

Deconstructing partnering in project-based organisation: Seven pillars, seven paradoxes and seven deadly sins

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Abstract

Despite the attention paid to partnering in the construction sector in recent years, prescriptive approaches tend to dominate the field and there is a dearth of critically informed work that attempts to understand the problems and limitations of partnering in practice. This paper seeks to redress this imbalance, by taking a critical approach that inverts some commonly-held assumptions about the relationship between partnering and organisation. To do this, the paper uses a rhetorical device devised by one of the leading exponents of partnering in construction, but in an ironic fashion to highlight some of the key underlying tensions and paradoxes when social, economic and organisational circumstances are taken into account. As such, the paper attempts to *deconstruct* more prescriptive accounts of partnering, but with the intention of moving towards a more realistic (and, hence, potentially more useful) understanding of the intricacies and dynamics of partnering in practice.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an enormous amount of interest in inter-organisational collaboration across and within supply chains, including within project-based settings, as researchers and practitioners have sought to understand the factors leading to and inhibiting successful collaboration amongst firms. The construction industry has been no exception to this rule and, more or less in parallel with the wider interest in collaborative inter-organisational relationships, there has been a proliferation of books, articles and reports devoted to exploring the theory and practice of partnering in construction (for a review see [1]).

Prominent among this work have been studies undertaken in the UK, which seek to distil what is currently known about partnering into a set of principles that can be used as the basis for practical recommendations [2,3].

These principles are perhaps most eloquently expressed in *The Seven Pillars of Partnering* [4], which neatly sets out many of the major elements that most commentators within the sector would probably agree are essential if a collaborative approach is to be successful. Other reports are available too that mark out similar foundations for a more collaborative approach to projects by clients and contractors [5–10].

As valuable as these reports are, they nevertheless represent only one shade of opinion on the nature and prospects for partnering in construction. More critical views on the benefits and limitations of partnering tend to get overlooked or ignored [11,12]. Instead, an emphasis is put on the search for general principles and universally applicable tools and techniques that can be used to support partnering. While this may be a highly desirable aim, the effect of this more prescriptive approach is to promote a model of partnering that is stylised and abstracted from any immediate practical context in which it might be applied. Moreover, the research upon which any examples of ‘good practice’ are identified is typically limited in scope as well as

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often heavily reliant on supportive case studies and anecdotal evidence. Rarely is partnering systematically examined in sufficient depth (or from different points of view) to present a fully rounded and convincing picture of its practical benefits and limitations.

Such limitations in the theory and research database underpinning partnering might not be so problematic were it not for the fact that the development and success of partnering is seen as dependent upon many intangible and elusive cognitive and social aspects, such as attitudes, motivations, openness and trust [13]. It has been argued elsewhere that the research to date in the construction management field is very limited in the extent to which it adequately explores psychological and social aspects of partnering based upon theory and research in the social sciences [1,14]. In particular, there is a lack of attention paid to the effects of power and influence in inter-organisational relations [15]. This is despite the importance attached in contemporary accounts to the effects of power in supply chain relations as well as in other forms of inter-organisational relationship, such as networks and strategic alliances [16–18].

Furthermore, it is quite clear that even ‘hard’ elements of partnering in construction seldom receive proper, systematic attention. So, for example, although most formulations refer to the benefits of using financial incentives to reinforce collaboration on projects, the positive effects of doing so tend to be presumed, rather than proven [19]. Likewise, information technology is often assumed to be a vital tool for integration between organisations, despite evidence of unintended consequences and of the premium placed upon social relationships in partnering situations [20].

There is therefore much to be gained from a more critical account of partnering in construction – not only through any contribution that it might make to discourses of change within the sector, but also through what a critical examination of partnering in construction might have to say about the governance and conduct of inter-organisational relations in project environments more generally [21]. This paper therefore sets out to present an alternative perspective on partnering in construction that draws much more heavily than existing accounts upon critical thinking about organisations and their management [22]. In particular, the approach emphasises the importance of viewing partnering from multiple perspectives and departing from the unitarist assumptions about the nature of organisational or inter-organisational practices that tend to underpin research on partnering. It also acknowledges the contested nature of much theory and research that is used to explore particular aspects of partnering, emphasising the importance of context (economic, social, organisational and institutional) in understanding the formulation, implementation and success or failure of partnering in practice.

To develop this perspective, the paper employs a framing device based on the one used by Bennett and Jayes in *The Seven Pillars of Partnering* [4]. However, it does so in

an ironic fashion, to explore the many inconsistencies and contradictions embedded within the approach. The argument presented here is that, by inverting the assumptions one makes about the nature of collaboration in practice, each of these ‘seven pillars’ can easily be transformed into a fundamental paradox that, in fact, makes successful partnering less likely. To support the argument, the paper draws upon the existing research-based literature, including the author’s own recent empirical work on partnering in construction and on learning and change in project-based environments [23]. Based on this secondary data, the paper consequently attempts a *deconstruction* [24] of the functionalist, prescriptive view of partnering represented in such works. In adopting this approach, it explores the many ways in which the prescriptive approach fails to acknowledge and incorporate critical success factors that not only help in an understanding of partnering on projects, but which can also determine its application and effectiveness in practice.

Although the orientation of this paper is a critical one, it should be emphasised that the intention is to contribute constructively towards the debate about partnering in the particular circumstances of the construction industry as well as in project-based environments more generally. The critique presented is not of partnering *per se*, but of the highly prescriptive approach commonly used by advocates to present their case. The presumption here is that a more realistic and grounded understanding of the intricacies and dynamics of a partnering relationship can only be helpful in developing more complete, appropriate and effective recommendations for partnering in practice. With regard to partnering itself, the implication to be drawn from the paper is that it involves the management of a number of contradictions or paradoxes, making it a much more challenging approach than some earlier, more prescriptive accounts tend to make out.

2. The Seven Pillars of Partnering

Partnering in construction involves a commitment by organisations to co-operate to achieve common business objectives. Sometimes the term is used solely to refer to long term commercial relationships, whereas ‘alliancing’ refers to collaboration on single projects. At other times, the terms are used interchangeably. Indeed, there is some debate concerning the feasibility of short term, single project partnering, given the lack of repeat business in construction which can make it difficult to establish long term commercial relationships [13]. There is also debate concerning the practices associated with partnering. Some take a pragmatic approach, emphasising the use of charters and dispute resolution mechanisms, contractual incentives, teambuilding workshops and similar formal tools and techniques [25]. Others stress the importance of informal social relationships and the more emergent nature of relationships built on trust [26]. Either way, partnering is very much seen as an ongoing process, in which progress is

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