



DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE AND LESS ADVERSARIAL PROJECT TEAMS THROUGH COACHING

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INFRASTRUCTURE + PROJECT TEAMS

Ask any sports fanatic what some of the defining characteristics of a champion team are and you will likely hear these - "Effective Teamwork", "Strong Leadership" and "Clear Vision". It's a story proven time and time again in the locker room, the battlefield and the boardroom - teamwork and leadership are essential enablers that can turn a group of individuals into a well-oiled 'machine' capable of reaching high performance that far surpasses their individual capabilities. But the key enablers of high performance do not just happen by chance - they have to be intentionally developed and nurtured over time.

Creating a team culture capable of supporting productive social and project environments enables high performance, innovation and efficiency. Yet, fixed-priced contracts based on traditional design-bid-build delivery can foster an adversarial mentality that is counter intuitive to these principles. Time and time again construction and infrastructure delivery companies and individuals are brought together in high-stake, high-pressure, complex environment and expected not just to perform but to succeed from the onset. Project relationships are governed by contracts designed to allocate risks between parties with provisions like performance bonds and guarantees, liquidated damages and retentions that attempt to enforce performance. What is often overlooked is that such environments often set the commercial drivers of the clients and contractors on a collision course.

The adversarial win-lose mentality perpetuated in such a contractual environment has the potential to negatively impact not only the quality of

delivery but relationships between the project team as a result of claims and disputes. As a consequence, a significant effort is often expended on detailed documentation to protect against a potential later dispute, even where parties are on relatively good terms.

Relationship based contracting approaches, such as alliancing and partnering, seek to address this by building better functional relationships and cooperation. However, these approaches are only appropriate, for high-risk, high-value projects and clients with regular high-volume project work to incentivise contractors to make relationship adjustments. The most common form of contractual relationship in the construction industry thus remains the traditional fixed price design-bid-build, which typically does not incorporate relationship building strategies for developing effective teamwork. Incorporating relationship principles into traditional fixed price design-bid-build projects through team coaching and facilitation may hold untapped potential to support high performance in construction delivery.

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AN OPPORTUNITY TO THINK DIFFERENTLY

Barwon Water's 2012 Water Supply Demand Strategy identified the need for a major water supply upgrade project aimed at improving long term water supply security and resilience in the town of Colac, a key industrial, commercial and administrative centre located in the Colac Otway Shire 150km south-west of Melbourne, Australia. Consisting of a 14km pipeline, pump station, earthen basin storage and diversion structures, the upgrade project was originally planned as a single works package to be delivered sequentially over a 24-month period commencing 2018. However, based on updated hydrology forecasts and water security assessments completed late 2015, the project delivery timeframe was accelerated. Design commenced in January 2016 with a planned project completion date of 2017. In order to achieve this accelerated delivery timeframe, the four major works packages had to be delivered concurrently. In addition to the typical challenges of constructing large infrastructure projects and project fast tracking, this strategy introduced new risks and requirements associated with managing multiple contractor interface points within a constrained work area and separate construction schedule critical paths that were potentially in conflict.

Risk planning completed in the early stages of the project highlighted the need for effective working relationships and teamwork between the project teams working on the different packages of the project to ensure smooth integration, joint problem solving and innovation. This presented the chance to think differently



and try a new approach. To mitigate risk of adversarial relationships and barriers to collaboration, Barwon Water sought the expertise of John Morrison from Frontline Coach Ltd and Deakin University researchers, Dr. Dominic Ahiaga-Dagbui and Dr Olubukola Tokede, to develop and test the effectiveness of a pilot concept called Project Leadership Program (PLP).

COACHING AND FACILITATION

The PLP consisted of a Facilitation Model based around on-site workshops and team coaching led by an external facilitator (Frontline Coach Ltd) throughout the project delivery cycle in order to support project stakeholder teams and engender strong leadership and optimum client-contractor relationships. The coaching was focused on enhancing performance within a team by attempting to remove relational obstacles and empowering the team with the resources and capabilities necessary to circumvent challenges, solve problems together and reinforce good performance to achieve optimum project outcomes. The coach's role also involved helping the team set realistic goals and targets, provide assessment and feedback, encourage and motivate the team, and even confront negative behaviour where appropriate and necessary.

Ultimately the coaching approach adopted must be shaped by a number of conditions including the frequency and duration of the coaching relationship, the purpose of the coaching, the number of teams involved in the coaching framework and whether the outcome of the coaching exercise relates to short-term or long-term goals. Typically, the

coach needs to be flexible and be able to respond to the different dynamics of the team and the project - there is no one size fits all solution.

LEARNING FROM REAL WORLD APPLICATION

Data collected from the project team supports a claim that the PLP facilitation program provided the mechanism necessary to develop team behaviours that support enhanced performance and create an environment less adversarial, and more collaborative than traditional contracting. But, how exactly does the facilitation model improve client and contractor relationships and enhance project problem solving and project outcomes? What lessons were learnt in this pilot application of team coaching? Here are seven key points:

1. SET GROUND RULES EARLY

The facilitation process begins with the establishment of project team ground rules well in advance of any works on site taking place. These ground rules are shared guidelines that define baseline acceptable behavioural models for project team members in relation to communication, cooperation and problem solving. Setting ground rules is a recognition that successful project delivery depends on managing both the technical aspects of the project as well as the often complex people and organisation dynamics.

2. PERFORM TEAM "HEALTH CHECK" FREQUENTLY

Once the project is underway, regular monthly workshops are used to check-in with team members and assess the project team culture. A crucial part of

these team "health checks" involved team members rating their own and each other's performance against the set ground rules and providing honest feedback on performance and expectation. This process can sometimes be confronting and the role of the Coach is crucial at this stage to facilitate conversations towards a focus on collaborative outcomes.

3. YOU GET OUT WHAT YOU PUT IN

Effective facilitation requires full commitment to the process by the entire project team. A key client requirement at tendering stage was that successful bidders had to commit fully to the facilitation program throughout project delivery. To demonstrate their own commitment, the client agreed to cover the contractor's costs and time allocated to the program.

4. RELATIONSHIP CONTRACT

In addition to the formal fixed price contract implemented on each works package, the facilitation process results in the formation of a second social "contract" between the client and contractor: this relational contract between the project parties engenders team members with tools and options not available under the formal contract to address critical behavioural issues that can halt, threaten or derail the successful delivery of the project.

5. ENCOURAGE OPEN AND HONEST COMMUNICATION

Facilitation provides an environment for honest communication of project issues necessary for developing a better understanding of each company's objectives, thereby reducing some of the usual barriers to information sharing and interactions between



INFRASTRUCTURE - PROJECT TEAMS

project teams. Teams are empowered to express concerns in relation to emergent problems and progress which improves transparency and helps foster critical trust between team members. In the words of one contractor's project manager "By having your client's trust there is always a subtle positive shift in relationships on site and in the office. This shift has a significant impact on project delivery and the site dynamics"

6. PURSUE BEST FOR PROJECT (BFP) IDEALS

A Best for project (BfP) approach is one where parties commit to behaviours and decision making that consistently prioritises the objectives and outcomes of the project, the main values of which consist:

- 'we win together' or 'we lose together';
- 'we work through problems not by apportioning blame but by looking for solutions together'; and
- 'your problem is my problem.'

BfP principals are uncommon, if not completely absent, from traditional delivery contracts. They enable project teams to remain creative and constructively engaged as opposed to acting from a self-preservative or defensive position which inhibits innovation and value adding.

7. WALK THE TALK (OLD HABITS DIE HARD)

Fostering a BfP culture necessitates a high level of trust, accountability and teamwork. Clients must exemplify behaviours for the rest of the team to follow as trust begets trust and collaboration begets collaboration. Where the project team perceives that

the client, or their consultants, are aggressive or belligerent, they would usually revert to traditional adversarial behaviours as well. This is perhaps even more important when things go wrong. Blame and criticism almost inevitably escalate conflict and disagreement with defensive positions becoming even more entrenched. The role of the coach is important in helping the team navigate these tensions, using requisite imagination to anticipate and proactively attenuate possible reversionary tendencies as they arise.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The performance of a project team largely depends on how well they work together to navigate uncertainties and respond to risks within the dynamic site environment. However, construction delivery is often adversarial as the different parties typically have competing commercial drivers. Clients typically rely on the use of arm's length contractual approaches to ensure compliance and performance and curb the traits of opportunism in transactional frameworks. Coaching through project facilitation presents an opportunity to help the team develop key enablers of high performance such as teamwork, collaboration and trust.

Project facilitation requires effort and commitment from all team members, especially the client. Thus, it may be most suited to clients with a continuous volume of work and regularity of relationship with the same partners. Such clients may be able to develop structures necessary

to ensure project delivery partners are moved towards increased collaboration and best-for-project ideals where overall benefits outweigh the challenges inherent in such an approach. In some regards, facilitation may best be viewed by clients as a potential soft insurance policy on key projects where the relationship between project team members presents a potential risk to the successful delivery of the project and realisation of the project benefits.

That said, it is also necessary to realise that there will always exist cases where teams or companies just do not work well together and no amount of 'team building' or 'culture creation' would be useful – in these cases, the team may be better served by the coach focusing their energies on helping members simply deliver their contractual obligations in the contract.

WHAT NEXT?

Following a successful initial trial and favourable project outcomes, Barwon Water has moved to implement the PLP Facilitation program on three other critical major projects. Two of these projects are currently under construction, whilst the third was completed in late 2018 with similar successful outcomes as observed on the case reported in this article. In addition to the targeted implementation of facilitation, Barwon Water is currently piloting a small project facilitation process across two asset renewal programs as well as integrating aspects of the PLP facilitation model concept into their project delivery framework for delivery of internal cross functional business projects.