

6.8 QM improves partnering; Partnering improves QM

Our distant forebears moved slowly from trial by battle and other barbaric means of resolving conflicts and disputes, and we must move away from total reliance on the adversary contest for resolving all disputes. For some disputes, trials by the adversarial contest must, in time, go the way of ancient trial by battle and blood. Our system is too costly, too painful, too destructive, too inefficient for a truly diversified people. To rely on the adversarial process as the principal means of resolving conflicting claims is a mistake that must be corrected.

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QM & partnering by William Ronco

Construction partnering has a two-way relationship with QM: QM improves partnering, and partnering improves QM. In fact, the potential partnering has to improve QM is so strong that it is important to consider including partnering in any QM program.

What is *partnering*? Partnering has been around for nearly thirty years, but many architects and engineers still do not know what it is. Worse, many *think* they know what partnering is. They say, ‘we’ve always partnered with our clients’, but register surprise when they learn the more specific definition of partnering.

Construction partnering is a highly structured form of team-building, initiated by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Partnering workshops involving key members of the project team (architects, engineers, owners, contractors, sub-contractors, etc.) to plan and manage project coordination and communications, anticipate and address problems and conflicts before they become serious.

Originally resisted by many in the industry, partnering has come to be embraced by contractors and owners, because it offers effective conflict resolution and communications management. Many government and corporate projects require partnering in their original bid documents. Some project insurers also require partnering. The Associated General Contractors sponsors awards for partnering efforts and provides extensive, excellent materials to enable contractors to develop and participate effectively in partnering efforts.

Architects and partnering

The AIA encourages partnering and provides excellent materials on partnering for architects. Partnering potentially offers architects the same benefits for effective project management that it offers contractors and owners.

However, many of the architects we have worked with in the 100+ partnering efforts we have led have been less than enthusiastic about it.

Some have been cool to the partnering process; others have expressed outright disdain. One ‘signature’ architect explained, ‘What’s all the fuss about communications? If partnering doesn’t protect the integrity of my design concept, why should I care?’ More recently, however, we have encountered a growing number of architects who support partnering. Often, we find that architects who are interested in QM also support partnering.

How partnering addresses QM issues

Partnering workshops usually include work in four different topic areas. QM issues surface in all four areas:

- ◆ ***Taking stock:*** Workshops begin with an open, facilitated discussion of project issues, concerns, roadblocks and opportunities. Quality issues surface here as project team members discuss their concerns about how the project will get built, what threatens the success of the project, why it will be important to address key items.
- ◆ ***Building mutual understanding and trust:*** Working with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or other similar tools helps surface how different project team members are likely to approach project issues differently. These tools open up discussion about how different types are likely to define quality differently, use different standards for quality, value different aspects of quality.
- ◆ ***Goals statement or partnering charter:*** Writing and signing a detailed project goals statement or partnering charter engages the group in useful discussion to agree on major project issues including expectations for quality, fit and finish, accuracy of drawings, coordination, accessibility, budget, etc.
- ◆ ***Refining key processes and procedures:*** Participants work on refining key project processes that impact quality including RFI management, turnaround, usage, tracking; change order management, tracking, etc.; substitutions uses, preferences; priority of schedule, cost or quality issues; regular project meeting agendas; processes for anticipating and managing differences of opinion when they occur.

One factor that makes partnering effective in producing lasting results is that the workshops evenly balance focus in all four of these areas.

Quality management improves partnering

Architects who are involved with QM both perform more effectively in partnering and get more out of partnering. Partnering often involves extensive work on aspects of project management that are likely to be addressed in any QM program:

- ◆ Quality and accuracy of working drawings.
- ◆ Development of processes and procedures.
- ◆ Specifics of translating a design into a completed building.
- ◆ Clarifying expectations about quality.

- ◆ Establishing the understanding that quality and attention to detail are important.

Architects who have already begun to address such factors are likely to perform more effectively in partnering. Conversely, architects who are more ‘design-centric’, and who may have neglected QM are likely to find partnering to be a painful experience. Some would allege that it is a good thing that partnering often forces architects to address quality issues they have been neglecting. However, it is difficult for people to embrace new thinking if it is forced on them.

Partnering improves quality management

While it may be obvious that QM improves partnering, it is not necessarily so clear that partnering improves quality management. Many architects have QM programs that appear to be very effective yet they have never been involved with partnering. We believe such architects are missing out on two important benefits that partnering produces for quality management.

First, including partnering in QM helps QM to connect to the external world outside the firm: to projects, contractors, clients, engineers. This external link is important because too often, QM programs can develop a focus that is overly internal. They monitor and track drawings in the firm, study processes in the firm, involve staff in the firm. At its worst extreme, this kind of QM program can evolve into a kind of arrogance and blindness to real issues that occur on projects.

Linking QM with partnering breaks up any kind of internal focus for quality with more of a concern for life outside the doors of the organization. Moreover, other professionals and disciplines on a project are likely to have perspective and insight that provide real value for any QM program.

Second, including partnering in QM makes it more likely that QM will include processes for communications as well as for assessment and measurement. The focus of many QM programs – creating lasting processes and procedures – may be anathema to more creative, free-spirit designers who prefer less structure and consistency in general. However, processes do help produce higher levels of quality.

Partnering almost always includes developing communications processes and procedures, e.g. for handling RFIs, tracking changes, monitoring client input. Such processes are a useful supplement for any QM program because they help translate quality standards and values into everyday project practices.

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