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Partnering in construction: a critical review of issues, problems and dilemmas

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Partnering in construction has been presented as a potentially important way of improving construction project performance through the direct benefits it can bring to both clients and contractors. However, there is still considerable debate about the nature and merits of a partnering approach. This paper attempts to contribute towards this debate by exploring the presumed link between partnering and cultural change within the industry, at both organizational and interorganizational levels of analysis. To do so, it draws upon theory and research from the social sciences (especially organizational theory) to explore some of the issues, problems and dilemmas which emerge when full and proper account is taken of the complexities of organizations, as well as some of the subtleties and intricacies of the concept of organizational culture. The paper concludes that it is only by fully appreciating the effects of such complexity that a more realistic and practical approach to the development and implementation of partnering will emerge.

Keywords: partnering, alliancing, culture

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the use of *partnering* in construction (CII, 1989, 1991; NEDO, 1991; CRINE, 1994; Latham, 1994; ACTIVE, 1996). During the 1990s, partnering and related forms of collaboration have been seen as a way of dealing with the fragmentation and lack of integration that have bedevilled attempts to improve project performance over the years (e.g. Banwell, 1964; Higgin and Jessop, 1965; NEDO, 1988). (As will be seen, not only do definitions of partnering vary widely, but also forms such as 'alliancing' are referred to. For ease of presentation, 'partnering' is used in this paper to refer generically to all such collaborative approaches.) Research has suggested that performance, in terms of cost, time, quality, buildability, fitness-for-purpose and a whole range of other criteria, can be dramatically improved if participants adopt more collaborative ways of working (e.g. Bennett and Jayes, 1995, 1998; Bennett *et al.*, 1996). Consequently, a good deal of attention has been directed towards examining the conditions which encourage or inhibit collaboration between clients and their contractors (e.g. Bennett and Jayes, 1995, 1998; Barlow and Cohen, 1996; Bennett *et al.*, 1996; Green and McDermott, 1996; Holti and Standing, 1996; Barlow *et al.*, 1997). At the same time, there is still considerable disagreement about precisely what form partnering can or should take, under what conditions it is likely to develop and how such ways of working can be fostered and developed (Barlow *et al.*, 1997; Thompson and Sanders, 1998).

The aim of this paper is to explore some of the key issues and debates surrounding the concept of partnering. The flavour of the paper is a critical one and its central theme is that there is still a need for more systematic and in-depth research which examines the nature, efficacy and feasibility of a partnering approach. One reason for this is that the debate has remained at a largely prescriptive level, and empirical evidence concerning partnering in practice has largely been piecemeal and anecdotal. Where evidence does exist,

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it is difficult to say just how much any observed improvements in performance are directly attributable to 'partnering' (Barlow *et al.*, 1997). Another reason, however, concerns the way in which partnering has been conceptualized and investigated. In particular, very little of the research to date has explored the social and psychological aspects of partnering as a mode of organizing. This is despite the fact that commentators place considerable emphasis upon the importance of changing attitudes, improving interpersonal relationships and transforming organizational cultures.

This paper therefore seeks to reassess partnering in a way that differs from the prevailing discourse within the industry. To do so, it draws much more directly upon social science concepts and theories used in organizational theory and research (for an overview of major perspectives in organisational theory the reader is referred to Burrell and Morgan (1979) or Morgan (1986)). In doing so, it seeks critically to examine some of the tensions and contradictions that only really emerge when the meanings and assumptions underlying the approach are held up to closer scrutiny. In particular, the paper concentrates upon the presumed role that cultural change plays in supporting partnering within the industry (Morgan, 1986, chap. 5). It also traces through some of the effects of variation in organizational and environmental context, in an attempt to identify organizational attributes and management practices which appear to support or inhibit collaborative approaches. The intention in doing so is to move towards a more practically grounded and realistic interpretation of the nature of organizational change than is commonly encountered in much of the literature.

The discussion in this paper revolves around three main sets of issues, problems and dilemmas that remain unresolved or under-explored in the literature. These are: the lack of an adequate and precise definition of partnering; the potential conflict between commercial pressures and forms of collaboration in practice; and the inherent difficulties in attempting to change organizational cultures to support collaborative approaches. Before addressing these three main concerns, however, the discussion begins with a short review of the case put forward for partnering.

The case for partnering

Although partnering as a specific concept is relatively new, the difficulties which it attempts to address have been identified for some considerable time. According to Luck (1996, p.1), 'partnering and integration strategies attempt to address a fundamental characteristic of the industry . . . that it is fragmented, as individuals from different organizations which are geographically and temporally dispersed are involved in the construction process'. Since the 1960s, a long series of government and industry reports has sought solutions to the problems associated with this fragmentation caused by the peculiar characteristics of the construction process (Harvey and Ashworth, 1993). Particular attention has focused upon improving the quality of relations between project participants and encouraging feedback and mutual adjustment between design and construction processes (e.g. Banwell, 1964; Higgin and Jessop, 1965; NEDO, 1988).

Partnering represents the latest in this series of initiatives (CII, 1989, 1991; NEDO, 1991; Latham, 1994). According to ACTIVE (1996, p.7), 'the confrontational culture which is endemic in the sector has resulted in the development of inefficient business processes, which feed through, as overheads, to total project costs'. Thus partnering is intended to reduce the adversarialism which is said to be typical in the industry and which has confounded previous attempts to encourage better integration and cooperation between contractual partners. Central to partnering, therefore, is a determination to move away from adversarialism and litigation and to resolve problems jointly and informally through more effective forms of inter-firm collaboration.

According to the CII (1991, p. iv), 'Partnering refers to long-term agreements between companies to co-operate to an unusually high degree to achieve separate yet complementary objectives'. Similarly, partnering has been defined as 'a long-term commitment between two or more organizations for the purpose of achieving specific business objectives by maximizing the effectiveness of each participant's resources' (NEDO, 1991, p. 5). Most of the attention in the literature has been directed so far at studying partnering between clients and (main) contractors, although there is an increasing recognition that the principles of collaboration may apply at other points in the supply chain (notably, in relationships between contractors and subcontractors; see e.g. Construction Productivity Network (1997)); and that they also apply to joint ventures (cf. Miles and Snow, 1978), which represent a more formal, investment-based type of collaborative relationship (Thompson and Sanders, 1998). Therefore there is a fairly wide consensus over the basic philosophy underpinning partnering: namely, that it should involve a commitment between firms to cooperate. This is based on the premise that this will allow each organization to meet its own business objectives more effectively, at the same time as achieving the objectives of the project as a whole (Bennett and Jayes, 1995, p. 2).

The incentives for engaging in partnering, plus its supposed advantages, also are fairly well established in the literature. Bennett and Jayes (1995, p. 25), for example, emphasize the potential net benefits that stem from increased productivity and reduced costs. An emphasis on cost reduction is clearly evident also in a number of construction sector reports and initiatives which all call for a reduction in costs by 30% (CRINE, 1994; Latham, 1994; ACTIVE, 1996). (CRINE (cost reduction initiative for the new era) was set up to improve performance in the offshore oil and gas sector, and ACTIVE (achieving competitiveness through innovation and value engineering) is a similar initiative established for the process plant sector.) However, as well as significant cost reductions, partnering has been attributed also with a number of other virtues that stem from shared understandings and the pursuit of common interests. First, it is claimed that project times can be reduced. In particular, the early involvement of contractors in the design stage can 'assist in constructability input and maximizing value engineering, thus improving both cost and schedule' (CII, 1991, p. 9). Consistent reference is made also to the advantages of greater project team integration (through teambuilding) and, where long term relationships occur, of the elimination of learning curves. Second, it is claimed that a focus on learning and continuous improvement can result in improved quality (both of products and processes), as well as improvements to safety (CII, 1991; NEDO, 1991; Loraine, 1996). Third, it is claimed that partnering results in improved customer focus and client satisfaction, as well as better responsiveness to changing market conditions (Bennett and Jayes, 1995, p. 17; Bennett *et al.*, 1996). Finally, the greater stability in workload associated with long-term partnering helps companies deploy their resources more effectively and makes them more likely to invest in training and research.

However, evidence in favour of partnering is not always convincing. There is a tendency within the partnering literature to concentrate on success stories. These often have an anecdotal flavour to them and concentrate on the experiences of 'exemplar' organizations such as DuPont (Cowan *et al.*, 1992), the US Army Corps of Engineers (Weston and Gibson, 1993), Marks and Spencer (Tse, 1985) and BP (Knott, 1996). In an attempt to overcome the dearth of systematic empirical evidence for the performance effects of partnering, Larson (1997) conducted a survey of 291 construction projects and discovered a positive relationship between partnering activities and measures of project success. However, although there have been fewer indications of the failure of partnering to meet performance expectations, these are by no means absent (CII, 1994; Rackham *et al.*, 1996; Angelo, 1998). It should also be noted that most of the literature promoting partnering has focused entirely on experiences in the UK (e.g. NEDO, 1991; Latham, 1994), the USA (e.g. CII, 1989, 1991) and Australia (e.g. Quick, 1994; Thompson, 1994), suggesting perhaps the need to be cautious when attempting to extrapolate to other national contexts.

In search of a definition of partnering

Despite the case put forward in favour of partnering, there are several questions which remain unanswered. The most obvious of these is what precisely does partnering entail in practice? While there is broad agreement about the overall philosophy of partnering, there are nevertheless varying views on a number of its features, including the precise role of contracts and charters, the duration of partnering arrangements, the role of incentives systems, and the need for formal team-building and facilitation (see Barlow *et al.* 1997, for a review). Thus partnering is an imprecise and inclusive concept capturing within it a wide range of behaviour, attitudes, values, practices, tools and techniques. As Holti and Standing (1996, p. 5) have suggested, '[r]ather than being a separate or definable initiative in its own right, partnering or increasing collaboration is best understood as the result of making progress with one or more of a number of inter-related technical and organizational change initiatives' (see also Loraine, 1993, p. 2; NEDO, 1991, p. 10). Indeed, more recent accounts of partnering have attempted to inject a greater degree of sophistication by viewing the diversity of partnering practices as being ranged along a continuum from competition to cooperation, collaboration and coalescence (Thompson and Sanders, 1998).

However, frequently the term 'partnering' is used to capture a spirit of cooperation that may occur on any type of project – collaborative or otherwise (Barlow and Cohen, 1996). One consequence of this semantic ambiguity (where partnering can also signify an *outcome*) is that it makes it difficult to distinguish between partnering as a distinctive practice and partnering as managerial rhetoric (Hinks *et al.*, 1996). Another is that it is important to bear in mind that the use of partnering methods *per se* does not necessarily lead to effective outcomes (or even collaboration), in the same way that using traditional forms of contract does not necessarily result in poor performance, or even conflict (Green and McDermott, 1996).

Notwithstanding these difficulties in definition, there are some commentators who insist on a more pragmatic, instrumentalist view of partnering. With a strong emphasis on tools and techniques, this approach has led to the generation of lists of systems and procedures that organizations should follow in order to establish a partnering arrangement. These include: charters and dispute resolution mechanisms; teambuilding exercises and facilitation workshops; continuous improvement processes; total quality management; business process mapping; and benchmarking (e.g. NEDO, 1991; Loraine, 1993; Bennett and Jayes, 1995; Evans and Bailey, 1996). In addition, information technology, such as 3D CAD and shared databases, often is seen as crucial in supporting open communications and information sharing.

There is insufficient space here to discuss these systems and practices, each of which is important in its own right. However, as a whole they do raise two important general questions. First, is it possible to define partnering as a coherent strategy, that involves the deployment of a more or less universal set of systems, practices and procedures? Alternatively, is the term partnering so diffuse and malleable that it can be ascribed to any form of non-adversarial relationship? These questions are important if the intention is to develop standardized tools and techniques that can be applied universally across projects, clients and sectors (an intention made explicit in many recent policy and research initiatives, including CRINE, ACTIVE and the EPSRC's Innovative Manufacturing Initiative). The problem here is that all the evidence points to partnering being *contingent* upon a number of commercial and other conditions (Bresnen, 1996, pp. 127–31). In the offshore oil and gas sector, for instance, it was the need to develop economically marginal fields at lower cost which led to the search for more cost-effective contractual solutions (Green, 1995). By contrast, partnering in the public sector has been much more constrained by competitive tendering requirements (Loraine and Williams, 1997). In other words, partnering is by no means universally applicable, let alone a panacea (Barlow *et al.*, 1997).

Moreover, companies interested in partnering will seek naturally to develop applications that reflect their own circumstances and requirements. However, evidence from other industrial sectors on the diffusion of 'best practice' shows how this can lead to companies adopting new practices in an *ad hoc* or piecemeal fashion, bowdlerizing complete 'packages' by selecting only preferred elements, adjusted to suit their existing systems of operation (Bresnen, 1996, p. 126). One implication of this is that real experiences of 'partnering' may vary so much from one project to the next that attempts to develop standard and transferable applications are thwarted.

A second important question is to what extent, if at all, is it possible to create or 'engineer' collaboration in the short term? It appears to be almost universally accepted that partnering requires: 'changing traditional relationships to a shared culture . . . based upon trust, dedication to common goals, and an understanding of each other's individual expectations and values' (CII, 1991, p. 2). Indeed, in their review of approaches to partnering, Barlow and Cohen (1996) note that mutual objectives, trust, and an understanding of each other's commitments appear in most formulations. However, although these essentially attitudinal and behavioural characteristics are considered to be central to any successful partnering arrangement, the manner in which they are to be encouraged is less than clear.

On the one hand, there are those who believe that the attitudes and the behaviour evident in the construction industry are deeply ingrained and that it is difficult to engineer any rapid movement away from such an embedded culture. Green and McDermott (1996, p. 2), for example, argue that partnering: 'should be the result of natural evolution of long term relationships between two parties who have realized the financial benefits of combining production processes and by-passing the traditional tender procedures, and have through this working relationship begun to trust one another'. In effect, the development of trust between organizations is seen as a function of the length of the relationship between them, and the mechanisms that led to this alignment (repetition, routine, understanding) are viewed largely as informal. On the other hand, there are those who regard the engineering of trust, mutuality, openness and alignment as wholly feasible over much shorter time periods, and who thus propose using formal tools and techniques to develop project-specific partnering (e.g. Loraine, 1993; Bennett *et al.*, 1996). Although the advantages of project-specific partnering are not regarded as equal to those of longer term arrangements (what Bennett and Jayes (1995) call 'strategic partnering'), the fact that it is considered possible to bring about change over the timescale of a single project is indicative of the view that partnering can be engineered and does not have to evolve 'naturally'.

Therefore there is a division between those who see partnering as an informal and organic development and those who regard it as something more formal that can be actively engineered. This separation between formal *instrumental* and informal *developmental* views on partnering is reflected also in attitudes towards the role of contracts in such arrangements, and towards the use of incentive systems based upon risk/reward (or 'gainshare/painshare') formulae. For some, the level of understanding forged in less formal terms with a partnering arrangement effectively supersedes the role of the contract (e.g. Quick, 1994; ACTIVE, 1996, p. 13; Green and McDermott, 1996). Others view the formal contract as a crucial safeguard against any breakdown of the partnering arrangement (e.g.

Loraine, 1996; Roe, 1996). Whatever the difference of view concerning the role of the contract, it is quite clear therefore that relying on formal contracts alone is not seen as sufficient to promote deeper desired changes in attitude. More generally, it alerts one to the fact that behaviour is not determined simply by formal structures and systems, but instead is the result of conscious choices and actions and a complex interplay between structural imperatives and their subjective interpretation and enactment (Silverman, 1974; Bresnen, 1991; Seymour and Rooke, 1995).

Partnering, contracting and cultural transformation

Underpinning the case for partnering is the presumption that the key to effective change within the industry lies in developing an appropriate culture of relations to support the contracting mechanisms needed for a partnering approach to work. Therefore essentially partnering is seen as about changing behaviour and/or attitudes - encouraging clients and contractors to transgress the conflicting interests that lie at the heart of their exchange relationship by appealing to common interests centred around specific project goals (e.g. Loraine, 1993) and/or more strategic long term relationships (CII, 1991, p. iv; NEDO, 1991, p. 5).

However, the problem with this conceptualization of the relationship between partnering and culture is that it can be easily forgotten that there is a real tension between, on the one hand, the need for the development of trust between clients and contractors and, on the other hand, surrounding economic conditions that predispose contractual partners to act (for very rational economic reasons) in more 'traditional', adversarial and even exploitative ways (Bresnen, 1996, pp. 123–7). This is not meant to suggest that collaboration is made impossible or unlikely. Rather, that it is collaboration (rather than conflict) which is the aberration to the norm: as over 30 years of government and industry reports have shown, lack of cooperation based upon fundamental differences in interests between clients, contractors and others is endemic and almost a defining characteristic of the industry (Higgin and Jessop, 1965; Latham, 1994).

Put another way, economic conditions which encourage clients and contractors to work together towards a common purpose may be essential and much will thus depend upon prevailing market conditions. For example, a 'buyer's market' may enable powerful clients to shift risks onto contractors and press more effectively for changes to their methods of operation. There is some evidence from the oil and gas sector, for instance, that economic conditions have made contractors accede more readily to client pressure to develop alliances (Green, 1994, 1995, p. 202). The downside to this, of course, is that economic conditions also may encourage a more negative orientation towards partnering.

Evidence from other sectors, for example, shows how collaborative forms of contracting can depart from the ideal, through being driven by the narrower concern simply to reduce costs or to pass costs and risks on to those further down the supply chain (Imrie and Morris, 1992; Bresnen, 1996). In the short term, of course, suppliers or contractors may be willing to absorb any extra costs in order to develop or maintain a relationship. However, such an approach may be unsustainable if compensating gains are not forthcoming. Indeed, where clients use collaboration as a means of 'ratcheting up' performance targets (e.g. via continuous improvement programmes), margins may be achievable only by contractors reverting to adversarialism. In these circumstances, there is the paradoxical danger that partnering could become a victim of its own success.

Another way in which one sees a departure from the collaborative ideal in other industrial sectors is through an unwillingness to commit fully to close, long term relationships, because they stop companies from taking advantage of price competition and more favourable deals from alternative suppliers (Imrie and Morris, 1992; Bresnen, 1996). In a similar way, there is certainly plenty of anecdotal evidence of scepticism on the part of clients and contractors unwilling to be locked into long term dependence upon particular firms. Other longer term commercial considerations also may come into play: for example, while some companies may be willing to share their technical know-how with contractual partners, others may jealously guard such proprietary knowledge.

All in all, to proceed on the assumption that such conditions can be transgressed readily by an appeal to common interests is to underplay the constraining influences of economic forces and institutional barriers. As Rasmussen and Shove (1996) have argued, recent partnering discourse tends to over-emphasize the power of agency to overcome structural barriers and constraints. In other words, while there is no simple 'structural fix' to the problem of fragmentation and conflict (e.g. through new forms of contract), there is also no simple solution based upon exhortations to act in ways that fly in the face of powerful economic imperatives and well established traditions.

Moreover, whatever the precise conditions, the perceptions of the pros and cons of partnering inevitably are going to be *relative*, since partnering may serve quite different interests for different parties. Even if these interests do coincide, this does not mean the absence of distributional conflicts, as evidenced by disagreements over gainshare/painshare arrangements (centring around the 'correct' assignment of risks and rewards and agreement on target performance levels). Consequently, examining partnering from different viewpoints may help encourage a proper appreciation of the range and diversity of stakeholder interests in any partnering arrangement (Bresnen, 1991; Seymour and Rooke, 1995).

Partnering and organizational culture

Even if one can presume some basic unity of interest, this does not necessarily mean that aligning attitudes is straightforward. Much of the literature tends to presume that cultural alignment (where organizations share some basic values, attitudes and beliefs) is a prerequisite for partnering. Consequently, unless there is some compatibility between organizations to begin with, organizations need to change their ways of working. The problem here is that it is well established that it is difficult enough effecting cultural transformation *within* organizations, let alone between them (e.g. Beer *et al.*, 1990). The reason for this is that organizational culture is by no means a unitary and consensual phenomenon whose management involves a simple, 'top down' process of senior figures manipulating key variables (structures, reward systems) in order to effect change. Instead, culture is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that arises and develops through on-going social interaction among members of a community (Hofstede, 1980; Schein, 1985; Meek, 1988). It is not simply something that can be imposed from on high, and frequently attempts to do so simply provoke resistance or produce unintended and undesired consequences (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979).

Indeed, organizational culture is so ubiquitous but, at the same time, intangible that it even defies easy definition, identification and analysis. Precise definitions of organizational culture vary, although there is considerable agreement that culture consists of a system of shared meanings, based around common values and beliefs held by members of an organization (for a more thorough discussion of the meaning and attributes of organizational culture see, e.g. Pheysey (1993) or Brown (1995)). Moreover, one important complicating factor in the study of culture is that it operates at many different levels, from outward behavioural manifestations to much more deep-seated attitudes, values and beliefs (Schein, 1985). What is clear, however, is that changing *behaviour* does not necessarily depend upon changing such deeper underlying attitudes, beliefs and values (compliance is a possibility). Therefore, not only may economic incentives be sufficient to produce any desired behavioural change, but also claims that such changes have been any more profound rest upon the presumption that new attitudes, beliefs and values have been *internalized* by members of the project team. In other words, a commitment to partnering might be a truly felt experience or it might simply be skin deep; either way, it is extremely difficult to tell, since behaviour can be misrepresented or rationalized (e.g. Hodgetts, 1991).

Another complicating factor is the existence of 'subcultures' within organizations that are associated with horizontal and vertical differentiation (departmental specialization and hierarchical stratification, respectively). It has long been acknowledged, for example, that clients can themselves be complex organizations (e.g. Cherns and Bryant, 1984) and that this internal complexity can have implications for the management of external relations (Bresnen, 1990). The effects of *horizontal* differentiation are likely to make themselves felt when attempts are made to collaborate across the organization with other groups who are driven by their own departmental or divisional interests. Thus, for example, although project teams might themselves be well aligned, relations with other internal groups (e.g. users of the facility) might be poor. In some cases, this might even lead to a marginalization of the project team within the organization.

The effects of *vertical* differentiation are likely to be encountered when attempts are made to 'cascade' new ways of working down the organization. Frequently the literature on partnering is insistent that top management's support and enthusiasm are vital in generating and sustaining changes a collaborative approach (e.g. Barlow *et al.*, 1997). However, it is rather less clear on how to narrow any gap between expressed intentions at a corporate level and what actually happens 'on the ground', where behaviour can be influenced by a wide range of factors (including experience of actually working directly with contractual partners). Thus it might be difficult to convert formal partnering arrangements into real differences in behaviour at operational levels, creating a difference between partnering as an 'espoused theory' and partnering as a 'theory-in-use' (Argyris and Schon, 1978). The obvious way to compensate is through more direct control of behaviour. However, this runs counter to many prescriptions for effective partnering which stress the importance of decentralized, flexible structures, where the team is expected to operate with considerable autonomy and discretion.

A further difficulty with culture concerns the complex dynamics associated with implementing change. The management of change literature is awash with examples of unsuccessful cultural change initiatives, largely caused by a failure to match the attention paid to the *content* of change with that paid to the (internal) *context* and *process* of change (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991). As regards context, often there can be a blindness to the inevitable political ramifications of change, as new structures and processes affect the roles, motivations, status and influence of individuals and groups in various organizational locales (Kotter *et al.*, 1986). Indeed, frequently cultural change programmes fail since they presume that the need for change and the direction it should take, once articulated and specified, simply will be taken as given (e.g. Beer *et al.*, 1990). As regards processes of change, implementation strategies may need to vary quite considerably to reflect differences in the motivation and ability of individuals and groups to resist (actively or passively) attempts made to introduce new ways of working (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). Also achieving cultural change can be an extremely long, drawn-out process (Child, 1984), as it involves what Lewin (1951) describes as refreezing (i.e. institutionalizing) new behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and values.

Many researchers would go even further than this and question whether in fact it is possible to manipulate and change organizational culture in the ways commonly prescribed. It has long been recognized that organizational culture is not simply a variable that can be manipulated in the way that one might adjust structures or reward systems. Instead, 'culture' captures the very essence of what an organization *is* and how it operates as a social collectivity (Martin, 1985; Morgan, 1986; Meek, 1988). The implications of this way of looking at organizational culture are that organizational cultural change, at best, depends crucially upon a number of situational factors (Martin, 1985). These include: whether there is shared perception of a need for change (perhaps due to crisis); whether the climate is 'supportive' or not (i.e. encouraging open debate and trust); whether the existing culture is powerful, well established and mature (i.e. entrenched); and whether or not powerful and competing subcultures or counter-cultures exist. Obviously, whereas some of these conditions certainly do assist the drive for change in the construction industry, it is not too difficult to see that there are others which still represent major barriers to change.

Conclusion

This paper has given a brief, and by no means exhaustive, overview of some of the main issues arising from current research on partnering. In developing the discussion, the paper has attempted to show how the analysis of partnering as a form of inter-organizational collaboration might benefit significantly from drawing more than it has done to date on frameworks and findings from mainstream organizational theory and research that are concerned precisely with the issues and problems that preoccupy construction management researchers interested in partnering. Although seemingly the discussion has introduced further complexity into the debate, this has been done with the intention of highlighting the very *practical* benefits ultimately to be gained from taking a more realistic view, informed directly by organizational theory and research.

In the course of the paper, a number of general themes have been developed which critically confront some of the assumptions that underpin more prescriptive accounts of partnering. First is the emphasis placed upon contingency and context and the difficulty in presuming that partnering does, can or should cohere as a strategy. Not only is 'partnering' a rather loose term to describe what is in reality a multi-faceted practice, but clearly also it is not always seen as necessary or desirable. One implication of this is that more attention needs to be paid to identifying the conditions (economic, institutional, technical and organizational) that encourage or inhibit partnering in practice. Another implication is that hopes of ultimately being able to standardize models of partnering 'best practice' may be somewhat misplaced and the real benefits may be achieved through *customizing* partnering, based upon a sensitivity to salient local conditions.

Second, a lot of emphasis has been placed upon exploring interrelationships between formal and informal aspects of partnering. This has involved questioning whether understanding the workings of the 'technical apparati' of partnering (contracts, pricing formulae, charters, workshops, etc.) is sufficient to understand how partnering works and whether collaboration can be actively 'engineered' simply by applying these techniques. It has involved also questioning whether trust and cooperation can develop fully in the context of an exchange relationship that may be affected by imbalances in economic power and widely varying economic conditions. Although the review by no means answers these questions, it does suggest, however, that it is much too simple to presume that the application of tools and techniques, backed up by an expressed commitment to partnering, is all that is needed. Rather, it needs to be established whether or not any changes induced are deep enough to be properly considered attitudinal change, or whether they simply reflect behavioural compliance based upon calculations of self-interest. Perhaps most importantly, the discussion emphasizes the importance of taking a *pluralistic* approach to the study of partnering (cf.

Burrell and Morgan, 1979, pp. 204–388), in which it is acknowledged that the parties to the relationship may have very different aims in mind and be approaching it from very different perspectives.

The importance of pluralism is evident also in the discussion concerning the relationship between partnering and organizational cultural change. Here, a number of points were raised about the nature of organizational culture and the ease or difficulty with which it can be changed (particularly due to complications caused by internal structural differentiation). The major implication of this discussion is that calls to adopt 'new ways of working' are somewhat naive and simplistic if they fail to recognize and allow for what is a highly complex construct that works in subtle and intricate ways (Martin, 1985). Implementing partnering effectively may require rather more than project team building, a set of appropriate tools and techniques and a strong commitment from top management. It may require also a sensitivity to factors that subtly reinforce particular ways of working, an understanding of the likely impact on individuals' and groups' motivations and interests, and a full appreciation of the complex (long term) dynamics of implementation processes (Lewin, 1951; Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). To recommend that cultural change is needed serves merely to flag up what is in fact a wide range of very difficult issues, problems and dilemmas.

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