



PUBLIC WORKS CONSTRUCTION MANAGERS VS (Uh...partnering with) GENERAL CONTRACTORS

Or, can't we all just get along...In today's bountiful public works building environment, one facet of our business is rapidly growing - the partnering session. Some experienced constructors say these sessions are for the better, others decree that they are costly nuisances. Many partnering firms nationwide are capitalizing on the increasing demands of public agencies to, not only complete their projects on time and within budget, but to assure that the whole project team, including CM's and GC's, work in a positive, mutually supportive environment throughout the course of construction. There are numerous reasons for this, including one recent phenomenon, that the pool of successful general contractors who can responsibly qualify for many of the medium to larger public projects has dwindled recently, encouraging agencies to implement partnering sessions with general contractors, not only for their current projects, but because future work with the same contractor is more likely to occur in today's climate. The belief is that a happy contractor will be more likely to bid on the agencies future projects, thus, more contractors, more competitive bids.

As you know, many construction management firms, working in the public works arena, are subject to competitive bidding guidelines similar to their general contractor brethren. When the GC construction bid is open, the CM representatives are usually right there in the room to observe, among other things, who will be building the project that they will oversee for the next one, two, or sometimes three years.

This new relationship starts in earnest at the project kick-off meeting when all parties, including architects, engineers, inspectors, sub-contractors, as well as owner reps and CM's and GC's are sitting arm and arm assessing the good, bad and ugly in the room. Let's face it, professional or not, we're human, and the pre-judgments abound in these meetings. We conjecture who we will best relate to and who will we have the most issues with, and sometimes miraculously, everyone sticks to the agenda. Then the initial partnering session is scheduled, if it has not already taken place, and even the seasoned pros start to feel a bit uneasy. Personal truths begin to unfold after the kick-off meeting ends and everyone aligns with their own staff to discuss the other attendees, who was liked and disliked, who has the necessary knowledge and who may be most likely to cause the most problems. Only after the kick-off meeting does the project truly begin, and, as in our personal lives, success is based on...

We've all been through these, sometime arduous, mostly positive full day partnering sessions. And we all know that, just like marriage counseling, its success revolves

around communication. Hey, isn't that how Dr. Phil has made his millions? Aren't we just supposed to face conflict resolution head-on and complete the project unscathed and claims free? Why the love fest? Because the truth is, these sessions seem to work. They are designed to build cooperative relationships, even with the sometime "overzealous inspector" or architect who believes that they have created the construction industry's first 100% complete and correct set of drawings and specifications.

Even with a degree in psychology, be it thirty years ago, I gravitate to the old fashion approach to this whole "how to make my professional relationships prosper thing". Keep the partnering sessions, but supplement them with an occasional lunch, dinner, basketball game, or golf outing, etc., with other project team members. In public works, with all its inherent formalities or not, who doesn't like a good meal, talking to interesting, often challenging, like minded professionals? I have never left after one of these semi-social events feeling worse about any of the participants who all appear to internalize what the partnering leaders would like us to do after one of their sessions – to go to work the next day with the positive attitude of cooperation.

The truth is, CM's and GC's usually have the most in common of all the project team members, as many CM's have previously been GC's and visa-versa. Generally speaking, our two entities know more about putting an entire building together than most. Why not enjoy this construction symphony, if you will, together. After all, we all know people who previously worked for the "other guy" and now find themselves on "our side". Just as in professional sports, players switch teams and the hated become the beloved, overnight.

I would like to declare an end to the verses. No longer will the pre-conceived judgments about "who is right" hold water in this positive public works environment. Owners want and repeat the catch phrase "win-win situation" and that is precisely what all successful CM's and GC's desire.

This is one of the main reasons why our firm is not only a public works General Contractor but ALSO a member of the Construction Management Association of America.

Are there any CM sports fans, who enjoy a good surf and turf combo, still out there?

John Saliba, V.P.
FTR International Inc.
Corporate Supporter Liaison Coordinator CMAA Student Outreach Committee
jsaliba@ftrintlinc.com.