

PARTNERING: WHY PROJECT OWNER-CONTRACTOR RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE

By John A. Drexler Jr.¹ and Erik W. Larson²

ABSTRACT: Over the last decade, research in the construction industry has explored the owner-contractor relationship in project management resulting in a different paradigm called partnering. Partnering is a relationship characterized by cooperation and collaboration in contrast to the adversarial relationship more commonly experienced between owners and contractors. This study utilized data collected from 276 construction projects to examine the stability in the owner-contractor relationship. Owner-contractor relationships were classified as being adversarial, guarded adversarial, informal partners, or project partners. Fifty-eight percent of the projects experienced some fundamental change in working relationship—either positive or negative. Projects that began as formal partnerships were the most stable with over two thirds ending as they began. Guarded adversarial was the least stable with fewer than 30% maintaining this kind of relationship at the end of the project. Content analysis of the reasons stated for the change revealed factors that contribute to an improvement or deterioration in working relationships. The writers use this analysis to make recommendations for sustaining and improving partnerships between owner and contractors.

INTRODUCTION

The following quotes are two managers' explanations for why their working relationships changed during the course of a construction project. The first statement explains why a project, started in a cooperative mode, then ended acrimoniously. The second explains why an adversarial relationship evolved into a cooperative partnership.

After the first month . . . it was clear that the owners were only giving lip service to teamwork. They delayed costly decisions, scoffed at our needs, and repeatedly challenged our decisions.

Given the magnitude of the problems we encountered early on, both sides recognized that the only way the project would be successful would be if we dropped our guard, started trusting each other, and began working as a team.

Recent construction industry publications have established the significance of the owner-contractor relationship for successful project completion. The current prescription for a positive relationship is labeled partnering. This study examines owner-contractor relationships that changed over time and identifies factors that contribute to a decline or improvement in the relationship.

BACKGROUND

Publications on construction industry partnering have demonstrated how the owner-contractor relationship affects construction project success (Mosely et al. 1991; Weston and Gibson 1993; Harback et al. 1994; Larson and Gray 1994; Larson 1995, 1997). If either party is suspicious of the motives and actions of the other, successful project completion may be jeopardized. Owners are likely to challenge and delay approval of appropriate changes in plans or budgets, force compliance by withholding funds, and obsessively monitor the progress of a project. Contractors are likely to exploit loopholes in the

contract, aggressively negotiate change orders, and withhold vital information. Small problems often mushroom into major disputes that create costly delays and ultimately lead to formal litigation. On the other hand, when both parties are able to merge their interests and develop a collaborative working relationship, disputes can be handled in a timely manner; information is freely exchanged, creative solutions to problems emerge, and both parties are able to work together to complete the project successfully.

This study is part of a larger research program on the efficacy of partnering on construction projects. Previous research examined the relationship between different approaches to managing the owner-contractor relationship and project success and found that partnered projects were more successful in controlling costs and resulted in better performance and customer satisfaction than projects managed under more adversarial conditions (Larson 1995). These findings were consistent with research conducted by Tarricone (1992) and especially Weston and Gibson (1993).

The partnering literature categorizes the owner-contractor working relationship along a continuum including adversarial, guarded adversarial, informal partner, and formal partner relationships. These categories reflect the level of cooperation and collaboration between owners and contractors. The adversarial approach represents an extreme position dominated by mistrust and self-interest. The guarded adversarial approach involves treating other parties as necessary but suspicious allies. Parties using this approach rely heavily on the formal contract to manage a project. Implicit in both the adversarial and guarded adversarial approaches is the assumption that mistrust is necessary for self-protection. The informal partnering approach involves parties working together cooperatively. Formal partnering takes cooperation one step further by creating a situation where parties work together as a team with common objectives and a commitment to collaborative problem solving. Admittedly, these thumbnail descriptions represent an oversimplification of a complex relationship. Still, research on the development of this framework revealed considerable agreement among practitioners that the descriptions captured the essence of the most common approaches to managing the critical owner-contractor relationship (Larson and Gray 1994). Complete definitions of each relationship type are presented in Table 1.

This earlier research revealed differences in project success depending upon how the project was managed (Larson 1995, 1997). Partnered projects, as a group, experienced the greatest success across a variety of success criteria. Less successful, in order, were projects managed under informal partner and

¹Assoc. Prof., College of Business, Oregon State Univ., Corvallis, OR 97331-2603; corresponding author. E-mail: drexler@bus.orst.edu

²Prof., College of Business, Oregon State Univ., Corvallis, OR.

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TABLE 1. Four Owner-Contractor Relationships

Relationship (1)	Relationship definition (2)
Adversarial	Participants perceive themselves as adversaries with each party pursuing their own concerns at the other party's expense. Major conflicts are deferred to superiors and resolved on a win/lose basis under the specter of formal litigation. Considerable time and energy is devoted to legal protection.
Guarded adversarial	Participants cooperate within the boundaries of the contract. Performance is guided by strict adherence to the contract. Major disputes are deferred to superiors and are resolved by formal interpretation of contractual obligations.
Informal partners	Participants attempt to sustain a cooperative relationship that goes beyond the boundaries of the contract. Disputes are resolved through mutual give and take, and finding solutions that at least partially satisfy both parties.
Project partners	Participants treat each other as equal partners with a common set of goals and objectives. Every attempt is made to avoid litigation and to resolve disputes in a timely, mutually satisfying manner. Participants consider themselves part of the same team and work closely together to solve problems and make process improvements.

guarded adversarial approaches. The least successful projects were managed with adversarial approaches. Furthermore, awarding a contract on a competitive low-bid basis did not appear to affect the success of partnering efforts (Larson 1995).

This study examines another important aspect of the owner-contractor relationship: the question of stability. Two questions are addressed: (1) How stable is the nature of the owner-contractor working relationship; and (2) what factors contribute to changes in the nature of that relationship? Why do contractors and owners who originally perceive each other as partners end as bitter adversaries? And why do contractors and owners who originally perceive each other as adversaries end up as partners?

SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire that was mailed to 1,000 randomly selected members of the Project Management Institute (PMI) in North America. PMI is a professional association for project management practitioners. The mailing yield 315 (32%) responses, and this study is based on the 276 respondents who answered a series of questions concerning a recently completed construction project.

Respondents were from one of several kinds of organizations. Twenty-six percent represented owners. Forty percent worked for prime contractors while only 6% operated as sub-contractors. The remaining respondents were auditors, inspectors, and other specialists.

Respondents held one of several roles in their organizations. Fifty-five percent were either principal engineers or project managers. Seventeen percent were members of top management (i.e., president, vice-president, or division manager). Ten percent were functional managers in such areas as marketing and finance. The remainder were either specialists or consultants.

The sample included small and large firms. Fifty percent of the respondents worked for firms with fewer than 100 employees, and 30% worked for firms with more than 1,000 employees. Similarly, one third of the respondents reported that their firm was currently engaged in fewer than five significant

construction projects, while another third indicated that their firms currently had more than 20 major construction projects.

The questionnaire asked respondents to identify and think about a specific recently completed construction project in which they actively participated. Identified projects varied in scope and size. Examples included construction of a 72 par championship golf course, a 100,000-ft² computer chip production plant, and a 60-unit townhouse complex; renovation of a five-story city hall building; and expansion of a waste-treatment facility. The average duration of the projects was 22 months with 38% of the respondents reporting that the project took less than one year to complete, while 41% reported that their project took over two years to finish. The average estimated total cost of the projects was \$10,750,000. Roughly half of the projects were awarded on an open, competitive, low-bid process.

The questionnaire contained statements defining the various owner-contractor working relationships contained in Table 1. Respondents identified the statement that best described the nature of the working relationship at the beginning and at the end of the identified project. When respondents indicated a change in the nature of the working relationship, an open-ended question asked them to describe the reason for the change. Only 4% of the eligible respondents failed to answer this question. The content of these responses were analyzed in a search to identify common themes among them and to provide the basis for this study. When the written responses needed clarification, respondents were contacted for a telephone interview. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 22 respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 summarizes responses to the first research question. The rows list the owner-contractor relationship that respondents identified as best characterizing their relationship at the project's beginning. The columns list the owner-contractor relationship identified as best characterizing the relationship at the project's end. Thus, the values in the diagonal reflect stable projects, where respondents reported no change in the owner-contractor relationship. Values below the diagonal reflect projects where respondents reported a relationship that deteriorated, whereas values above the diagonal reflect projects where respondents reported a relationship that improved. Each cell in the matrix of Table 2 has three values. The uppermost value indicates the number of respondents who made up that cell. The middle value, in boldface type, indicates the percent of all respondents who made up that cell. Because this study's

TABLE 2. Owner-Contractor Working Relationships on 276 Construction Projects

Relationship at project's beginning (1)	Key (2)	Relationship at Project's End				Total (7)
		Adversarial (3)	Guarded adversarial (4)	Informal partners (5)	Formal partners (6)	
Adversarial	<i>N</i> % of Total % of Row	19 7% 45%	19 7% 45%	4 1% 10%	0 0% 0%	42 15% 100%
Guarded adversarial	<i>N</i> % of Total % of Row	39 14% 36%	32 12% 29%	33 12% 30%	5 2% 5%	109 39% 100%
Informal partners	<i>N</i> % of Total % of Row	17 6% 24%	11 4% 15%	29 10% 41%	14 5% 20%	71 26% 100%
Formal partners	<i>N</i> % of Total % of Row	2 1% 4%	3 1% 6%	12 4% 22%	37 13% 69%	54 20% 100%

Note: *N* = number of respondents.

TABLE 3. Reasons for Changes in Owner-Contractor Working Relationships

<i>N</i> (1)	Declining relationships (2)	<i>N</i> (3)	Improving relationships (4)
21	Unclear contract/litigation	25	Trust/positive relationship
20	Change in scope/schedule	20	Shared goals
12	Personnel	9	Teamwork/communication
7	Failure to perform	6	Personnel changes
7	Lack of trust	3	Clear contract
5	Underbid		

Note: *N* = number of respondents.

focus is on stability or change in relationships from the beginning to the end of a project, the bottom value, in italics, shows the row percents, reflecting a change or no change from beginning to end of a project.

Regarding the first research question, respondents reported that the owner-contractor working relationship changed in 159 (58%) of the 276 cases. Of those cases that changed, 84 (53%) became more adversarial and 75 (47%) moved in the direction of formal partnering. Inspection of the row percents reveals that 69% of the projects that were initially managed as formal partners maintained this relationship at the end of the project, reflecting the most stable cell; and 45% of the projects initially managed as adversarial remained so at the end of the project. The least stable cell occurred in those projects that began as guarded adversarial with only 29% reporting that the project ended as such. Only 41% of the projects that began as informal partners sustained this relationship upon project completion. Overall, the results attest to the dynamic nature of the owner-contractor relationship. The relationships changed more often than not. When the entire sample is examined, only 42% of the working relationships remained stable.

The second research question is why the relationships changed. Table 2 shows that some cells in the four-by-four matrix have too few cases to reliably conduct a cell-by-cell analysis of respondents' comments about why change occurred. In our attempt to identify common patterns in explanations for why change occurred, the content analysis compared comments from all those cases where the relationships deteriorated to those where the relationships improved. We will first discuss the reasons why relationships deteriorated on the adversarial—formal partner continuum and then examine explanations for why the working relationships improved. Table 3 displays a summary of the content analysis.

Decline in Working Relationships

Partnering is intended to meet the dual goals of defining a project's objectives clearly so that each party knows exactly what is to be achieved within time and resource constraints and at the same time providing a flexible structure for solving problems that could not be anticipated (Cowan et al. 1992). The two most frequently mentioned reasons respondents offered to explain why relationships declined are associated with each side of this dual goal.

The most frequently mentioned reason respondents gave for a deteriorating relationship related to unclear contracts and resulting litigation. Failure to define the objective explicitly was the problem reported in 21 cases. One respondent wrote, "[the] contract was based on a concept—not on deliverables." Often, the problem resulted from differences in how the contract was interpreted, "[they] used contract interpretations to their advantage to increase their cost." Other comments included, "We did not fully understand what the costs and needs were to satisfy what we sold. Failure to clarify scope resulted in customer becoming suspect of us," and "The parties [didn't] really have fully congruent goals. [This] was a fast-

track project where the design continued to evolve after construction began." These responses are consistent with previous research that consistently identify poor project definition (scope) as a major barrier to project success (Gobeli and Larson 1986; Pinto and Slevin 1988; Ashley et al. 1987).

Twenty respondents identified how change orders and changes in scope or schedule were managed as the second most frequently mentioned reason for a deteriorating relationship. In effect, there was no workable process established for solving unanticipated problems. One respondent wrote, "[The project] was more difficult than the manufacturer thought, and the customer was inflexible on delivery and cost." Another wrote, "Owners wanted flexibility to modify design at no cost—contractor wanted to reopen budget whenever changes were made. Neither side understood the concerns of the other as well as they needed to." Finally, "the owner [was] very demanding and constantly changed scope but refused to compensate for it."

Together, the unclear contract/litigation and change-in-work categories constitute 55% of the responses that could be combined in common themes to explain deteriorating relationships. It would appear that spending the time to clearly define interests and objectives and to engage in formal planning could resolve some of these problems, as could agreeing on processes for solving unanticipated problems.

A third major reason respondents gave for why owner-contractor relationships deteriorated related to individual styles of key personnel. One respondent described, "an inexperienced architect and a less than professional contractor." And another, "Construction manager had [a] mean-spirited vindictive assistant [who] poisoned all project relationships." Another wrote, "Owner's project staff was completely replaced in the middle of the project with personnel from a different plant location."

Seven respondents attributed a declining relationship to the failure of one or another party to perform. Respondents wrote, "Contractor unable to produce working installation," and "Contractor's failure to provide knowledgeable supervision. Fell behind on schedule." Failure to perform will certainly have a negative effect on owner-contractor relationships.

Seven respondents simply attributed the problems to a general lack of trust. Follow-up interviews indicated that trust deteriorated because of poor performance, a failure to do what was promised, failure to keep the other party informed of the project's status, and/or disseminating false or misleading information. Once trust had been broken it was impossible to salvage the relationship. Two of these respondents noted that on international projects, cultural differences between the parties prevented the partnership from being sustained. Here trust, cooperation, and teamwork had different meanings for the parties involved. Trust will be discussed again later as it also relates to improvements in working relationships.

Five respondents noted that underbidding resulted in a deteriorating relationship. Ten other explanations for a deteriorating relationship were made, but they did not converge into common themes that could be coded.

Improvement in Working Relationships

Table 3 also summarizes respondents' explanations for why their working relationship improved over the course of a project. The content analysis yielded five major categories.

Twenty-five respondents gave reasons that could be combined into a category reflecting the development of a trusting work relationship as a result of time spent learning to work together. Some of these comments simply emphasized how relationships improved over time. Characteristic comments included "the more people worked together, the greater the bond," and "relationships are between people—not companies or legal documents—they grow and mature over time."

Together these comments suggest that time might result in people coming to view each other in a less guarded manner when they have had the opportunity to observe each other's willingness to solve problems. In these cases participants came to view their relationships as mutually reinforcing because their personal approach resulted in things getting done without spending time assigning blame.

Other comments in this category emphasized how trust developed as a function of successfully working together over time. Characteristic comments included "political interference lessened as confidence grew with the contractor's performance," and "we learned to trust each other." It is likely that respondents who explicitly mentioned increased confidence or trust as the reason for an improved working relationship simply took the developing relationship subcategory to its logical consequence—trust, which results when working together appears to be mutually rewarding.

Trust was an issue in projects where relationships deteriorated and improved. We should not be surprised that incompetence or failure to perform will result in a deteriorating relationship or that exceptional performance will enhance confidence and trust. This will be true regardless of the starting-point relationship. But most situations will fall somewhere between these extremes. Competence aside, how one goes about handling problems sends messages that result in other parties interpreting one's actions. An unwillingness to solve a problem combined with personal attacks and looking to assign blame elsewhere will result in a loss of trust. An approach that communicates a sense of "we're in this together and how do we fix it" will result in an increase in trust (Fisher and Ury 1991).

Another major category involves the realization of shared goals between parties, and 20 respondents reported this to explain relationships that improved. This includes the recognition that parties are working toward the same goals and need each other to achieve them. Twenty respondents who described projects where the working relationships improved over time gave reasons that reflect this classic concept from social psychology: conflicting parties join their efforts when they realize that their ultimate goals are mutual and will be better met through cooperation than through conflict (Sherif et al. 1961). This notion has served as the foundation for the concepts of integrative and principled bargaining (Walton and McKersie 1965; Fisher and Ury 1991) and is widespread today under the rubric of managing organization conflict. Characteristic comments were, "cooperative and practical approach to resolving problems . . . with the main goal of the project being [the] main objective," "mutual frustrations seemed to strengthen the relationship between owners and contractors," "the owner and architect realized we were committed to make the project successful," and "everyone went the extra mile to assure client satisfaction and trust."

There were two interesting subcategories included in the responses classified as shared goals. One relates to the weather, and two respondents identified it as the reason why the working relationship improved. One respondent wrote: "winter conditions did not permit long-winded approval procedures." The second subcategory of shared goals included lower-level individuals working outside the contract because they realized the need to do so. Three respondents, realizing that a poor relationship was keeping them from meeting their common goals wrote that they were able to work well together in spite of the formally defined relationship. One respondent wrote, "it was decided to work together, sometimes without the knowledge of the supervisors." Another wrote, "this forced [us] and [our] prime contractor to reach agreements never contractually conceived." Thus, it would appear that sometimes external forces serve to enhance cooperation. Moreover, lower-level

participants sometimes take personal risks to work together to help a project succeed in spite of the animosities and suspicions held by their superiors.

Nine respondents identified teamwork and communications as the reason for an improved relationship. One respondent wrote, "Team interface, clearer description of roles and increased sense of ownership," and another wrote that there was a, "high level of cooperation during the execution of work." One respondent wrote, "The main reason I would say was the personal communication among all the different parties."

Six respondents identified personnel changes as the reason why a relationship improved. Characteristic comments included, "The owner realized that the hard line approach wasn't working and brought in new people who began to work with us not against us," and, "In all of these cases a more hostile representative was replaced by an individual who worked within the boundaries of the contract."

Readers should recall that personnel changes were also given as reasons why projects deteriorated. This suggests the importance of careful selection of personnel for projects intended to operate under better-than-adversarial conditions. Key personnel need to have demonstrated interpersonal skills. Regarding projects where personnel are changed midproject, the reason why such changes were made should be clearly articulated because, otherwise, parties will come up with their own interpretations for the changes. The interpretations can range from personnel being assigned to other projects because this project was not deemed very important, or personnel being assigned elsewhere because they were giving away too much. Because others will make attributions or judgments to explain personnel changes, the reasons for changing key project personnel must be carefully communicated.

Finally, three respondents identified a clear and unambiguous contract as the reason why the relationship improved. Characteristic comments included, "They (contractor) needed to finish the project and we realized that adversarial role was causing delays and impeding the project. We both came to the conclusion that our interests could be best served by adhering to the spirit and letter of the contract," and, "It was a fairly routine project and the contract covered most of the problems we encountered."

Several responses could not be coded into a common theme but help further explain why some relationships improved. One respondent wrote about a contractor who suddenly realized that cooperating would not damage his profitability threshold. "The contractor under-bid the project, but won enough in change orders early on to cover anticipated losses. Once [he] realized this, [his] whole attitude changed. [He] became more relaxed and we were able to complete the project according to specs." Exposure to partnering concepts also was reported to affect positive change: "The owner and controller had returned from a partnering workshop and made a sincere effort to change the culture of their business and working relationships. This led to a completely different management style." The introduction of quality teams affected the relationship in another project: "During the project, continuous improvement quality teams were formed that facilitated the full development and understanding of the project goals that enabled all participants to achieve their goals in harmony."

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following points summarize the main findings of this study.

1. These findings attest to the instability of working relationships between owners and contractors. Fifty-eight percent of the project experienced some fundamental

change in the working relationship—either positive or negative.

2. The stability of working relationships varied depending upon how the relationship commenced. Projects that began as formal partnerships were the most stable with over two thirds ending as they began. Guarded adversarial was the least stable with fewer than 30% maintaining this kind of relationship at the end of the project. Of those relationships that changed, half regressed to an adversarial relationship, while half progressed to some form of partnership.
3. An analysis of respondents' comments explaining why a relationship declined or improved yielded several common themes. Themes explaining reasons for a declining relationship include unclear contracts and resulting litigation, changes in scope and schedules, personnel, failure to perform, lack of trust, and underbidding contracts. Themes explaining improving relationships include trust and positive relationships, shared goals, teamwork and communication, personnel changes and the presence of a clear contract.

Based on the analyses of the respondents' comments, the following recommendations can be made.

1. It would appear that these deteriorating relationships could be avoided if parties wrote in unambiguous terms their scope and objectives. This must be based on formal planning for the entire project. Then, parties need to agree to define a process or structure for managing unanticipated problems. We should not be surprised when scope or objective statements, written ambiguously, lead to different interpretations on the part of parties. A process for collaboration will not work when the interests of each party remain unclear.
2. Training can be provided to assist managers to better identify common ground between owners and contractors in an effort to focus on common goals. Managers can also learn to use collaborative problem-solving skills.
3. Careful attention needs to be paid to assessing the interpersonal skills of managers when selecting key project personnel. Consideration should be given to providing interpersonal skills training to personnel who have weak interpersonal skills, but who have excellent technical skills. While difficult to measure, serving as a team player might become an important consideration in managerial performance reviews. Finally, the basis for personnel changes needs to be clearly communicated to other parties.
4. For the working relationship to improve contractors have to demonstrate competence early on in the project and the capability of managing their own people as well as subcontractors they are dependent upon. At the same time, owners need to demonstrate that they are reasonable and sensitive to the impact their demands are having on the contractor. Empathy appears to be an essential quality for sustaining collaboration.

The dynamics of the construction industry create the opportunity for owner-contractor working relationships to improve or deteriorate. Teamwork naturally evolves, not because

it is a good idea, but because it is the best way possible for the parties involved to realize their individual goals. Why problems result in improved teamwork in some cases and deterioration in others, is likely to be dependent upon a complex set of factors. One factor that appears to be critical is the magnitude of the problem(s) and the threat it poses to the different participants. If financial security is threatened, then it is only natural to assume a self-protecting, adversarial position. Another decisive factor is developing a shared vision of "fair dealing" that governs the interaction of participants. Parties that feel they are being taken advantage of by others will naturally retreat to a more adversarial position. Conversely, parties that believe their counterparts are dealing with problem in an open and honest manner are more likely to pursue a more collaborative relationship. But it is walking-the-talk versus the talk itself that will lead to these beliefs.

Overall, the results appear to support some of the essential principles behind project partnering. One of the primary strategies behind project partnering is establishing the foundation for teamwork prior to beginning a project [cf. Associated (1991); Cowan et al. (1992)]. The findings support the importance of establishing up-front agreed-upon procedures for implementing change in orders, resolving disputes, and sharing risk, as well as establishing in advance what constitutes equitable profit for each party (Ehrenreich-Hansen 1994). If agreed-upon frameworks and procedures are in place before starting the project, then cooperation is more likely to be sustained.

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