



Train for collaboration

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The railways sector is characterised by conflict between organisations operating in a fragmented industry asserts David Archer. The development of new leadership skills in collaboration can resolve the problems that result from the complex web of relationships

The UK rail system continues to be characterised by conflict arising from fragmentation in the industry, as it goes through new cycles of reorganisation and further breakdown into component parts of operating, infrastructure and regulatory entities.

Each time the sector is reorganised, management becomes an ever more complex issue because of the increasing number of interfaces between a growing number of organisations. Each participant has a range of different, and often conflicting targets and objectives, with diverse stakeholders to satisfy.

This complexity has proven particularly challenging for senior managers who usually have been trained, and often have only ever worked within the railways or other engineering sectors. It is a culture and tradition that has tended to prioritise assets and processes over people and relationships. The challenge is for them to develop the collaborative leadership skills that will enable them to handle conflict in a constructive and sustainable manner.

Directors and their teams often struggle to cope with the multipart system of groupings and organisations that have to work together collaboratively: uncertainty and unpredictability is endemic because so many factors are outside of the control of individual managers, and they are just not trained to operate under these conditions.

The reality is that the outcomes of major projects are increasingly determined by the success of relationships across boundaries and the management of the interfaces between organisations. This has a major impact operationally: conflict inevitably arises in these critical relationships when the essential collaboration that is needed fails to materialise at the key

points of interdependence

Conflict health-check

The starting point in resolving the problems highlighted is to understand that you cannot 'engineer out' conflict from the interaction between organisations in the sector – as many engineers would like to do. Conflict is in fact a healthy symptom of a complex system that is operating normally – but it only passes the health-check if all parties are confident that the disagreements that arise are being properly resolved, with good relationships maintained in the long term.

As in a problematic marriage, the signs of unhealthy differences are all too self-evident – from people shouting and trying to score points, through to sending in the lawyers.

In fact, effective collaboration through conflict resolution is fully achievable by means of management development processes learned from the oil and other sectors where there is a long record of resolving disputes between disparate organisations in high-stakes' projects. With the correct training and guidance, managers can understand and successfully negotiate the dynamics of these relationships: to identify potential sources of disagreement and to resolve the differences that do arise, calmly and effectively. A focus on building this collaborative leadership capability is key.

Collaboration works

John Self was formerly general manager of the Jubilee and East London Lines. He oversaw the re-opening of the East London Line following a three-year closure for major refurbishment. Under his management the £3.5 billion Jubilee extension project was available for public use ahead of the Millennium deadline set by Government.

"There were a range of external pressures, from London Underground, Government and the private sector suppliers that were building the track and signalling. It was a very challenging, but not unusual situation for such a major project – however the Millennium deadline brought extra pressure, as that was not negotiable!" says John.

His management style during the project was characterised by the patience and tenacity that truly collaborative leaders demonstrate. Much of his time was spent in building strong relationships: informally meeting people and ensuring full and mutual understanding of each participant's position. His strategy was to prioritise tasks and issues effectively and identify which solution would work – and to address any conflict directly: "The goal was to get everyone involved on-side. Conflict rarely goes away on its own, but it is resolvable if you are determined to get the parties around the table and deal with it head-on. You must ensure that you don't succumb to the pressures of conflict yourself – certainly it helps if you have already developed in your team the knowledge and skill set required, with some expert training from experienced professionals in collaboration and conflict resolution," says John.

He summarises that the solution to disputes is to focus on building relationships in advance: to put effort into understanding the other parties; to get in front of them; to understand what really matters and not worry about subsidiary matters; really think through the issues and refuse to give up: "Never make a negative judgement about people based simply on the organisation they come from. Keep your eye fixed on the objective. Recognise that it is a long game: build and use your network of individual contacts. If you do the groundwork in collaboration from the outset, then you are able to respond much more effectively when the pressure is on and a conflict looms."

Ten tips for handling conflict

The following checklist highlights best practice for a collaborative leader looking to handle conflict situations:

- 1** Identify your own personal triggers – what is it that your partner can do that often pushes you into bad behaviour? You may not be always able to prevent your initial reaction but at least you can plan to deal with the consequences.

- 2** And of course the other side of the coin: understand what it is you do that can wind your partners up. Plan to avoid falling into those habits.
- 3** Don't over-react to conflict – 'count to ten' and 'don't make any sudden moves' are old adages but wise ones.
- 4** Analyse the nature of your relationship and identify the potential points of conflict and the drives that could push these into a full-blown dispute.
- 5** All conflicts are not equally important to the future of the partnership and its business success. Identify the situations where conflict really matters – and where it doesn't.
- 6** Intervene fast in those places where conflict matters most and has the greatest long-term consequences for the relationship.
- 7** Seek to understand the motives of all concerned: what do they get from being in this conflict situation and what therefore might be their incentive to resolve it?
- 8** As a leader, don't try to 'take the conflict away' from those involved – it just builds an environment of avoidance or collusion. Make sure the people who are at the heart of the conflict are also central to the work to find its solution.
- 9** Understand the limits of your own conflict resolution capability – some situations need you to seek help from third parties, including from dispute resolution professionals
- 10** Teach others to manage conflict in a sustainable manner – share your knowledge and not just in your own organisation. Your partners probably need to build their conflict handling capability too.

David Archer is a director of Socia Ltd, which works with board-level decision-makers to create and maintain successful partnerships in collaborative projects and supply chain relationships.

For further information visit: www.socia.co.uk.