

## **The Partnering Concept**

Partnering is a structured process designed to create an atmosphere of commitment, cooperation, and collegial problem solving among organizations and individuals that work together on a project. Partnering uses mutually developed vision statements, common goals, guiding principles, issue resolution procedures, and evaluation methods to help ensure project success. The process is normally initiated at a workshop at the beginning of the project.

At the workshop, everyone is considered equal. No participant or organization should be allowed to dominate the workshop process. All parties need to recognize that partnering is the building of the team to complete the project.

Partnering does not change the parties' contract obligations. It does facilitate the manner in which the contracting parties treat each other during the course of contract performance. It creates a climate in which the interests and expectations of the contracted parties are more readily achievable. To this end, a written charter is created during the workshop that states the parties' common interests in reducing time-consuming and costly disputes, as well as improving communications to the benefit of all parties.

All contracting parties have an economic interest in the success of the project. Just as customers are concerned with getting good value for their money, suppliers are in business to make a fair profit for the services they provide. When a supplier is squeezed for profit, the quality of the work and business relationships can suffer or be destroyed, creating hostility and expensive, protracted litigation of claims. Driving good suppliers out of business is not in anyone's best interest. The long-term goal should be to keep good contractors in business so that competitive bidding is as robust as possible in the future.

Partnering should include the ultimate user of the system. Customers need to be involved in the partnering process from start to finish. They provide valuable information about their project needs and can participate in problem-solving sessions at the workshop and follow-up meetings, and may gain a better understanding of where their dollars are going when contract modifications are required. A typical goal of the partnering team is to deliver a quality project to the customer that meets the cus-

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customer's functional needs and financial constraints. Customer satisfaction is an essential ingredient in virtually all partnering efforts.

The costs for partnering generally include one to three days of the participants' time at the start of a project to conduct the workshop, and later for any follow-up sessions. There are also the facilitator's fees for these meetings. These costs are small, however, when a project is delivered within the customer's budget, at a profit for the supplier, and ahead of schedule. The time required is small in comparison to the time saved over the course of the project. At the initial workshop, many partnering teams will identify and resolve potential problems. This can prevent weeks or months of delay later in the project. During the project, the team uses partnering procedures to work together to avoid other schedule delays and to achieve project goals.

Anyone who has a direct impact in the success of the project should be a participant and attend the initial partnering workshop to become a team member. Participation in the workshop ensures an understanding of the team's common goals and mutual vision. When an individual is not present at the workshop, partnering may have no meaning to that person.

Follow-up sessions are sometimes delayed or canceled because of the pressures of project performance and completion schedules. This prevents the partnering process from effectively working when it is most needed. It takes a strong commitment to partnering to ensure that follow-up sessions take place when everyone is otherwise busy. To avoid this problem, a schedule for the follow-up sessions should be established during the initial workshop. Dates can be set to meet all team members' schedule requirements.

Subcontractors should participate to inform the other participants of their interests and value to the project. Subcontractors will, in turn, learn and appreciate what is important to the other project participants. Subcontractor participation in the workshop can help prevent disputes during performance.

Two essential elements of a successful partnering relationship are trust and communication. If any team member feels that other team members are taking advantage of her, trust will be adversely affected. Team members should be encouraged to communicate this feeling plainly and promptly to the others when the issue arises.