

## Strangers, Friends, and Partners

By Hal Macomber

AEC projects are different from projects everywhere else in life. When we do a project at home we do it with people we know and trust. When we do a project with members of our church, club, or neighborhood, we are doing it with people we know. When a company brings together a group of people to design or launch a new product chances are most participants know each other. The same is usually the case in the software development world. Not so in the AEC industry.

In the AEC world, a group of strangers is thrown together by the selection and contracting process. Even when clients hand-pick us, rather than going through a blind bid process, we still come together as strangers. Why does it matter that we come together as strangers?

AEC is a design/engineer-to-order business. Design is a social process that depends on the relatedness of project participants. When we see great design the people involved will often say that no one person was responsible for the design. The design emerged from repeated conversations among a broad group of participants.

Strangers never produce great designs. Only team mates can do that. Team mates have trust for one another. Each sees his or her role as helping the team succeed. That means offering help even when no one is asking for help. Our challenge in this industry is to turn strangers into friends and friends into partners. There may be no greater responsibility for project leaders. The measure of how well-related our staff is to each other, the client, and the other players (contractors, community constituents, tenants) may be **the** leading indicator for the quality of our subsequent design efforts.

The stranger phenomenon has not gone unnoticed. *Partnering* was all the rage 10 years back. Key players and their clients saw that they weren't doing their best work acting as a collection of client-performer pairs. We all know the intent: get these strangers to act as partners through a facilitated process of joint goal-setting, deep conversations, setting standards of behavior, and social activities. Great intention, but partnering didn't work. Why? Companies engaged in partnering as an event rather than an ongoing process for taking care of each other's concerns in the project. So if we can't rely on partnering for producing trust on our projects what can we do?

Project leaders can take on a role for cultivating commitment-making and eliciting individual purposes.

Here's my thinking: trust is established when strangers come to see each other as reliable performers for each other without questioning the motivation of the parties. While that can happen, it usually doesn't *just* happen. And all too often the strangers we assemble learn to distrust.

The new role of every project leader (project architect, consulting engineer, or project manager) is to shape circumstances for team members to deepen their relatedness. That happens as trust and care for each other's success are built. Our project leaders are already in a position to take these actions. Whether they say so or not, our clients expect the people assembled will function as a team. They expect those we put in charge of our projects will create that team and be responsible for cultivating and shaping it through the life of the project.

So, how do we pull this off? By redefining the role of the project leader from whatever it is today to *agent for trust*. And your role in this? Change the way you measure these people. Change what you ask of them each day. And be at his or her elbow to guide and encourage. We all want to see our people and our firms known for always delivering great design. Redefining the leader's role is the place to start.

### **Cultivating and Shaping Actions for Project Leaders** [sidebar]

Guidance for exploring the new role of *agent for trust*.

1. Explore each participant's own purposes for being on the project with an openness to redefine the project in a way that the participant gets exactly what s/he wants. Clarifying those intentions will do two things for your project. First, it honors or respects the autonomy of each participant. Second, it provides the opportunity for producing an alignment of intentions reducing the chance of hidden agendas.
2. Listen intently for signs of dissatisfaction -- where people are not getting what they perceive was promised to them. Address those situations quickly and fully. Little dissatisfactions get magnified. In no time others on the team see the leader as uncaring and unresponsive when dissatisfactions go unaddressed.
3. Help people in promising conversations. Be an agent for both the customer and performer being satisfied by the outcome of the promising conversation. The basic nature of a project has to do with requesting and promising. Each successful conversation creates a little more trust among the parties.
4. Courageously enter the situations of distrust. Speak about it. Repair it. Offer your own actions for renewing trust. Treat the situations of distrust as you would any other emergency on your project. Work it 'til it is resolved.
5. Champion satisfying the customer and the resulting fruits of your collective efforts. Keep this conversation alive throughout the project. Speaking about the importance of the project to each constituent keeps team members' attention on what is important avoiding getting lost in the day's urgencies.

Don't wait for opportunities to come along. Make opportunities to practice this role.

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