

The Project Collaboration Toolbox: What Should Your Team Use?

Keith A. Reester, Jr.



Keith is an FMI consultant who helps companies with construction management and streamlining of operations. He specializes in organizational team

building, motivation and leadership, and continuous improvement programs for contractors and owners.

303.377.4740 kreester@fminet.com

IN BRIEF Most contractors have had some experience with “partnering.” But there’s more to partnering than just meeting to kick off a project. FMI recognizes four levels of team building, with the highest level representing a true collaboration in which the entire project team — from executives to field personnel — work together throughout the project for the benefit of all the team members.

Every day, contractors and owners spend countless dollars on conflict and wasted time, money, and expertise. In the 1980s, construction professionals looked for new means to achieve project goals of finishing on time, on budget, and safely, and partnering was one of these means. Throughout the past two decades, almost every construction professional has been involved in some form of “partnering,” from “touchy/feely” types to “hard-nosed brass tacks” types. In FMI’s experience of partnering more than 1,500 projects worldwide, representing \$30 billion of

in-place construction, we have identified several critical keys to partnering success.

WHERE DOES YOUR TEAM STAND?

First, think of a project you are currently involved in when reviewing *Exhibit 1*. This table reflects FMI’s “Levels of Team Building,” a method for evaluating every project team on any construction job. The table has four columns. The column on the far left represents the increasing levels of team building. The second column, “Relationship,” reflects the type of rapport under which the team operates. The third column, “Team Culture,” indicates how problems are solved throughout the project team. The fourth column, “Team Focus/Results,” represents the focus of the team when driving toward the finish line of the project.

The Baseline Level

The “baseline level” can be defined as how the construction industry has typically done business historically. Most project teams default to this level when a project is just beginning. For teams operating at this level, the project is like a poker game. (“I’m going to hold my cards as long as I can and hope that you fold so I can take a big share of the pot.”) This team level is defined by the characteristics in *Exhibit 2*.

Level 1

At Level 1, teams take a step toward building a collaborative solution

to finish the project (*see Exhibit 3*). The team offers a minimal effort to mutually assure fellow team members’ success on the project. Most teams made up of quality contractors, subcontractors, designers, and owners operate at this level.

Level 2

Project teams that actively seek to build high-quality working relationships with their other team members can progress to Level 2 (*see Exhibit 4*). At this stage, teams are focused on not only meeting the project goals, but also on potentially beating them. Additionally, there is active involvement at the project sponsorship (executive) level.

Level 3

In FMI’s experience, less than 5% of all project teams rise to Level 3 during the course of a project (*see Exhibit 5*). Several factors contribute to this low percentage, but teams can aspire to achieve this level.

ASSESSING YOUR TEAM

Look again at *Exhibit 1* and think about your current teams. In each of those three columns (Relationship, Team Culture, Team Focus/Results), place a check mark where you believe your project teams are today. What are the areas in which you lack? At what level would you like your project teams to perform? Is Level 3 attainable for your teams? No matter where you assess the performance of your project teams, there is always room for improvement.

TEAM BUILDING FOR SUCCESS

If team building is implemented in a progressive and proactive manner, outstanding results can be achieved. FMI characterizes teams that perform at Levels 2 and 3 as “high-performance

Exhibit 1: Four Levels of Team Building

| | Relationship | Team Culture | Team Focus/Results |
|-----------------|--|---|--|
| Level 3 | Total organizational commitment Seamless integration | Cross-organizational problem solving Craft workers Inspector/owner representatives Discipline engineers | Major innovative breakthroughs |
| Level 2 | Shared accountability Structured reporting process | Senior-level "sponsors" Proactive versus reactive | Improved contract performance |
| Level 1 | Commitment to mutual goals | Early identification and intervention | Achievement of project goals; no claims |
| Baseline | Client monitors and inspects contractor | Reactive; blame assigned | Contractual rights and responsibilities |

teams.” Simply put, high-performance teams are characterized by success built on accountability, follow-through, and commitment to operating as a team. Partnering can help a team move from Baseline or Level 1 up to a high-performance team. But which partnering tools are best to move a team up the ladder? *Exhibit 6* outlines key components in the “Project Collaboration Tool Box,” as well as how these components relate to teams operating at all team-building levels.

MOVING AWAY FROM THE BASELINE — BASIC PARTNERING (LEVEL 1)

As illustrated in *Exhibit 5*, baseline teams will not use any of the partnering tools successfully to help them break

from the cycle of finger-pointing and underachievement.

The first step in moving away from a baseline project team is the team kickoff session. This is the step most people associate with partnering — meeting in a room to talk about issues. A successful team kickoff session must have four components:

- *Project Charter* — The objective in this exercise is to develop a clear understanding of the goals for the project and which are of the highest priority. It is similar to creating a “rules of engagement” for how the team will do business moving forward. A project charter is also an outstanding tool to communicate team views to new

companies and people as they come on board.

- *Issue Resolution Matrix* — Development of an issue resolution matrix, which outlines how issues will be escalated and to whom, is essential. This document creates a framework for resolving issues in a timely and fair manner.

- *Rocks in the Road Problem Solving* — Project teams can benefit tremendously from brainstorming potential obstacles to the success of the project, developing root cause analysis, and then action planning to resolve those “rocks in the road.” Proactive problem solving lets project personnel focus on the project

Exhibit 2: Baseline Level of Team Building

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Relationship | “Client monitors and inspects contractor” | In this scenario, the objective of the owner’s representatives is to look over the shoulder of every move a project team makes, leaving little room for creativity or, hopefully, errors. Project team members have no trust in their other partners. |
| Team Culture | “Reactive; blame assigned” | When a problem arises a finger-pointing contest breaks out to see who can blame someone else for the problem. |
| Team Focus/ Results | “Contractual rights and responsibilities” | Often when problems arise, the contract is the first discussion point versus trying to solve the problem and utilizing the contract to support that solution. |

Exhibit 3: Level 1 of Team Building

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Relationship | “Commitment to mutual goals” | Key team members have met to discuss and agree upon critical goals related to the success of the project. Each organization understands the viewpoint of other team members, and everyone realizes how that understanding positively impacts each other’s success. |
| Team Culture | “Early identification and intervention” | As opposed to pointing fingers when a problem arises, team members seek to solve that problem for the success of the project. Also, team members actively seek to identify and solve problems before they occur versus just “fighting fires” as problems arise. |
| Team Focus/ Results | “Achievement of project goals; no claims” | The team meets the schedule and the budget with no need to go to arbitration or litigation for final resolution of any outstanding issues. |

Exhibit 4: Level 2 of Team Building

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Relationship | “Shared accountability – structured reporting process” | The team has developed a methodology to share accountability for successes, failures, and problems across all organizations involved in the team. FMI’s “Stand & Deliver” model is one such method. Senior-level sponsors meet regularly to receive an update on key project goals, project successes, and issues that need to be escalated from a joint team of project level personnel. |
| Team Culture | “Senior-level sponsors – proactive versus reactive” | Typically, senior-level project team members only get involved when there is a problem. In a Level 2 team, these executives are involved more frequently, giving feedback, removing obstacles, and celebrating successes with the day-to-day project team. This is not stepping in to manage a job day-to-day to keep it from losing money. |
| Team Focus/ Results | “Improved contract performance” | Beat one or all of the three key project goals – schedule, budget, and/or quality. |

instead of “fire fighting” issues as they arise.

■ *Action Plan Forward* — A critical take-away from any team kickoff session should be a clear action plan for follow-up, more rocks in the road problem solving, and maintenance of the issue resolution matrix.

If you end your efforts with only a kickoff session, then your team is missing a tremendous opportunity to enhance your odds of success. Teams often see the kickoff as a stand-alone event and then head back to the job site and operate like a baseline team. Just hosting a kickoff session may help a

team improve, but it is only a step along the path to overall team success.

BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL TEAM — TEAM PARTNERING (LEVEL 2)

Teams seeking to rise to the next level of team building success need to embrace a partnering mentality in which each team member feels accountable for their actions as well as the success of other team members. The first step in rising to Level 2 is “beginning with the end in mind,” seeking to lay a successful foundation for long-term team building throughout the life of the project. Before starting with a kickoff session, a Level 2 team will actually begin with an executive team session, with only the project

sponsor and project management levels of each organization attending the meeting. In this session, the project leadership will seek to create a shared vision of success. Essential components of executive team sessions are:

■ *Project Vision Alignment* — Each organization comes to the table with critical needs to assure success. By defining these critical needs and aligning those needs with other team organizations, a clear vision of success can be defined.

■ *Cross-organizational team structure* — How will the team successfully operate across company lines and disciplinary

Exhibit 5: Level 3 of Team Building

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Relationship | <p>“Total organizational commitment – seamless integration”</p> | <p>The team has developed into one organization focused on the project success versus individual company success. There is an understanding among all team members that “in order for my organization to succeed, yours must succeed as well.” If “outsiders” sat in on a project meeting, they would only be able to ascertain that everyone worked for the project, not the individual companies involved.</p> |
| Team Culture | <p>“Cross-organizational problem solving – craft workers, inspector/owner representatives, discipline engineers”</p> | <p>On most jobs, problem solving is limited to project managers and possibly superintendents, but in a fully integrated Level 3 team, every team member plays a role. Level 3 teams reach out to all positions in the project team, including craft people and design engineers, to seek input on opportunities for improvement.</p> |
| Team Focus/ Results | <p>“Major innovative breakthroughs”</p> | <p>Not only does the team beat schedule, budget, and/or quality goals, new methods for design, construction, and operation are created.</p> |

lines? Answering this question during the executive team session is critical to successfully handling difficult issues that arise during the project.

■ *Clear roles and Responsibilities* — Roles must be clearly defined for the critical organizations in the project, as well as for the individual roles of executives, project managers, and field level personnel. This component can be especially important in projects where owners, designers, suppliers, and contractors have not worked together before.

■ *Project-wide team building plan* — If each organization is willing to support a

successful team, clearly defining a team building plan for the length of the project will help assure success. This team building plan should define frequency of follow-up, team accountability reporting structure, and regular plans to celebrate success.

Team Follow-up Sessions

Successful teams know that having an executive team session and kickoff session are not enough. At critical milestones, the project team must regroup to assess adherence to the project charter and issue resolution matrix, to identify new rocks in the road and how to overcome them, and to

clearly resolve any outstanding team issues.

Stand and Deliver Accountability Structure

Level 2 teams should have a clearly defined accountability structure, and building a “Stand and Deliver” process is a successful method to achieve that. The stand and deliver format consists of a joint team of project-level personnel that reports on a regular basis to a joint team of project executive-level personnel. These reports include:

- a brief synopsis of how the team is performing against the specified goals defined in the project charter

Exhibit 6: Project Collaboration Toolbox

| | Industry Average | Basic Partnering | Partnering | High-Performance Team |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Levels of Team Building</i> | <i>Baseline</i> | <i>Level 1</i> | <i>Level 2</i> | <i>Level 3</i> |
| Team Kickoff Session | | X | X | X |
| <i>Project Charter</i> | | X | X | X |
| <i>Issue Resolution</i> | | X | X | X |
| <i>Rocks in the Road</i> | | X | X | X |
| <i>Action Plan Forward</i> | | X | X | X |
| Executive Team Session | | | X | X |
| <i>Cross-organizational Team Structure</i> | | | X | X |
| <i>Project Vision Alignment</i> | | | X | X |
| <i>Roles and Responsibility</i> | | | X | X |
| <i>Project-wide Team Building Plan</i> | | | X | X |
| Stand & Deliver Accountability Structure | | | X | X |
| Celebration of Success | | | X | X |
| <i>Passive</i> | | | X | |
| <i>Active</i> | | | | X |
| Crew Level Input | | | | X |
| <i>Passive</i> | | | | X |
| <i>Active</i> | | | | X |
| Team Building Activities | | | | X |
| Issue/Process-Specific Team Sessions | | | | X |
| Post-Project Team Review | | | | X |

- recent successes
- any issues that need to be escalated to the executive level for resolution.

For a framework of this nature to work, several critical steps must occur. First, the team must define measurable, agreed-upon metrics for success on each of the critical goals or success factors defined in the charter. These metrics should include difficult-to-define goals such as quality and communication. These measures then must be clearly communicated to the entire team as the benchmark for success. The other

difficult problems — can really boost a team's efforts. Examples of celebrations of success are team-wide barbecues to celebrate safety achievements, distributions of t-shirts or hats with a team project logo on them, "topping out" celebrations, and project-wide family picnics.

ACHIEVING OPTIMUM SUCCESS — HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS (LEVEL 3)

A top-flight team can succeed in several different ways — significantly beating the schedule and budget, or actually meeting those requirements on

suggestions are reviewed by a project committee, which seeks to implement viable suggestions as well as give feedback to everyone who participated in suggesting opportunities.

- *Active Crew Level Input* — In this scenario, project leadership actively invites team members into specifically scheduled OFI sessions to seek their input for improvements. Worthwhile initiatives are implemented, and individuals and/or teams are recognized for their contribution.

Issue/Process-Specific Sessions

Every project has specific processes or rocks in the road that can be improved. A Level 3 team will seek to improve these processes not just for this job, but for all future jobs. In issue/process-specific sessions, a project-wide team, made up of key individuals with responsibility for the issue or having a specific expertise, will meet to identify the current issue or process, put current practices on a flow chart, and then redevelop the process by eliminating non-value-added steps. Once completed, the new initiative is published project-wide and implemented.

Team Building Activities

Highly advanced teams recognize the advantages of having team members know each other personally and the value of people having shared experiences. Project-related team building activities meet both of these needs. Examples of team building activities range from on-site actions such as "Job Site Minefield" to "Lost in the Wilderness" programs, in which teams work on a scenario with limited resources and constraints seeking to create a solution. These activities can then be correlated back to work-related activities. Other

To operate at the highest level of performance, the entire team must have an understanding of the project goals and actively participate in achieving them.

crucial component of making a stand and deliver process successful is full executive participation and support. Executive personnel must commit to providing their time and resources to working on a proactive basis with the team, as opposed to being reactive and getting involved only when problems arise.

Celebrate Success

Good teams celebrate the success of the entire team, as well as its individual members. Typically in construction, organizations celebrate only their own successes, but a Level 2 team celebrates successes across the entire project team. Celebrating success recognizes outstanding accomplishments and builds team camaraderie and morale. Regularly scheduled celebrations of success — for example, at critical milestones or after

a very challenging project. Today's construction marketplace and regulatory environment make nearly every project a test — whether it is a fast schedule, EPA or code impacts, or just a tight budget — and creating high-performance teams can help these tough jobs be a success.

To operate at the highest level of performance, the entire team must have an understanding of the project goals and actively participate in achieving them. One critical component is crew level input, of which there are two styles: passive and active.

- *Passive Crew Level Input* — The project team has an Opportunities for Improvement (OFI) program, which gives individuals the chance to make suggestions for the improvement of the team or the project. Once submitted,

on-site options include personality or communications-style profiles that help team members understand their behavior as well as the behavior of others.

At an even-more-involved level, teams can take these activities off-site and couple them with meetings — for example, stand and deliver sessions or celebrations of success. These efforts can involve events such as Outward Bound-style programs, river rafting, attending sports contests together, or learning a new skill simultaneously.

Post-Project Team Review

Every project should reconvene the entire team from executives to the field level and develop a full “postmortem” on the project, the objective being to collect lessons learned for all partners and to develop plans for improvement on future projects. Additionally, a fantastic time for a final team celebration is after the post-project review.

BUILDING YOUR TEAM FOR SUCCESS

Success breeds success, and once you have one project team that rises to Level 3, you’ll want every team to operate at the top of their game. But don’t be fooled. Moving from the baseline or Level 1 to Level 3 is very difficult and will take a serious commitment of time and resources. Two critical factors should be considered when deciding what level of partnering you want to develop on your project: first, your team’s past partnering experience, and, second, the complexity of the project. Teams with some partnering experience will be more likely to make a fast progression up the levels of team building. Project complexity can also play a critical role. The more complex the project, the more likely you need to consider moving toward a high-performance team.

FMI’s experience and research in the construction industry has shown that less than 5% of all teams achieve Level 3 status during a project, and once achieved it must be worked at to be maintained. But if you think about where you put those checkmarks on the levels of team building, do you believe that your teams can be better? If so, decide which partnering tools you need to take that step forward, commit to the process, and move toward building that success.