Partnering: What it is and what it isn’t

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Partnering is a concept originating with the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1980's. The ultimate goals of partnering are to resolve disputes before they give rise to costly and disruptive claim situations, and to facilitate construction of a profitable, timely and high quality project. It is supposed to be a win/win management approach.

Partnering has proven to be an effective tool for construction project management. Contract appeals with the Corps have been drastically reduced in the 1990's.

Partnering is not an easily defined concept. It is a state of mind more than anything else. It can build an atmosphere of cooperation and communication, respect and trust. Partnering is a throwback to the days of the handshake, an attempt to correct what has gone wrong with the contractor/owner relationship over the past thirty to forty years.

Partnering fosters a "team approach" to project management and seeks to eliminate adversarial posturing. Partnering provides the A/E with a construction perspective and the contractor with a design perspective. Creative and mutually beneficial solutions are thus facilitated.

The partnering process must be initiated before ground is broken. A pre-construction partnering meeting should be attended by key project personnel of all major players - the general contractor, its major subcontractors, the owner, its management consultants, and the design team. Top management participation and support is also essential. Sometimes an experienced partnering facilitator will be invited to steer the first meeting, and to help resolve the toughest construction issues arising while the project is being built.

The purposes of the initial partnering meeting include opening structured communication lines; developing a spirit of trust among all players; presenting a joint statement of mutually beneficial goals; identifying and resolving foreseeable project barriers or conflicts; streamlining administrative processes for payment, shop drawing approval, RFI responses, etc., and developing a dispute prevention format for prompt identification of construction/design/quality problems and for prompt resolution of such problems at the lowest possible level. Most importantly, all team players must commit their full cooperation to the partnering process. This commitment is typically evidenced by a written mission statement signed by all attendees. This mission statement should be conspicuously posted above every desk.
Built-in monthly (or even weekly) "check points" are highly recommended, as is the regular review, updating and distribution of a project "action item list." A major follow-up meeting at the fifty percent completion point is important to assess, critique and fine tune the partnering process’ effectiveness and to re-affirm commitments to its continued effectiveness. A post-construction follow-up meeting is also important for project closure and to confirm the success of the partnering process.

Keep in mind, however, that partnering is a voluntary process. It is a supplement to, and not a substitute for, good project management practices. Partnering does NOT change contract obligations. As such, contractors must preserve their rights by complying with contractual claim notice provisions. At the risk of appearing adversarial and of upsetting the spirit of trust, changes and delays must be documented to owners and subcontractors in a timely fashion.

For more information on the subject of partnering, visit the Army Corps of Engineers' web site.