PARTNERING

MAGAZINE
WWW.PARTNERINGINSTITUTE.ORG

Issue 30
Winter 2020

NEXT-LEVEL PARTNERING

How you WILL benefit from a Collaborative Partnering Program

INSIDE:

IPI INTERNATIONAL PARTNERING INSTITUTE

Why Vulnerability and Challenging Conversations Are the Only Way

At the start of all partnering sessions, we lay out the rules of engagement. The second rule is always frank, open conversations. The only time that partnering sessions fail, is when we neglect to bring up the issues and avoid talking about certain topics, whatever they may be.

Earlier this year I was engaged with a project team at a major airport on the East Coast. The project had been experiencing some major challenges and the team was struggling. The first hour or so had started with the owner challenging some of the decisions that the contractor had made. At a break, the president of the construction firm pulled me aside and mentioned that there was a rumor going around that the construction manager was going

to quit. The contractor was upset that the owner had been challenging their management, when the CM and the owner were experiencing issues, as well. "We have to bring up this challenge to the owner," I said. However, the president of the firm disagreed. He did not want to "get into it" with the owner over this issue and said it was just a rumor that was going around the jobsite. Again, I challenged the decision, but he insisted.

As we wrapped up, what turned out to be a pretty positive meeting after all, the CM walked directly up to me and said, "Neal, it has been great working with you. I am quitting this afternoon. Good luck." The rumor was true, and now everyone was going their separate ways and we didn't have a chance to discuss it as a team.
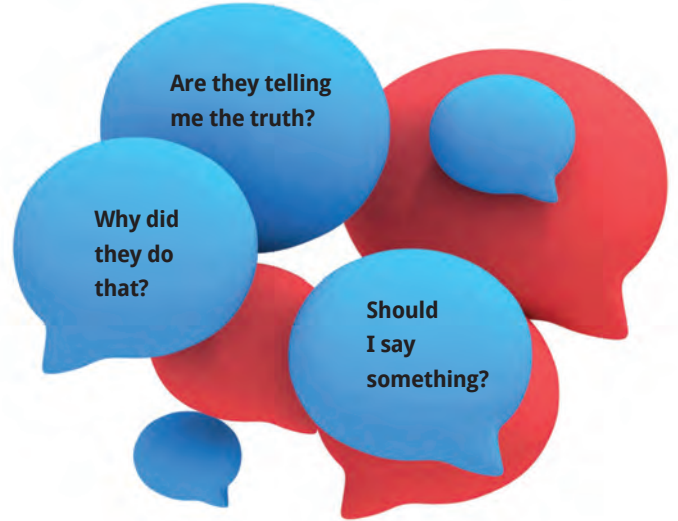
I was totally thrown off guard. Why didn't this person bring up this change in the partnering session? Were they trying to play games with team members? I quickly grabbed the principals of the owner and contractor, facilitating a quick discussion that worked to mend the lack of communication. Both parties were thrown for a loop on the communication, and we **recommitted to clear, transparent and honest communication**. The owner did fess up to also hearing the same rumor, but had not had the time to discuss it or come up with a plan for bringing it up.

Why is this experience important?

Gossip in the workplace is often viewed as negative and potentially destructive, but from a leader's standpoint it can be helpful and an area to build relationships and the team. When leaders hear or experience potential gossip, it is best to not perpetuate it, but to lean in and listen more. This is a chance to understand the challenge and look for potential solutions that might be a positive outcome for all parties.

Tough conversations are just that, tough. We as humans tend to want to avoid touchy or challenging subjects that could cause some consternation or disagreement. Often times, we don't want to show our weakness...we feel it would lead to being *vulnerable*. Time and time again, even on the highest performing teams, we find that *truly expressing vulnerability is the key to building trust, strengthening relationships and producing extraordinary results on your project.*

Highlighting failures can be a great exercise to create vulnerability, seek transparency and develop trust. Why on earth would anyone want to ever do this? Let's just talk about the wins and all of the good things that are happening. During a recent partnering meeting on a large, high profile mega project in Colorado, we sat down with the executives to review performance. The project was firing on all cylinders and it really was an extraordinary team. The first question I asked to the executives was, name one thing that you personally failed at over the last 3 months. What was the failure and how will you deal with it going forward? It

created an amazing conversation. The project manager, along with the contractor, admitted that he was over worked, stretched thin and needed assistance. Other

executives saw some challenges with their presence and engagement with the project. One team member even brought up a specific discussion with someone else on the team and asked for a do-over. It was one of the most dynamic and trust building conversations that I have experienced on a construction project.

One way to help encourage vulnerability is to offer praise for a job well done. Often on construction projects we are fighting one fire after another. Small wins and milestones pass by without recognition. Thoughtful praise can go a long way. What is meant by thoughtful praise, you ask? Often times we hear generic praise like, "Great job Jimmy!" Or "Way to go Barbara." Which is positive, but doesn't share the power of a specific piece of praise such as, "Jimmy, your lead on getting the team to collaborate and come up with a solution around that RFI really helped get the team back on track and saved time and money." Sometimes, recognition should be left up to the team. Let them plan the event, give them a budget and have them come up with the ideas and own it. More often than not, you will get something original, fun and something that truly engages the team.

Strong relationships are built of shared risk, experience and working through adversity. The more that we are able to freely share these experiences and vulnerabilities, the closer it brings us together as more than colleagues, but actual friends. Friendships are what everyone really wants at the end of large projects. These large projects are often long periods of time. Three, four, sometimes many years. They are often the time equivalente of high school or college. Large chunks of time in our lives that we will remember. These experiences can be incredible, or not. Do we want to develop relationships and friendships based on vulnerability on our construction project? The choice is up to the team.

Neal Flesner, MBA, MA, MIPI
Neal Flesner, of Ventura Consulting Group, has been facilitating partnering on large, complex projects and programs since 2007. With an MBA from the University of Oregon and a Masters in Organizational Development, Neal works to enable his clients and teams to deliver extraordinary results, www.venturaconsulting.com.