

From 'Good' to 'World Class'

Raising the Bar on Project Teamwork

By Jim Eisenhart, Ventura Consulting Group



Part 1 of 2

Sure, the term 'world class' has become somewhat of a hackneyed, overused cliché, whether you're talking about sports or even construction. And yet, if you do a little homework and talk to

enough people in the construction industry, some common notions and characteristics tend to surface. But first the question: "Why World Class"? After all, isn't "good," good enough? Maybe not.

Consider that construction, whether private or public, has evolved from the low bidder takes all game of the '80's and '90's to a process that not only benefits from, but in some cases has as a prerequisite, world class teamwork and project results.

It is well know that design, bid, build has now become a minority of project delivery systems on larger public sector projects, as such project delivery systems as CM at Risk, design-build, lease-leaseback and integrated project delivery become increasingly popular. And, even where design, bid, build is employed, owners more often now have the right to utilize prequalified bid lists. The implication? As a contractor just having a track record of "good" teamwork and "good" project results may not even get you invited to the table.

Additionally, all of the newer project delivery systems are predicated on a higher order of collaboration between owner, designer and general contractor. The games of what we call "tennis" (back and forth paperwork), case building, posturing and the "high/low" change order game that were prevalent on design, bid, build are not only dysfunctional but blatantly wasteful on, say, a design-build project. The newer delivery systems indeed encourage a truly collaborative effort grounded in common goals and personal integrity by all project stakeholders.

Another relatively recent phenomenon that we're noticing from contractors, CM's and owners is the desire/commitment to be

a GC, CM or owner 'of choice.' In the past, the owner didn't have much of a choice.

Likewise, and interestingly, we're seeing the same desire from owners such as Caltrans, City and County of San Francisco, Los Angeles Unified School District and San Diego Water Authority among others.

Another good reason: consider that having a high performance, world class team is the best value tool to both lowering project costs and managing risk for owner, contractor and designer. Exhaustive studies by the US Navy and Caltrans have validated this repeatedly.

GOOD PROJECTS	WORLD CLASS PROJECTS
Minimally meets schedule, budget and quality requirements	Acknowledges, but is not limited by contractual requirements or specs
Teamwork within traditional roles	Organizational lines are blurred and team members do 'whatever it takes' to get the job done
Can be controlled by circumstances seemingly beyond the team's control	Team owns the game regardless of the circumstances- No excuses
No claims. Conflicts can be resolved however, process can be painful	Conflicts strengthen team and create opportunities for breakthroughs
Conventional approach to work processes, means and methods by contractor only	Outside the box thinking by entire partnership. Open to new technologies and processes. (eg, BIM, IPD & LEAN)
Individuals tend to suppress criticism or suggestions for improvement	Open, direct verbal communication that is sometimes confrontative, never personal and always constructive
Advice is given & sought, however can be seen as self-serving	Trusted Business Advisor = NO SPIN
Good is good enough	Continuous improvement in quality, safety & key construction processes
Overall it was a good job, on to the next project	Passion, extraordinary personal commitment, intrinsic satisfaction and pride
Clients satisfied & relationships last for life of job	Clients delighted & valuable, lifelong relationships are created

So what is the distinction between “Good” and “World Class”? The accompanying chart outlines a few that our clients have pointed out to us.

Constraints Limiting “World Class” teamwork:


So, if world class teamwork is so great, and if you make the assumption that 98% of project stakeholders would like it on their project, why is it so rare? Consider the following:

1. “I may be committed to ‘World Class’ but I’m not sure about the others – so why should I bust my ___?” Project teamwork, unfortunately, has a tendency to fall to the lowest common denominator.

2. “It will require me working longer, harder or more expensively.” In our experience and if you talk to anyone who’s been part of a ‘world class’ team, this is a fallacy. Indeed, the opposite is true. Yes, there might be more meetings up front, but it saves an extraordinary amount of time on the rear end fixing things, clarifying misunderstandings/mistakes that might have been anticipated in a true, proactive and collaborative effort.

3. What’s in it for me? Like, so what? This concern only comes from those who have not been part of a “World Class” team. Those who have will always tell you that it is the intangibles: pride, challenges, long lasting relationships, reputation and even fun.

4. I don’t know what you mean by “World Class.” We acknowledge that there are a significant number of individuals (owners, GC’s, designers) who have never been part of a “World Class” team. They cannot even conceive of it. The best they’ve been on have either been “Business as Usual” or “Good.” So how can you commit to something that you’re not sure is even possible?

In Part 2 in an upcoming edition of the *Constructor*, we will talk about each of the 10 characteristics of “World Class” teams and illustrate them with examples. 

Jim Eisenhart is president of the Ventura Consulting Group with offices in Ventura, California and Houston, Texas. They have partnered over 1000 projects worldwide since 1992 ranging from the Pentagon Renovation to the San Francisco Bay Bridge. They specialize in working on projects where there is a commitment by senior management of all project stakeholders to nothing less than “World Class” teamwork and project results.

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Part 2 of 2

In Part 1 of this article in the February issue of the *California Constructor*, we talked about the difference between good projects and world class projects. Here in Part 2, we will examine the 10

characteristics of world class teams.

1. Project results are not limited by contractual requirements or specs.

When you give the collective participants at an initial project meeting or partnering session a choice between “just complying with contract docs and specs” and “defining and committing as a team to project results that acknowledge, yet aren't limited by, the contract documents and spec's,” guess which

If you enable and challenge project participants to dream a little (with one foot on the ground!) they invariably come up with goals and project results that not only exceed the contract documents but constitute a true 'win-win' outcome for all.

one they choose 99% of the time? No one wants to be limited to a set of documents and specs, which, at best, are open to multiple interpretations. Nor does anyone like to be told that they can't do any better than what the contract says.

If you enable and challenge project participants to dream a little (with one foot on the ground!) they invariably come up with goals and project results that not only exceed the contract documents but constitute a true 'win-win' outcome for all. A tip: Have them set the lofty goal(s) first and then challenge them to figure out the “how-to.” Our experience is that this facilitates a collaborative effort. Indeed, we postulate to them that the only way they can achieve a truly world class goal is by world class teamwork.

2. The team owns the game regardless of the circumstances. No excuses. It is fully empowered at all levels.

On the \$400 million Caltrans West Bay Approach to the San Francisco Bay Bridge, it was determined early on that the complexity of the job required nothing less than face to face interaction between the Caltrans Toll Bridge Program, the GC/Tutor Saliba, and the designers, who were in Sacramento. The team (Toll Bridge & Tutor) went all the way to the top of Caltrans and told upper management that they needed the designers working physically with them. They started by getting the designers to attend the partnering workshops. From there on it naturally evolved and the designers quickly became part of the world class team.

An all too typical excuse on many

projects is that 3rd party permitting/approval (regulatory agencies and fire marshals) is a wild card no one at the project level can control, let alone influence. World class teams don't let that sit. They beg, borrow and utilize anything they can to expedite that approval when they need it – even if it necessitates ruffling a few feathers in the process.

3. There is “outside the box” thinking by the entire team/partnership, and the team is open to new technologies and processes, such as IPD, BIM, LEAN, etc.

Usually, once a project enters the construction phase, conventional wisdom

has it that it is up to the contractor to come up with how the job is going to be built. CM's, owners, and the design team kind of approve and leave the contractor alone. Hey, that's not our job!

This, we say, sub-optimizes creativity. Why not get the whole team together, or at least those who might have something to contribute to expediting the schedule, at the start of the job to figure out how to best make it happen?

Likewise with new project technologies or even old ones (Prolog, etc.), there are invariably different interpretations of what the technology is (IPD is a good case in point) and to what degree and how should we implement it as a team. If you're working as a world class team, every team member should be asking the question, "Does it or how might it help us achieve our goals?"

4. Organizational lines are blurred, and project team members do 'whatever it takes' to get the job done.

The old "it's not my job" game is dead, or it should be. I can recall only some 10 years ago a CM (who shall remain nameless) said in a partnering workshop that it was the GC's responsibility to identify and prevent safety incidents and accidents. And if anyone else to include owners or designers sees a potential risk, they should not say anything because it might make them liable (for what?). This sounds ridiculous today, but it still exists in other manifestations.

Once you set common goals with your teammates and then begin to identify who needs to do what to achieve them collaboratively, the key criteria for who does what should not be “which organization is responsible for that?” but rather, who individually has something to contribute to a team solution? True world class teamwork is epitomized by utilizing the best individuals in small teams to get the task or process done.

5. There is open, direct verbal communication that is sometimes confrontative, but never personal.

Yeah this sounds a little messy, and sometimes it is. But consider the all-too-common alternative that is to (a) shove it under the rug; (b) write a letter; and/or (c) complain to others about the issue/individual to others.

Get “the moose on the table,” we say. In the absence of common goals, any critical

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or negative feedback can be perceived as personal. Like, “what are you getting on me for?” If the assumption is that we're all committed to the same game/goals, constructive feedback is just that. But when there's no larger context, it's easy for feedback to be seen as self-serving, case building, posturing or game playing. And, by the way, on world class teams there's only one game: achieve the common goals.

6. Conflicts strengthen the team and create opportunities for breakthroughs.

So what happens if a member of a world class team has an issue with someone and they do confront the individual and disagree? They elevate it and move on. No animosity, personal rancor or ill will. Hey, we disagreed on this one issue, but we're still teammates and I continue to trust you and will work with you. It is OK to agree to disagree. What's not OK is to let the issue sit and fester. This is, perhaps, the single most important point we find that separates 'world class teams' from the others.

7. Team members demonstrate passion, extraordinary personal commitment, intrinsic satisfaction and pride.

What more does anyone want from a project? Sure the bonus is nice and so is the recognition. But when you ask individuals from world class teams what meant the most, it is always the intangibles. And isn't that very similar to the values espoused by centuries old craftspeople, artisans, and designers?

Oh, and by the way, you can't force, legislate or otherwise manipulate people to make this happen. It comes from individuals making a personal choice to work together on the basis of trust, common goals and teamwork.

8. Lifelong relationships cultivate future opportunities.

Isn't this ultimately what makes everyone's job worth doing and doing well? And again consider the practical side of this. As designers, CM's and contractors go about looking for partners, JV's, etc. on the new and ever evolving project delivery processes, it will always be personal relationships that create the new opportunities and innovative delivery processes and that ultimately make them work on the specific job.

9. Clients are delighted.

It used to be “just build it per plans and specs.” Well, not many owners are singing that mantra today. The fallacies? (a) The best you'll get is per plans and specs; (b) they will spend a lot of time arguing about what the plans and specs really mean; and, (c) consider that there is no such thing as a

perfect set of plans and specs, let alone contract documents.

We should have added on this one that all project stakeholders on world class teams are delighted. And why not?

10. Seen as “trusted business advisor”

What is a ‘trusted business advisor’? Someone you can turn to for advice or council who you implicitly trust as having your best interests in mind. A good example is that between an owner and CM or GC wherein the owner does not hesitate to seek their advice and opinions and who fully assumes that the GC or CM will not respond in a self-serving manner.

So what are the prerequisites for ‘world-class’?

Frankly this is relatively simple. It starts with senior management's commitment to the possibility of ‘world class’ project results and teamwork.

On the \$900 million Los Angeles Metro Eastside Extension project now underway for four years, the CEO of LACMTA attends quarterly team meetings with his counterpart from URS/Washington Group, plus their staffs. Not only do they explicitly endorse world class, but senior management participates actively in the process to make it happen.

With that senior management commitment, the resources are out there in terms of team building, project delivery processes, and partnering to assist a project team in realizing world class results and teamwork.

A second prerequisite is clear, common goals that call for extraordinary results that can only be achieved through world class teamwork. You can do this yourself or you can get professional help. The key is challenging the team to get ‘outside the box’ but not so far that they throw up their hands and give up. This needs to be followed up with a process that tracks and provides feedback to the entire team relative to the goals over the course of the project. 🌊

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