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TRUSTING THE PARTNER

Improving management processes is central to Sir Michael Latham's *Constructing the team*. A report published this week puts the case for making those improvements through partnering. Josephine Smit reports.

Words like trust, benchmarking and customer care do not roll easily off the tongues of construction industry chiefs. But in many industries outside construction, especially in the manufacturing sector, they have long been considered the hallmarks of good business practice.

Now with the impetus of Sir Michael Latham's industry review, construction is under pressure to make up for lost time. And one of the ways in which it can make the much needed improvements in its practice and performance is by adopting a partnering approach. "Partnering benefits everyone involved," says Sir Michael Latham. "It goes to the heart of the problems identified in *Constructing the team*." His words appear in the foreword to a report which as its title, *Trusting the team*, suggests could also be considered a companion document to Sir Michael's report.

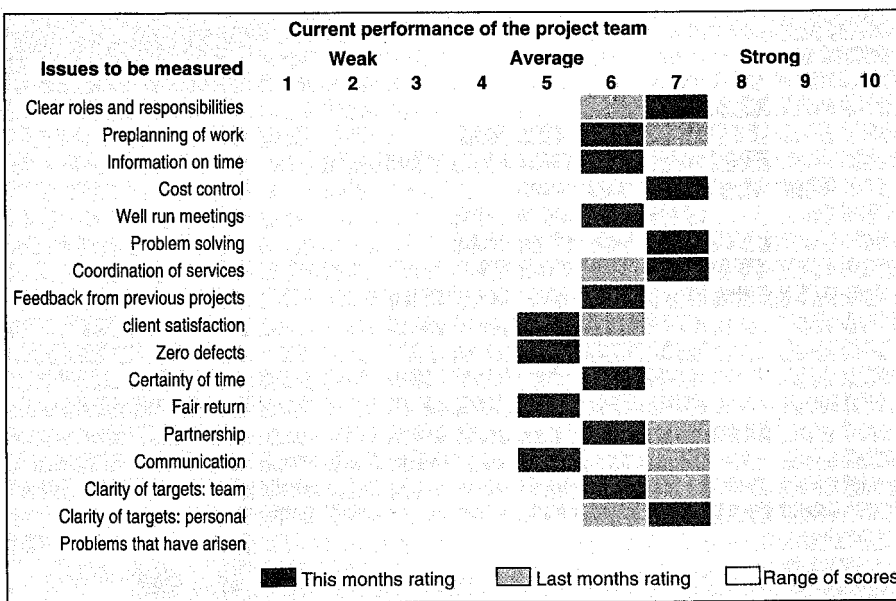
Trusting the team, launched this week, is the first major study into partnering specifically aimed at the UK construction industry and is based on research into more than 40 examples of partnering in the UK and US. Published by the Reading Construction Forum at the Reading University based Centre for Strategic Studies in Construction, it has been put together with input from a task force of clients, consultants, and main and specialist contractors.

The report explores the two different partnering options: project partnering which involves companies working together on a one-off basis, and strategic partnering, where they work together over a series of projects. And importantly it explodes many of the myths that have surrounded partnering within construction, notably that it is an ill-defined and cosy, perhaps sometimes too cosy, way of working.

Report co-author and CSSC director Professor John Bennett has a rather more businesslike definition of the term. "It is a set of management actions that will make a difference, that will improve productivity, along with quality of product and service to the customer," he explains. As part of this process a partnering team agrees mutual objectives and how to resolve disputes.

Bennett acknowledges that this alone could lead to a "nice cosy relationship which could get sloppy". For this reason he adds another criterion for a true partnering arrangement: continuous improvement. "If you have these elements, you are partnering. If you don't, then you are doing something else," he says matter of factly.

The net result of these improvements is substantial cost savings. In project partnering companies can expect to see savings of 10%; in strategic partnering savings of 30% are achievable over time. These are



Long-term relationships in the UK building industry have formed the subject of Engineering & Physical Sciences Research Council funded research by report co-author Sarah Jayes. One of the companies she has studied, and which is featured in the report, is Gazeley Properties.

Gazeley Properties has adopted a strategic partnering approach. It boasts a formal partnering arrangement with contractor Simmons Construc-

tion, consultant Edward Roscoe Associates, architect Chetwood Associates, mechanical and electrical consultant Kelly Taylor & Associates and commercial manager WH Stephens & Sons.

The team's overall objective is to become acknowledged as the most efficient producer of large distribution facilities in the world and win a growing share of the continental market.

Developments needed to achieve this include: benchmarking, communications, documentation, teams for major elements, zero defects, after care, project programmes, cost control, IT integration and

prefabrication.

These developments are designed to achieve: innovation, efficiency (at least a 30% reduction in the cost of designing and constructing large distribution facilities), quality, time management (completions achieved on time to the day and the hour), value, and improved service (team to market research and develop services covering pre-design, design, construction and occupancy).

On projects, team progress towards its objectives is monitored using evaluation charts (shown above). These are completed on a monthly basis.

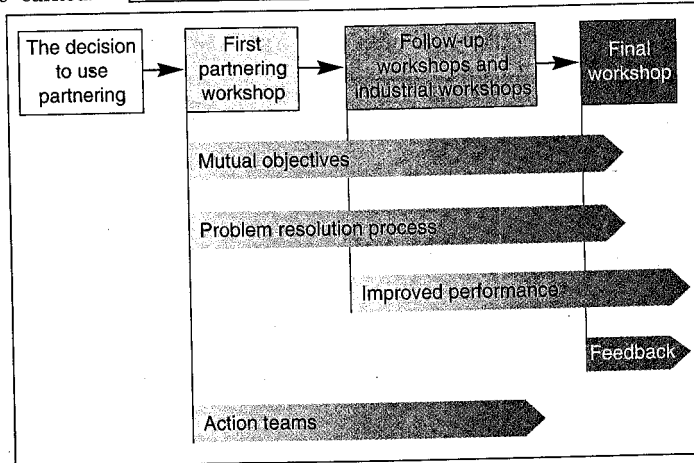
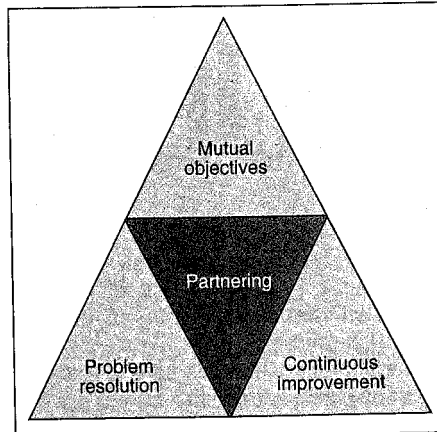
MANAGEMENT

sufficiently impressive to cement the business case in favour of partnering, but report co-author and CSSC research fellow Sarah Jayes argues that the construction industry should be focusing on higher quality rather than lower costs.

Benefits go way beyond cost savings, the report authors claim. Partnering can deliver better designs, avoid defects, make the construction process safer, reduce claims and will result in a project team that can genuinely enjoy the experience of working together. But warns Jayes, "people have to understand that it takes time to achieve the benefits".

And those benefits have to be earned. Companies and their staff have to be absolutely committed to the partnering process. Trained facilitators and workshops ensure that the partnering ethos is in place. "Once organisations adopt it, it becomes a way of working, not a set of rigid procedures," says Bennett.

The same applies to the partnering charter, a non-legal document setting out the partnering team's visions and goals. It is signed by all those attending the objective setting workshop and widely distributed as tangible confirmation of the partnering



principles. This document is available as a point of reference through a project – most frequently being re-read when an obstacle is hits – and is definitely not just for show.

Simple chemistry can dictate that some people will work together better than others. Challenging the team to do better acts as a check on complacency, say the report authors. And measurement and benchmarking are integral in allowing companies to assess the value of the relationship.

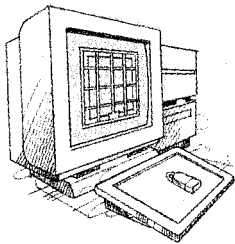
The CSSC research team has found that to date in the industry partnering has seldom been used to its full effect – often companies have failed to carry out this vital measurement process. The report published this

week should help companies to realise partnering's true potential. "It should raise the quality and give the industry a language," says Bennett.

He sees this as just the beginning of an ongoing development process for partnering. Next priority for CSSC and for Jayes will be to train facilitators to spread the methodology and the message.

Trusting the team is available from the Centre for Strategic Studies in Construction at the University of Reading (price \$34.95).

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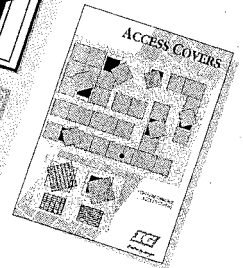
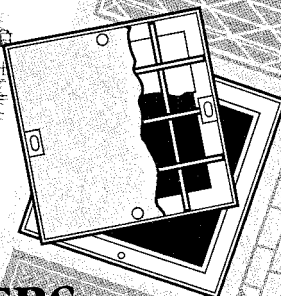
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