CONSTRUCTION COLLABORATION AT THE DEER PARK BYPASS

Construction of the Victoria's Deer Park Bypass is combining a standard 'design and construct' arrangement, with operational processes and systems that resemble a 'project alliance'. VicRoads and Leighton Contractors are describing the collaboration as 'One-team' contracting.

By Jonathan Schauder and Joel Gerschman

As project managers search for new ways to deliver exceptional outcomes on major projects, many are looking to adopt more innovative, collaborative processes – and to avoid the adversarial mindset that can often lead to time delays, cost blowouts, expensive legal suits and limited opportunities to add value.

The leadership group on the $331 million Deer Park Bypass is putting this vision into practice. Realising that building genuine collaboration takes more than theoretical agreement on some nice ideas, they're driving a fundamental shift in culture. It's what they call a 'one-team' approach - an embedded culture of thinking, speaking and acting as a single, unified team working towards a common goal.

To do this, they're systematically targeting all four levels of their culture: the project vision, the team mindset, the skills for implementing the mindset, and the systems and structures that support the behaviours. Here's an overview of their strategy.

Creating a boundary-pushing vision

The starting point for the new approach was a common, ambitious vision. Based on decades of experience, the leadership team understood that without a joint vision that pushes boundaries of innovation, it's hard to inspire anyone to exceed minimum standards set by a contract.

Indeed, with a catch-cry of 'performance before prescription', and clear goals of delivering outstanding outcomes in quality, cost and time, the Deer Park Bypass team set out to leave a lasting legacy for Victoria's western community.
Building a one-team mindset

Vision is important. But when controversial change events occur - like scope alterations and delays - a jointly crafted vision alone won't resolve differences. That's why the most effective projects develop a shared mindset that gives the vision practical meaning, particularly in times of conflict and change.

While 'partnering' initiatives have always expressed a mindset of respect and collaboration between teams, the Deer Park Bypass took the abstract idea of 'collaboration' and gave it tangible reality. They asked themselves the practical question: If we were operating as one, unified team shooting for a singular goal, how would we make decisions?

Their answer: not through power-based tactics or by throwing the contract at each other, but through what they call an 'Interests First' approach - a commitment to search for innovative solutions to meet each others' interests and objectives. While the contract specifications are necessary to describe the parties' intentions and rights, this perspective allowed the parties to set the contract aside while they focused on creating 'best for project' outcomes.

Honing individual skills

To translate this mindset into consistent action, 'interest-based' skills development was necessary. The leadership group recognised that without formal training, it's easy to fall into rights-based arguments or damaging power-based mechanisms, rather than using more innovative processes.

Accordingly, the group engaged collaboration experts, CMA, to conduct joint training sessions in collaborative negotiation and problem solving skills - an initiative that has already enabled fast resolution of several critical issues. For instance, when a band of endangered legless lizards threatened to delay the project's start date by up to six months, a tempting reaction would have been to review the contract to apportion responsibility and blame. Instead, with the ultimate project vision in mind, they pooled their resources to safely relocate the lizards within the required time frame, ultimately saving significant overall costs and preventing a damaging legal battle down the track.

Supporting behaviours through systems

As with many new initiatives, there's a wide and deep chasm between understanding something and routinely applying it to real-life problems. That's...
why the Deer Park Bypass sought to support the vision, mindset and skills with systems and processes for ensuring enduring behavioural change. The following are examples of some specific steps already taken:

- New approach to critical path.  
  There was always going to be controversy around end of project dates, particularly where there was an expectation to finish early. Yet, rather than waiting for confusion to set in, the leadership team created a system that rewarded exceptional performance, rather than simple adherence to prescribed timelines. This approach has already motivated a joint search for more innovative, faster solutions. Working together, they found a way to commence the project two months ahead of the construction program – a move that will bring massive gains for all parties, including the general public.

- Collaborative monitoring. Unlike traditional projects, where all parties would ‘double up’ on and engage their own monitoring and research systems, the Deer Park team took the unparalleled collaborative step of engaging an independent program advisor to monitor and report on current progress. This enabled the team to focus jointly on where to do better, rather than on where they are now. And instead of getting ready for a battle between their experts when issues arose, the team decided that it would be easier and faster to share a trusted expert who could guide them towards an optimal, efficient and legitimate solution.

- A matrix structure with co-location. 
  Both partners learned quickly that operating as separate hierarchies would compromise collaboration and optimal integration. That’s why they created a revolutionary delivery matrix to ensure that the right people were accountable for the right roles – without reference to VicRoads or Leighton, and regardless of authority. Teams and titles were assigned on a project needs basis, and work was allocated on a foundation of ‘best for project’ – how can we best get the job done? The result was an effective, integrated structure ready to respond to the challenges of a major project.

In accordance with research around best practice alliances, the Deer Park Bypass chose to enable this integrated structure by housing both teams on one location. The leadership group understood that one of the biggest barriers to collaboration is fragmented and uncoordinated communication. Not surprisingly, this physical integration has already enabled regular face-to-face interaction for fast issue resolution, better understanding of each other’s operating culture, and enhanced trust levels and team atmosphere though bonding opportunities.

- Project coach. Finally, a project coach – an expert in the fields of negotiation, collaborative problem solving and conflict management – was appointed as a member of the leadership group. The project coach would ‘sit-in’ on meetings to provide strategic advice, and would assist the leadership group to facilitate discussions with team members around any difficult staff issues that arose.

Progress to date

So far, the Deer Park Bypass has already achieved exceptional results: it’s ahead of schedule, it’s achieved fast and optimal resolution of issues that might otherwise have sidelined the project, and it’s demonstrated significant leadership in terms of best-practice collaboration. Indeed, a growing number of major road projects have already begun to adopt aspects of the one-team approach.

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