

Collaborate or die?

Collaboration is increasingly recognised as a key area where construction falls woefully short. Well known Independent Commercial Mediator **Amanda Bucklow** examines some of the mental and behavioural blocks to effective collaboration.

KEY POINTS

- The human brain is hard-wired to collaborate
- But the current culture of individualism, sovereignty and allocation of blame is hardly the humus in which collaboration can flourish
- Successful collaboration demands a culture maintained by excellent skills in communication, decision-making and principled negotiation and leadership
- Communication falters remarkably when there are difficult conversations to be had
- Effective decision-making can be blocked by mental models like confirmation bias, devaluing suggestions or information because of their source, and loss aversion
- Courageous leadership is needed to recognise that the industry's problems are joint problems

Collaboration is a keyword for the construction industry. Exhortations abound for more collaboration to improve the outcomes of major projects which are failing. As a word, collaboration carries much baggage. It can mean a route to innovation, problem-solving and increasing market share and it can mean conspiring or colluding with the enemy by giving away intelligence. Our competitive world makes the latter feel more likely.

Nevertheless, the human brain is hard-wired to collaborate and has been for hundreds of thousands of years. The behaviour is fundamental to our survival because we are mammals and our young are helpless when they are born. There was a long time during our evolution when not collaborating meant certain exclusion from the group and exclusion would likely mean a long and

painful death. It really was a case of collaborate or die. Consequently, the fear of banishment helped to moderate behaviour.

Collaboration relies on an inherent understanding of interdependence. Put simply; if you do a bad job we cannot do a good job; if you withhold information, then we are likely to make the same mistakes or worse. The current culture of individualism, sovereignty and allocation of blame is hardly the humus in which collaboration can flourish. However, those who have great experiences of collaboration will recognise that the benefits of joint endeavour towards an agreed goal is an experience well worth having. Ask anyone who has been in a successful mediation.

Collaboration is both a behaviour and an experience, and both deliver value. A behaviour because of the outputs and an experience in building goodwill and trust. For the behaviour to be expressed, it must be underpinned by coherent values, beliefs and assumptions. When values, beliefs and assumptions are mostly negative, the behaviour will be – negative. Moreover, it is for that reason you will never succeed if you make collaboration a stand-alone project or programme. It demands a culture maintained by excellent skills in *communication, decision-making and principled negotiation and leadership*.

Communication

Communication as a skill is much misunderstood and frequently manipulated to persuade. We assume that persuasion is about talking and data when the most persuasive approach is a listening strategy. Very rarely do people consider listening as part of the mix: listening to understand what lies underneath the positions people are trying to maintain.

Even less often do people pay attention to the quality of their questions which define the quality of information they receive. Rubbish in, rubbish out would apply here. The paradox is that the more

expert someone is in their field, the more likely they are to ask questions to which they already know the answers and our obsession with expertise creates more and more unconnected silos which take more and more effort to connect.

Communication falters remarkably when there are difficult conversations to be had. Either the conversations are avoided altogether or conducted in a way that makes them unsuccessful by breaking trust and allocating blame. For a species that is uniquely equipped with an impressive capacity to communicate, we are notoriously bad at it when there are problems to address. Noteworthy early warning signals will include:

- ◆ being more interested in keeping a positive tone than addressing real problems;
- ◆ shutting people down who ask challenging questions or who disagree with the information presented;
- ◆ interrupting contributions which are longer than sound bites or which seek to disrupt the existing beliefs and assumptions; and
- ◆ answering those who have concerns with clichés, eg ‘don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions’. Alternatively, ‘let’s stop talking about this and just get on with the job’; and my *bête noir*, ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’

It is the compulsion to shut down concerns, simply because they are uncomfortable, that leads to disasters both human and financial. Apportioning blame after the event doesn’t get the job done either. The pursuit of sticking to the plan, not admitting that things are going wrong or that assumptions made months ago are no longer valid, and spending an inordinate amount of time and money justifying the route taken, these are the approaches that are the substance of every adjudication, arbitration and court case. The map is not the territory. If you set out for Leeds and end up in Manchester how meaningful is it to rationalise why that happened and blame it on the sat nav? I often suggest to people that ‘a plan only exists to tell you when the plan isn’t working’. Why isn’t the plan working? What is getting in the way? Why are people not collaborating since the strategic goal is or ought to be the same for everyone?

Decision-making

Decision-making is a skill set we take for granted.

However, there are many components to decision-making, and the mental models that we employ are critical to both quality and outcome. Mental models are biases and constructs which help us deal with the complexity of information available to us. There are many mental models, too many to cover in this article, but there are three that are worth exploring. These biases and constructs have an equally compelling role in how we learn from our mistakes.

Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is only seeking information to confirm what you already believe or assume. It explains why two or more people can interpret the same facts in entirely different ways – the stuff of lawsuits.

Our genuine need to rationalise the unlimited amount of information that assails us every day, confirmation bias serves a useful purpose by confirming that all is well with the world and that we are ‘right’. However, it fails as a reliable filter when early warning signs of deviation are ignored, and that can have dire consequences. The desire to be right is also hard-wired, and there is a difference between the desire to be right and the desire to have been right:

*‘The desire to be right and the desire to have been right are two desires, and the sooner we separate them, the better off we are. The desire to be right is the thirst for truth. On all counts, both practical and theoretical, there is nothing but good to be said for it. The desire to have been right, on the other hand, is the pride that goeth before a fall. It stands in the way of our seeing we were wrong, and thus blocks the progress of our knowledge.’ (QUINE W V, ULLIAN J S *The Web of Belief* (2nd edn, 1978, London: McGraw-Hill Education).)*

We are notoriously resistant to changing our minds in the face of new information. I have seen this play out in mediations where expert witness statements form part of the negotiations, and when further information emerges which challenges the conclusions, it is challenging for the expert to change anything.

To overcome confirmation bias, you must be aware of it, and make it conscious otherwise ‘you will continue to interpret all new information so that prior conclusions remain intact’ to paraphrase Warren Buffet.

Reactive devaluation

Reactive devaluation is a term that describes the cognitive bias that occurs when a proposal or information is devalued because it comes from a perceived antagonist or someone of diminished standing because of hierarchy or assumptions about competence. Reactive devaluation is even more likely where trust has been broken and is a happy companion for confirmation bias. The consequences are that good ideas and even better information are ignored and especially from the front line.

Loss aversion

The third bias which deserves consideration is loss aversion. Loss aversion describes the preference we have for avoiding losses rather than making gains. So for example, when making a decision about a specific course of action which has the prospect of a 5% gain if it goes according to plan but a 25% loss if it doesn't, will meet resistance especially if another proposal has a 1% gain if it goes according to plan but only a 5% loss if it doesn't. The second option is the most likely choice. While it might be understandable, it is the kernel of average and mediocre and what is known as the Red Queen Effect. Leigh Van Valen first proposed the Red Queen effect in 1973 in relation to human evolution. The analogy has since been used to describe the arms race and investment behaviour by others, and it refers to a point in the novel *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll where the Red Queen schools Alice in the way the world is rather than the way she expects it to be. As Alice remarks on how little progress they have made even though they have been running faster and faster, the Red Queen replies:

'Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!' (LEWIS CARROLL, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1871).)

Loss aversion also applies to circumstances where there is a risk of humiliation through the loss of face, being found out, and having your mistakes paraded before the world. For humans, humiliation is exclusion and therefore a kind of 'death'. It activates the same neurological responses as a physical threat.

Principled negotiation

Principled negotiation requires people to focus on needs and interests, not positions. To get to needs and interests, you need information, great questions and some trust. Very often those can only be brought together by a third party who has no vested interests and is not threatened by the outcome. In my experience trust can be temporary, and it can be rebuilt very quickly, and there are positive triggers for that to take place one of which is *reciprocity* and the other is *acknowledgement*. These behaviours are the glue for good negotiations and therefore collaboration.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is sharing, demonstrates understanding and is often made up of a series of very small steps: sharing information, knowledge, resources and concessions. Appreciation of the effects of the problem on others opens up the possibility of viewing the issue as a joint problem. In taking the focus away from the 'them and us' equation and putting it on 'the problem' sets a different tone. Even though the situation hasn't changed the point of view has.

There is one question that hangs like a spectre over all the valid arguments: why would anyone collaborate if they are not getting paid?

Recent news reports will support that view including the publication of payment performance figures of contractors with a combined turnover of £15.5bn, the high level of bankruptcies in the industry and an idea that someone else has to take the first step and that generally means the government. None of that sets the scene for positive change nor does it speak to good leadership. 'We will focus on improving payments to our supply chain during the next financial year' is a provocative response for those who are in the 'over 60 days' category.

Developing a circle of competence

Leadership is where it all comes together. Without leaders courageous enough to recognise their shortcomings and circle of competence, actively support others in developing their circle of competence and be prepared to take the view that the state of the industry is a joint problem, then it will be a slow and painful death for many. **CL**