



Lessons Learned on the Importance of Establishing a Partnership for Large Projects

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As Federal projects have grown in complexity, scope, and urgency, many organizations choose to partner with their implementing organizations to enhance communications and trust and to facilitate keeping the project on track to completion. The Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command (NAVFAC) overhaul of the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in Georgia utilized partnering with its contractors to successfully complete a large-scale dry dock overhaul on a very tight schedule.

Discussion:

Background

Early and deliberate establishment of a partnering relationship can lead to success in large scale projects. Partnering encourages a foundation of trust to be built up between the parties in anticipation of future difficult conversations and decisions such as change orders and adjustments to the schedule, including schedule delays.

Discussion

An example of partnering was the dry dock project at Kings Bay in Georgia, which reopened in October 2022. The dry dock serves as a cornerstone in the nation's strategic deterrence. It stands more than 130-feet tall, extends more than 1,100-ft in length and is the dry dock of the Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Georgia, the largest covered dry dock on the east coast. To establish trust and transparency at all levels, the parties' leadership met weekly without a set agenda to discuss field level concerns with the intent of coming up with ways to resolve and overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. These weekly discussions built the foundation for the project's success and created the forum of the parties to allow anyone to pick up the phone when an issue arose and have the trust that a direct conversation would resolve the issue. The expansive overhaul project included full electrical overhaul, complete systematic mechanical replacements, significant concrete repair within the dock basin, structural enhancements throughout the facility, and overhaul of the dry dock's two 85-T bridge cranes, which included simultaneous execution of all work scopes within a time constraint of 15-months at a cost of over \$340M. For the project to maintain such a tight schedule, the project team worked 24-hours per day, seven days per week for the full 15-months. Each party had a specific interest in the project, but not all wanted to or needed to be involved in the entire renovation. The dry dock capitalization project was a complete success, but was not without challenges, which were overcome through partnering.¹

Early in a project's lifecycle, leadership within the parties, including the government and its contractor team, must work hard to establish trust through transparency at all levels. One element of a partnering relationship is setting an end goal so that all the partners can work towards that goal. For partnering to be successful, there are a few key practices that need to be incorporated early in the project beyond trust and collaboration. These practices include accountability, communications, expectations, and transparency.

For accountability, all partners are expected to take responsibility for their portion of the effort and to complete their work on time. These efforts can occur simultaneously, with little schedule float, and by setting clear benchmarks to hold each party accountable.

For communication, tightly scheduled projects require clear and consistent communications throughout the life of the project. Partners should hold weekly situation report meetings to track project status, discuss future milestones and

project requirements, and identify issues. These meetings can prove to be invaluable for discussing project issues in real-time and keeping action items on track. Meeting minutes should be shared each week to document progress and resolutions. Regular communications, i.e., weekly meetings, can prove invaluable when issues are identified which allow the team to discuss options to these issues in real-time. One possible outcome could be to change the design approach to resolve the identified issue. Through the course of project completion, many situational report meetings should be held committing the project to consistent communications.

For expectations, clearly communicating and defining expectations at the beginning of a project is critical to accomplishing the goals of the project. This could allow the parties to understand the needed design requirements, and discuss the impacts to cost, schedule and feasibility. The parties would be able to meet a major user benefit through potentially major or minor changes, but all agreed to by all parties.

For transparency, it is important that all the parties are able to trust one another, even though they may have never worked together in the past. Transparency in a project team can help reduce the likelihood of parties drifting towards self-preservation and helps dialogue toward potential design changes and solutions. After evaluating the impact of changes, the parties could discuss any scope change(s) to determine the change(s) with the least impact to the overall project schedule.

Conclusion

The NAVFAC overhaul of the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in Georgia utilized partnering with its contractors to successfully accomplish a complex tightly scheduled project with multiple efforts occurring simultaneously. This partnering arrangement utilized key practices to achieve their common goals. The key practices were based on trust and collaboration and included accountability, communications, expectations, and transparency.

Recommended Actions:

1. Set up a partnering arrangement with all parties of your project to enhance trust and collaboration.
2. Set up common goals to achieve the project and hold all parties accountable.
3. Commit to frequent and consistent communications utilizing meetings as frequent as weekly to communicate and resolve issues in real-time.
4. Identify and communicate expectations so that all parties can understand the need, feasibility, and impacts of meeting the identified expectations.
5. Allow all parties to express their secondary goals that may be parallel but not direct benefit of the overall goal of project completion. This can help in instilling trust amongst the different parties.

Critical Decision(s): All

Facility Type(s): All

Work Functions(s): Project Management

Technical Discipline(s): All

References:

1. The Military Engineer, May-June 2023 edition, *Lessons Learned from the Kings Bay Dry Dock Renovation*, Lt. Cdr. John Orr, PE, PMP, CEC, USN.