

Partnering in Defence

Little did I realise when I embarked on my MBA at the University of the West of England, in 2004, that it would lead me to do my dissertation on partnering in defence. However, here I am, having completed four years of part time study, and I am glad that I went down this path and grateful to Andrew Humphries and Linda McComie for their help. I will be graduating in November 2008 with a distinction and I hope that I have helped at least part of the MOD to understand its relationships better.

My dissertation was based on a critical examination of partnering relationships in three defence relationships. I chose to look at defence relationships because; during my career with the MOD I have observed a wide variety of behaviours resulting in both productive and dysfunctional relationships. I posed the following research questions:

- What characteristics make the relationships partnering?
- Are the relationships partnering in nature?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships in terms of partnering?
- How can the relationships be strengthened?

After an extensive literature search I decided to look at the three relationships through the lens of the Humphries and Wilding (2006) conceptual framework. This takes into account literature from relationship management, Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) and supply chain management. I also looked at literature on partnering covering generic partnering characteristics, partnering in construction and defence and the application of TCE to partnering. The literature points clearly to TCE as an explanation for partnering.

I found that there was a great deal of commitment to partnering in MoD policy and in the leadership of the teams. This was not always reflected in every layer of the organisation and there was a particular problem with commercial staff in one

relationship. They were all long-term relationships and for some of them this posed particular problems because of the baggage left behind from many previous contracts. However, where there had been good experiences this contributed to a positive working relationship. All the teams were able to work together effectively; however, there were difficulties of homogeneity of relationships within the teams and where there was a high turnover of staff. All the teams have external stakeholders who, on the whole, lacked understanding of the business. Each of the teams had to deal with geographical separation between the contractor's site and their headquarters, which made it hard to achieve a shared working environment.

The role of the external scrutineers in relation to the teams was unclear. Only in one case was the central customer included in the team and this had a positive effect on the partnering.

I provided recommendations for each relationship and then looked at the relationships as a whole. I was able to pick out common themes which were used to make recommendations which could be taken forward in the wider MOD.

A precursor to implementing the recommendations is to address the widespread shortage of skilled workers in the MOD and in the contractors' organisations. This is particularly acute where rare technical and specialist skills are required and is one of the drivers for partnering.

I concluded that all the relationships were partnering to one extent or another and recommended that the teams continue to work on their relationships and address the difficulties of achieving a shared working environment and dealing with stakeholders and external scrutiny.

When comparing my data to that collected by Andrew Humphries, when he conducted his research in the late nineties, I was surprising that the profile of MOD relationships has changed very little. The same old chestnuts keep re-emerging. This is despite many change initiatives in the MOD over the past decade.

I hope that the outcome of this work is that at least one part of the MOD is now taking its relationships more seriously and trying to adopt a more partnering approach. I believe that ultimately the whole of the organisation will go down this route, pushed that way by the prospect of failing projects and reducing numbers of skilled workers.

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