

COLLABORATIVE PROCUREMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF PRACTICE AND TRUST IN TIMES OF AUSTERITY

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Despite authoritative calls for an increase in collaborative working and partnering practices, recent austerity is causing many companies to move back towards traditional competitive procurement routes. Clients may feel the only way to assure themselves that they are not paying too much is to market test their projects in a highly competitive environment. Organisations may feel vulnerable opening themselves up to partnering and collaborative practices during a time of uncertainty, and are reluctant to take unnecessary risks. This study seeks to explore the effects of the recent economic downturn on collaborative working, with particular emphasis on manifestation in practice and the positioning of trust within such relationships. Eight interviews were carried out with senior industry professionals, all experienced in partnering and collaborative working practices. Austerity was found to have influenced collaborative practices in industry at both individual and organisational levels. Individuals have responded with a quest for job security which has in turn developed risk-averse work practices and affected the establishment of short term collaborative relationships. Organisations have returned to traditional competitive procurement methods, seeking to reduce risk in their practices and maintain control in uncertain times. Sceptical considerations of collaboration have re-emerged; the abuse of collaborative relationships for financial benefits, employing austerity as leverage, have become contemporary legend if not fact. Perceptions of collaborative working have shifted within the austerity context, and there is the potential for industry to lose ground gained before the recession in the development of collaborative practices. Further research is recommended to examine the repercussions of this shift in both practice and philosophy, as austerity-born projects come to completion.

Keywords: austerity, collaboration, integration, partnering, trust.

INTRODUCTION

Despite perceived advantages, collaborative working practices within the construction industry are still relatively rare (RICS 2007:27), and appear to have become more so during times of austerity. The RICS Contracts in Use Survey (2012) found that partnering contracts during 2010 accounted for only 0.9% of all contracts by value, compared with 6.6% in 2004 and 15.6% in 2007, a trend which could be attributed to the recent UK economic crisis.

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It is felt by some clients that open and competitive procurement systems, that truly market test prices, are the only way to assure stakeholders of lowest possible initial capital cost (Ross 2011); and in this economic context, 'partnering has not lived up to expectations' (Gadde and Dubois 2010: 26).

This study seeks to explore, the concept of trust during austerity in collaborative working and partnering arrangements (Kaluvarachi and Jones 2007). Trust is considered in the literature to be an essential element in successful partnering. The terms 'partnering' and 'collaborative working' are used interchangeably within this paper, referencing a wider philosophy of trust, fairness and equity, rather than specific details of practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perfection through Procurement

Partnering and collaboration have long been championed as the future of the UK construction industry. Latham (1994) sought to 'Construct the Team' and was heavily critical of traditional procurement and contractual routes, largely due to the lack of coordination between construction and design. He suggested a change in culture and a move to partnering to increase fairness, encourage teamwork and enhance performance through collaborative engagement of clients and design teams with contractors (ibid 1994:50).

Egan (1998) saw early establishment of construction teams as an essential aspect of co-operative construction, with contractors able to contribute to management, buildability, health and safety, procurement and supply chain management of projects. It was thought that such early collaboration reduces disputes, reduces tender costs and improves team working practices (ibid 1998:20).

More recently, the benefits of collaboration have been argued to include an increase in profits brought about by sharing expertise, knowledge, ideas, innovation, best practice, and promoting efficiencies and improvements in decision making (Hansen and Nohria 2004:35). Collaborative working has also been suggested to reduce the negative aspects of construction procurement, minimising conflicts and disputes through increased cooperation, and developing relationships built on trust (Larson 1997).

Government support for partnering and collaborative thinking was championed by the Strategic Forum for Construction in the 'Accelerating Change' report (Egan 2002). Projects that had applied the principles of both Latham and Egan in the use of collaborative procurement methods were found to achieve significant improvements in client satisfaction, cost predictability, safety, and time predictability. Yet partnering and collaborative procurement has also attracted its critics. The RICS (2005:2) have argued that successful experiences in collaborative procurement '... are largely anecdotal and focus on the experiences of exemplar organisations.' A similar argument was presented by Morgan (2009:9), formerly procurement director at BAA, who concluded that with major capital projects, procurement routes that promote alliances and partnerships are not always appropriate, being vulnerable to abuse given the scale of the commercial interests involved. Furthermore, partnering projects do not guarantee success, and clients may be paying far too much for their products.

Trust as a Collaborative Necessity

There is an argument that when companies enter into highly complex, uncertain and potentially risky projects as relative strangers, it is not surprising that frequent conflicts and disputes arise in traditional procurement systems (Chan et al 2004: 230). Partnering and collaborative approaches seek to avoid conflicts and disputes by increasing levels of co-operation and developing organisational relationships built on trust (Larsen 1997). It is however recognised that such approaches do not provide guaranteed mechanisms for the development of trust (Marshall and Bresnen 2000:230), and the complexities of developing trust in a single combined operational entity through collaboration are vast. Trust is likely to be dependent on a number of factors, including social interaction, power, identities and expectations. In project teams, individuals may inherently have varying propensities to trust and be trusted (Walker 2009: 158).

The degree of trust between key members of teams has been identified as a critical factor in shaping relationships between all project team participants, as well as a key influence in project outcomes (Walker 2009). Gadde and Dubois (2010:256) referred to the concept of 'the relationship atmosphere', determined by the 'balance of collaboration', encompassing constructive elements such as commitment and trust, as well as negative elements such as power and conflict. Kaluarachi and Jones (2007:1053) also found that communication, trust, change in mindset, and commitment of participants were all major factors in developing successful and innovative partnering agreements.

Morrell (2011) argues that greater co-ordination is needed in the preparation of project documentation to encourage partnering, buildability, standardisation, prefabrication and collaborative working in the pursuit of value for money. Yet in order to enable the communication and sharing of knowledge necessary for fully-integrated practice, trust between supply chain members, from clients to the smallest SMEs, is a fundamental requirement. Through development of their propensity to trust theory, Briscoe and Dainty (2005:230) identified a potential lack of desire amongst specialist supply chain partners to trust their more powerful main contractor partners. They report that specialists have negative experiences in sharing information and prompt payment initiatives, leading to organisational mistrust.

The quality of collaboration can be reinforced or weakened, depending on the behaviour, approaches and attitudes of both organisations and individual participants (Coulson-Thomas 1990:179). There is heavy reliance on relationships within teams, but in practice the time needed to nurture these relationships, is often lacking in construction management procurement systems (Walker 2009:140). The literature suggests that trust is a vital factor in the development of successful partnering and collaborating working practices.

Potential Problems for Collaborative Procurement: Trust in Times of Austerity

The project-based nature of much construction work can be seen as a fundamental barrier to the development of trust in practice, where relationships are perceived to be short term, and true collaborative working practices struggle to emerge (Walker 2009). Furthermore, a perceived 'loss of control' has also been identified as a barrier to collaborative working. There is a concern that sharing of knowledge results in loss of knowledge, adding to a more general uncertainty (Thurairajah et al 2006:7). Such managerial uncertainty is unlikely to encourage new collaborative working

arrangements during a time of economic doubt; austere times suggest a return to familiar and trusted traditional procurement systems.

Reliance on the known and controllable has previously been identified within industry as a symptom of a 'negative culture', sceptical and suspicious of new initiatives. It has been argued that these old behavioural aspects, cultures and attitudes are so deeply embedded in the construction sector that they are proving difficult to change (Thurairajah et al 2006:7). For partnering approaches to be more attractive to clients, they must seek to address problems of cultural indifference, old stereotypes and adversarial views of team members alongside new ways of working being established (Liu et al 2004). Yet it is unlikely that an economic downturn will provide a suitable context for such paradigm shifts in practice. Indeed, the RICS (2012) have suggested that partnering is not compatible with an economic climate of recession; lowest capital cost becomes politically more important than long term best value measures. Research studies have found some clients commonly fixate on obtaining lowest bid price rather than best value (Beach et al 2005).

When partnering is used, there may on occasion be an abuse of power by clients towards main contractors, or main contractors towards their supply chain, to 'squeeze ... too hard' (National Audit Office 2001:62). In times of austerity the desire to squeeze can become a necessity, challenging the benefits of the partnering relationship. Indeed, one of the most prolific barriers to increased collaboration could be psychological; clients who seek to prolong strategies associated with market leverage and power, achieve lowest price, rather than best value, and increase supply chain competition (Findings in Built and Rural Environments 2005:2). This view could also apply to the relationships between main contractors and subcontractors, where the 'buyers' dictate to the 'sellers' the terms of their employment and what is required of them (Mathews et al 2003:167).

In the sense that collaboration is ideally for the long term, and over multiple projects, economic conditions may dictate that clients cannot commit too far ahead. The constraints and challenges for many clients, make partnering a problematic aspiration, and they are forced to limit themselves to mere single project awards (Mason 2006:5).

METHODOLOGY

In order to further explore collaboration and partnering within a contemporary period of economic austerity, and also examine the role of trust within this context, a qualitative study was undertaken (Flick 2009). This approach enabled the exploration of key themes, understandings and attitudes of those who work within this environment on a daily basis.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews (Gillham 2005) were held with eight construction professionals from different construction industry disciplines; an architect, quantity surveyor, project manager, main contractor, subcontractor, property lawyer, mechanical and electrical engineer and a structural engineer. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting professionals with experience in partnering and collaborative working practices. However, beyond these two criteria, the sample was one of convenience. Whilst the small sample size does not allow for generalisation, it does provide insight into the perceptions of those working within the construction industry during the economic crisis, and their understanding of trust in collaborative working. Consultations were carried out to plan and formulate the format and structure for the interviews. A 'pilot' interview was conducted to obtain feedback on

the data collection tool, and tease out any difficulties with the way it was designed and administered.

The interviews were undertaken in a period of austerity; late 2012 to 2013. They were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and subsequently coded and sorted (Silverman 2001; Langdridge 2005). Examples of the main qualitative codes included informal engagement, closer interaction and good team working whereas examples of the main themes included factors that instil trust and potential barriers to collaborative working. As recommended by Taylor and Bogdan (1998), the raw data was summarised in tables; codes were listed, themes developed, content analysis data presented, key literature sources identified, data consistencies and inconsistencies noted and propositions made. The tables became a plan to develop a narrative to construct a contemporary picture of partnering and collaborative working in austere times. Due to constraints of space in this paper, the narrative has been interwoven with its discussion, to contextualise the findings of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenging the Philosophy of Collaboration

Collaboration is based on trust, equity and fairness. A shared ethos between partners is essential for collaborative success, and all these philosophies should be embedded in aligned organisational strategies (Thurairajah et al 2006; Bresnen and Marshall 2000). However, whilst supported theoretically, rarely is there realisation in practice. Participants reported that partnering has been tainted by inequitable working arrangements which give little or no benefits to partnered organisations.

The disparity of power between clients and other organisations has allowed the former to take advantage of collaborative arrangements to serve their own organisational needs; arrangements for sharing have become significantly one-sided. Some organisations take advantage of austerity to bully partners further down the supply chain; they use the power derived from scarcity of work elsewhere in the economy to use a 'take it or leave it approach'. The abuse of power to secure organisational gains at the expense of others, appears to have become too much to resist. A shift in philosophy during an operational partnering framework renders organisations highly vulnerable to exploitation as they are virtually held to ransom; to accept revised or reduced terms, or be cast back into a cut-throat market place. Such exploitation through partnering frameworks increases the risk of this procurement option, reducing its attractiveness and contributing to a reduction in willing partners.

However, one practitioner attributed his survival in the current economic climate to collaboration in the widest possible sense, sometimes undertaking work without payment, sharing expertise and providing information, introducing contacts and working at risk without formal appointments being in place.

Austerity in Practice

Although collaborative working potentially creates a less antagonistic and stressful working environment, facilitating better individual performance, and subsequently better team and project performance, it is still met with scepticism. Suspicion of realisable benefits as claimed emerge; for example, cost savings for clients from collaborative working are perceived to have become exaggerated over time. Further, partners lower down the supply chain provide anecdotal evidence of where they have suffered financially. Such 'ghost stories' reinforce fears and anxieties over risks within

the industry, and promote a reluctance to move away from traditional working methods.

Indeed, a continued reliance on experience and the familiar appears to be providing comfort; competitive tendering and traditional procurement have been the norm for many years (Mason 2006). In periods of insecurity and uncertainty, it may simply not be the right time to implement new practices that are relatively untested. This fear of the unknown can also be related to the personal uncertainty felt by construction professionals, unwilling to take risks. Job security and 'playing safe' in times of austerity may be influencing procurement practices.

The perceived lack of financial benefits or incentives to move towards collaborative practices appears to have grown in influence. A short term focus either remains, or has returned to those who embarked on collaborative strategies, favouring contract award through lowest bid price, rather than exploring other criteria which may enable the development of long term collaborative relationships. Initial capital tender costs are seen by some clients as most important, irrespective of the fact that there are many authoritative claims that low bid costs lead to higher final accounts and poor life cycle value. Indeed, as suggested by the RICS (2012) and Morgan (2009), short term commercial interests override the principles and perceived benefits of partnering. As the economic climate puts financial strain on many construction organisations, the management of cash-flow and financial accounting becomes ever more focused.

Other work practices were also felt to have been affected by austerity. The potential for clients to provide a continuous supply of work (Mason 2006) has become more problematic, again minimising the potential implementation of partnering in practice. Resources within organisations have become stymied; investment in CPD, training programmes and systems designed for integration with other partnering organisations has significantly reduced, restricting developments towards more collaborative processes. This has been felt most in the context of Building Information Modelling (BIM), which requires investment in technology and participation in new systems to support collaborative project teams.

For collaborative practices to succeed, a cultural shift is required (Thurairajah et al 2006), and BIM has been put forward as the necessary catalyst. Yet embracing cultural change and engaging in further training, investment and CPD is presently not high on the agenda. Organisations, and the individuals who work within them, are facing an uncertain future. Industry may not feel the time is right to embark on new initiatives and methods of working practice whilst insecurity looms large.

Trust within the Austere Context

Trust is considered vital for the integration of teams and individuals in the development of collaborative working practices, as suggested by the literature (Latham 1994; Egan 1998; Larson 1997). A 'culture' of trust allows projects to move forward effectively, and creates an environment where problems can be shared and therefore solved more easily. Where trust is lost, working relationships can become untenable. However, trust is not something that can be engineered through contractual conditions, nor through procurement routes alone, but needs to be developed, built up and earned over time. The developmental nature of this process aligns with the long term vision of partnering and a procurement framework approach to construction, yet it is now challenged by austerity. The return to short term contracts and the constant quest for lowest initial bid price inhibits the development of trust between organisations.

However, where long term organisational collaboration is a potential future work-stream, the development of trust within such relationships becomes 'incentivised' and consequently active in practice. Strategic, rather than project partnering is felt to be more desirable, especially on a cluster of many projects of short duration. It is therefore suggested that trust can be generated within encouraging contexts. Potential long-term work in times of austerity needs to promote the development of personal relationships and support collaborative working.

The importance of trust was also found to be influenced by organisational position within the wider project team. Within design team-client relationships, trust was considered to be vital and fundamental to project success, however in client-contractor relationships this was less important. Clients' and contractors' roles are considered to be diametrically opposite, and whilst partnerships and collaborative working relationships are desirable, they do not guarantee profit or even survival. Abuse of trust, depending on position within the project hierarchy can lead to abuse of practice. Client and design team changes are expected to be absorbed in budgets in 'the spirit of collaborative arrangements'. This is another perspective to be considered in the challenges of partnering and collaborative working.

One individual was critical of the development and employment of trust within the wider organisational context. Either positively or negatively, communications, commitment, confidence, teamwork and personalities of individual team members were all found to be important elements in the building of trust in organisational operations, as suggested by Walker (2009); although the strength of trust is more dependent on individual personal relationships, developed from mutual respect, rather than simply 'good' working relationships. Austerity has further influenced personal relationships, as individuals become more focused on their own individual situations, rather than wider organisational concerns, reflecting growing uncertainty (Thurairajah et al 2006). Trust generated from previous relationships and dealings and between individuals at senior levels is regarded as critical in the cascading of trust throughout organisations, and between those currently operating partnering arrangements. An integrated project team needs to communicate well and operate within an environment of trust, leading to 'an upward cycle of trust' (Cheung et al 2003).

At an operational level, 'human' factors such as integrity, honesty, consistency, reliability and competency are regarded as important in facilitating good collaborative working. Such factors are suggested by Thuraujarah et al (2006) and Cheung et al (2001) as vital for the greater integration of project teams, providing the right environment for partnering to succeed. Yet, hard factors are also put forward as crucial in the partnering process: experience, technical ability, education and competence of individuals, management systems, resources, and commitment of the organisations. For partnering to succeed, in the contemporary climate, the development of trust needs all the help it can get.

Effects of austerity on Collaborative Procurement

The study revealed for the most part that although trusting collaborative working relationships are desirable, they will not guarantee profit margins and survival in a very difficult and competitive economic climate. Partnering could disadvantage lower levels of the supply chain, especially when dealing with more powerful partners. In certain circumstances partnering arrangements allow clients to 'bully' contractors into accepting unfair returns under the banner of a collaborative arrangement. Members of

the supply chain at higher levels may lead their partners to financial loss on some projects.

Reinforcing the views of Mason (2006) the study confirms that competitive tendering and traditional procurement have been the norm for many years. As such, in times of austerity when there is much insecurity and uncertainty, it may not simply be the right time to be engaging in new practices that are relatively speaking still not properly tested. There is a fear of the unknown and some construction professionals are not prepared to take the associated risks. Job security and 'playing safe' in times of austerity may override the adoption of collaborative working practices.

The research findings support the view of Beach et al. (2005), Oyegoke et al. (2009) and Wolstenholme (2009) in that professional development, education and training, operational and cultural change and commitment to continual improvement would be required if partnering, in austere times especially, is going to succeed in the future. Along with the recommendation of Morrell (2011) this could also bring cost savings to the industry in terms of buildability, standardisation, prefabrication and value engineering. Organisations are still looking to the short term and favouring selection of lowest tenders rather than looking at other criteria which may promote long term collaborative benefits.

The study also found that the current economic climate is putting a financial strain on many construction organisations and this is particularly the case with smaller consultants, main contractors, and subcontractors. Findings indicate that this could be adversely affecting the deployment of resources and affordability of initiatives linked to embracing partnering and collaborative working philosophies. The study also finds that smaller organisations may not be investing in CPD, training programmes and systems designed to integrate with other partnering organisations. This argument is consistent with the findings of Dainty et al. (2001) which suggests that there is sometimes reluctance from organisations and individuals to expend time and resources in developing collaborative relationships, especially when affordability is an issue.

CONCLUSIONS

The current economic climate appears to have significantly influenced the trust element in collaborative procurement. Collaboration appears to have been undermined from a number of positions. From the perspective of individuals, job security has become paramount, influencing choices made within work practices, and leading to reluctance to take risks. From an organisational perspective, collaborative working is no longer an attractive prospect in uncertain economic times. Long-stated, sceptical arguments against partnering have gained credibility as tales of abuse in organisational relationships and the trust on which they are based, have emerged. A return to traditional competitive practices has been driven by perceptions that partnering is expensive; there is a need to assure lowest possible price at bid stage.

Austerity appears to be incentivising some to deploy market leverage to achieve lowest price tenders. Long term best value is less important. This not only hinders, but potentially abuses the development of collaborative working. Clients are trying to 'squeeze' contractors, and, in response, contractors are seeking profit through commercial claims and variations, and by squeezing lower levels in the supply chain.

A return to traditional practices offers psychological security and appears to focus on what matters most in austere times; money. Yet this is a very short term perspective,

and a lack of investment in collaborative training and innovations such as BIM could result in missing the industry's next major technological shift in practice.

Collaborative procurement may be perceived as a risky alternative to traditional competitive tendering, and logically, it is unlikely to be launched by clients as a new initiative in austere times. Given that austerity is forecast to last by some commentators for a decade or more, and many clients who have previously practiced collaboration are reverting back to market testing through open and competitive traditional bidding, it is possible that the market share of collaborative procurement systems, based on trust, will fall further into decline. However, BIM may be the initiative that 'keeps the collaborative procurement flag flying'? More research is recommended to explore the approach to collaboration in current market conditions, and to examine the emergent issues over a longer time period, when the consequences of the shift back to traditional procurement processes has begun to impact on the success of projects.

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