a variety of questions about the quality of debriefings, what information they find most valuable, and the alternatives open to them when debriefings are unsatisfying.

As you'll see in more detail in the report, government contractors are looking for something very simple from a debriefing - why they lost.

But very often, contractors do not get the answer to that straightforward question.

Only two respondents out of 155 rated the quality of debriefings as excellent. That compares to 47 who rated it poor.

But our report isn't just about criticizing the poor quality of agency debriefings. We'll also explore the techniques companies use to get information about where their bids have fallen short. This includes what they gain from filing bid protests as well as other ways contractors gain insights on their losing bids.

In a market as competitive as we see today, information on how a proposal is evaluated, where it fell short and how it can be improved is critical.

We hope with this report that we shine a light on what has been a growing challenge in the industry and share some of the practices contractors have turned to as they try to overcome the poor quality of the agency debriefings.

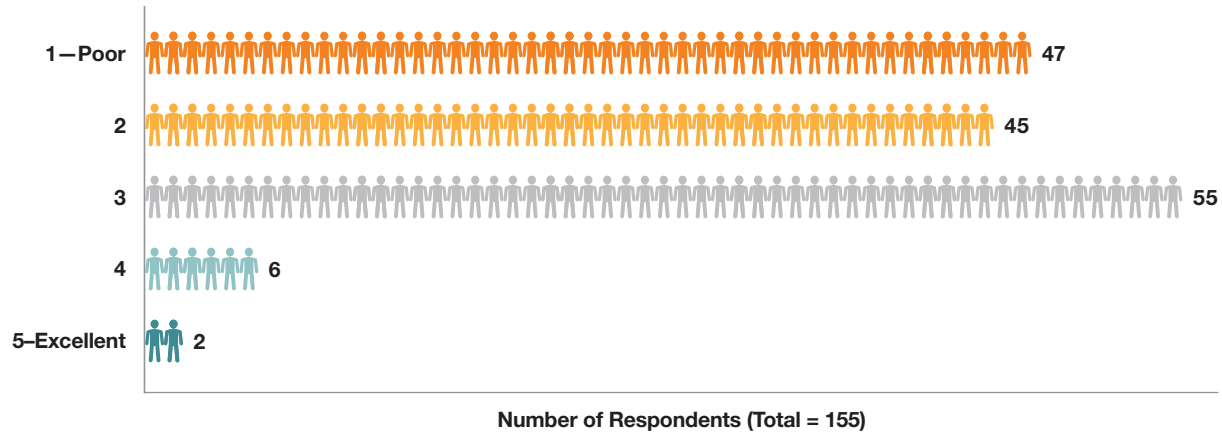
As always, we look forward to your feedback. Email us at [WTInsider@WashingtonTechnology.com](mailto:WTInsider@WashingtonTechnology.com).



Nick Wakeman, Editor-in-Chief

# The Value of Contract Debriefings

How would you rate the quality of the debriefings you receive after losing a competition?



On a scale of one to five, with one being poor and five being excellent, it is plain to see that contractors are not satisfied with the quality of the debriefings they are receiving.

We asked our respondents for examples of critical information they are looking for, and the response can be boiled down to a simple question of “Why did we lose?”

But behind the simple answer to the question of “why” are very specific needs and questions. Here is a sampling of what our respondents said they are looking for:



- Rationale for selection of the winner
- Winning price
- Winner’s non-price scores
- How was technical acceptability determined
- Key personnel strengths and weaknesses

- Comparison to winner for each rating area
- Price acceptability from a reasonableness perspective
- What were you looking for?
- What were our technical deficiencies?
- What factors were we downgraded on?
- Lower ratings explained
- How can we work with you on other business going forward?
- Where did we go wrong in our reading of the RFP and your needs?

While there were many out of the 150-plus comments who wanted to know pricing considerations, our respondents are mostly looking for information on the quality of their proposals, technical evaluations and a better understanding of the needs of the customer.

# The Power and Peril of Bid Protests

Have you ever filed a bid protest in order to learn more about your losing bid?

		Count
Yes	 52.9%	82
No	 47.1%	73

Often companies turn to bid protests to force the hand of agencies to reveal more details about their evaluation and award decisions. More than half of our respondents said they have filed bid protests just to gain more of this intelligence.

As a follow-up to that question, we asked our respondents who had filed a bid protest what they learned. We found that there are no guarantees that a bid protest will deliver the desired results.

On the negative side, many commented that agencies do not like bid protests. A few even said that agencies will treat protesting companies unfairly on future competitions. Others complained about the cost and about how the Government Accountability Office too often sides with the agency.

One respondent wrote that protests are expensive, and the government tends to drag their feet during the process. "It takes a village to extract useful information with a lot of back and forth with the attorneys which ultimately drives the cost up even further. The agencies tend to get very defensive and sometimes, there is a backlash downstream of the process."

"The information provided was so generic and nonspecific that it provided no learning or how to improve our methods," wrote another.

But respondents reported real value is still gleaned through bid protests:

- Bid protests compel the agency to either re-evaluate the award or provide more critical feedback on deficient areas.



- In some cases, we had the award overturned and bidding reopened. In other cases, we learned a little more about our perceived weaknesses.
- Sometimes we learn that the awardee had a better proposal. Other times, we have been able to pick apart a poor decision process.
- Although often filtered through counsel because of redacted filings and protective orders, the government is forced to share the details of their evaluation process.

Other commenters reported a more mixed bag:

- Sometimes the customer will give valuable information on the true strengths and weaknesses of the proposal. Sometimes we learn we were nothing but proposal fodder so that the agency could get three bids.
- Sometimes the government can be non-informative. At other times, the government may reveal whether or not backup exists for its decision.
- We learned additional data points but never enough to be certain about what truly went on in the evaluation.




While the value of what is gleaned from bid protests varied, respondents are still very supportive of going that route, despite any negatives. An overwhelming majority said they would file a bid protest again.

### Would you file a bid protest again?

		Count
Yes	 86.1%	68
No	 13.9%	11

While many said they would file a protest again, respondents to our survey overwhelmingly acknowledged the risk of bid protests.

### Do you believe bid protests have or could have a long term impact on your relationship with your customers?

		Count
Negative impact	 72.4%	68
Positive impact	 3.9%	6
No impact	 23.7%	36

## Alternatives to Bid Protests

Do you have a formal process for taking the information learned from a debriefing and/or bid protest and applying it to future proposals?

		Count
Yes	 73.7%	112
No	 26.3%	40

While more than half of our respondents said they have used bid protests as a tool to gain more information on their unsuccessful proposals, a large number—47.1 percent—said they had not filed a bid protest.

Instead, they used other means to try to gain more insights into why an agency rejected their proposal.

In the answer to this question, many of the respondents emphasized customer relationships as a key to gaining the needed insights.

“We leverage relationships we have with the government and competitors to get other insights that may be relevant,” one respondent told us.

“Networking” was a common single-word response.

Others described meeting informally with members of the selection team to gain more insights.

Being able to have honest conversations with the customer and even an open dialogue with competitors is important. Several described how they try to get feedback from other losing bidders.

Respondents describe a process that is very much like solving a puzzle by pulling information from a variety of sources including government program managers, other customers and other contractors.

“We learn through the grapevine in discussions with other bidders and the rumor mill regarding the winner’s proposal,” wrote one respondent.

Some also turn to filing Freedom of Information Act requests to access reports and other documents involving the procurement.

One respondent described how he tries to establish a relationship with the contracting officer’s representative (COR) at the debriefing. Over time, a relationship with the COR can improve the quality of future debriefings and can lead to other opportunities.

But short of a bid protest, several respondents commented that gaining meaningful information is a challenge when the formal debriefing is of poor quality.

“We move on to the next job and don’t look back,” one wrote.

## The Importance of Internal Processes

Over 100 of our respondents described the internal processes they use for gathering information about unsuccessful proposals.

Many have processes in place to capture lessons learned and discuss the findings with the bid team and upper management. Bringing in outside consultants also is common.

“We take the debriefing document and our team's notes and compile the information to present our business development team with an after action report. This information is also used when we begin the capture process for opportunities with the same agency,” one respondent told us.

Several described using a “lessons learned” framework that is used by the capture teams as well as operations.

“We document all debriefs and review areas called out as weaknesses or deficient. We incorporate changes in future proposals and win strategies,” one respondent wrote.

“We maintain a library of all debriefs obtained. If a flaw or weakness is found in our process, we alter the process,” another wrote. “The library is used each time we start a proposal to remind the writers what the government is looking for and how we will be graded.”

Several respondents commented that they hold their internal debriefings for both wins and losses.

“We do a win/loss debrief on all award decisions. We try to do a high level analysis to see if there are things we can learn from to either repeat or not make the same mistakes twice,” one wrote.

Many companies try to go beyond just collecting the information. Once the information is gathered into a database, companies use it to inform future bids and proposals.

“We put it into our Q&A process when vetting an opportunity,” one company told us. The information is also valuable when assessing a solicitation's evaluation criteria and responding to future requirements.

“The goal is not to make the same mistakes that eliminated us from competition,” he said.




Another told us about how they take the information and create scenarios around each element of a proposal. “They become part of the proposal management plan for each opportunity,” he said.

The common thread through many of the respondents' comments is that companies need a process for gathering information from a wide variety of sources – the customer, partners, and internal personnel – and putting the information into a framework that can then be used to improve processes when developing their next bid.



# The Path Forward

## Are debriefings getting better, worse, or staying the same?

		Count
It's improving	 1.3%	2
It's worse than before	 55.0%	83
It's about the same	 43.7%	66

Only a tiny sliver of our respondents feel that debriefings are improving while well more than half feel they are getting worse.

Among those who see debriefings getting worse, there were a lot of complaints about the government's reluctance to share:

"Agencies are ducking the debriefing requirement."

"Fewer contracting officers are willing to provide substantive information. It is all very scripted and not particularly helpful."

"Some agencies are not providing debriefs or very limited information that does not prove to be helpful."

"It's always been bad. Not getting any better."

"Government is afraid they (are) going to tell you something useful."

Some of the more constructive criticism focused on a lack of experience of contracting officers and procurement officials and the large volume of contracts they are handling.

"Generally, procurements seem to have more and more respondents submitting proposals. As a result, the government cannot take the time to prepare a quality debrief," one wrote.

In what could be a Catch 22 situation, many respondents commented that the government is fearful that what they say in debriefings will result in more bid protests.

"Contracting offices are getting so worried about everything being protested that they do not want to put too much detail in a debriefing as it might serve as ammunition for a protest," one respondent told us.

But as our research has shown many contractors turn to bid protests as the only real means of getting substantive information about an unsuccessful proposal.

So which came first, the bid protest fear or the poor debriefings?

We talked with some of our respondents in a follow up to our survey, and the poor quality of debriefings shone through.

One person told us that debriefings can be a rehash of the solicitation's requirements and evaluation criteria with little information specific to their particular proposal.

One of our respondents gave us a breakdown of what a good briefing consists of:

"NASA debriefings tend to be much more informative and allow for actual listening," this person told us.

And what the agency provides is very straight forward:

- Number of bidders
- Rankings for each
- What was valuable in the proposals

It is a simple formula, but one that many agencies are struggling with, according to our research.

## Conclusion

Government contractors are struggling with the poor quality of the debriefings they receive from their customers. Too often, they walk away from an unsuccessful bid frustrated with the lack of information they are getting about why they lost.

As a result, many companies turn to a bid protest, even though they acknowledge that bid protests can strain the relationship between contractor and customer. The specter of a bid protest also seems to be inhibiting the government from sharing much information about why a company lost a competition, which only makes the problem worse.

So, two key takeaways of our report are that poor debriefings are a fact of life in today's market and bid protests are a necessary evil for companies desperate for more information on unsuccessful proposals.

And while our research clearly establishes that debriefings are lacking, we've also highlighted many of the practices companies have in place to gather lessons learned and move forward from an unsuccessful proposal.

Companies have formal and informal processes for gathering information. They populate databases with these lessons learned and use that information to improve their processes going forward.

Our findings point to a strong desire for continuous improvement by government contractors particularly in a marketplace that is as highly competitive as we are seeing today.

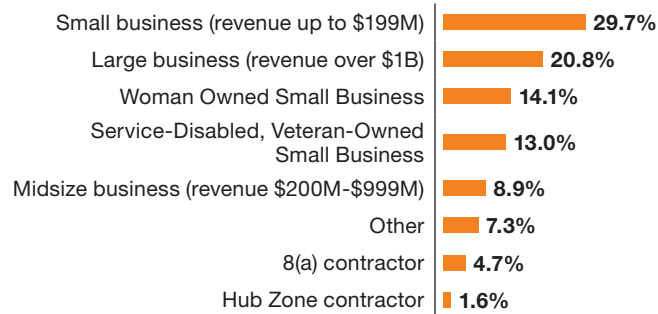
And with the poor quality of debriefings, it is paramount that companies have the processes in place to gather information from multiple sources, including internal stakeholders, partners and even competitors.

Once that information is gathered, they need to apply it and reap the benefit of lessons learned.

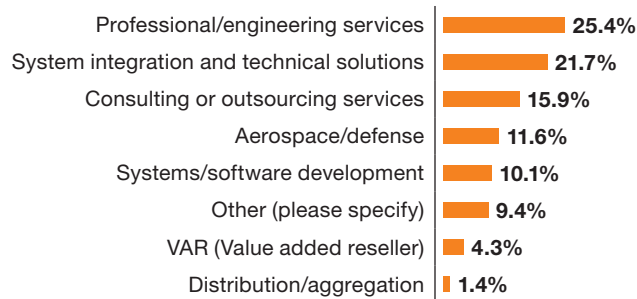
Debriefings that lack substance may challenge companies to gather the information, but it doesn't lessen the importance of learning as much as they can from their unsuccessful proposals. Their future success depends on it.

# Appendix: Respondent Profile

## Type of Company (multiple selections allowed)



## Business Services



## Business Focus (multiple selections allowed)

