

Olive Branches Extended

By Leo Phillips and Dan Fordice

Could there be any more appropriate name than Olive Branch for a town in which historic, renewed efforts at partnering were contrived? On 20-21 January a group of Corps of Engineers and Associated General Contractors executives met to address the partnering concept.

The meeting was a resounding success in bringing each group of leaders to a better understanding of partnering, as well as identifying mutual benefits, goals and values for a partnership between the two organizations.

History

Partnering has been around in the Mississippi Valley for at least a decade. Numerous projects were partnered in each of the four districts comprising what was previously called the Lower Mississippi Valley Division (St. Louis, Memphis, Vicksburg and New Orleans).

Folks in Vicksburg often point to Red River Lock and Dam 4 & 5 projects for examples of partnering in LMVD. Partnering was not alien to the Northern districts (St Paul and Rock Island), now parts of the Mississippi Valley Division (MVD) thanks to a 1996 reorganization of the Corps. Of course, partnering has been continuing in other districts outside MVD as well, particularly in Mobile District.

The Corps of Engineers version of reality

In the Mississippi Valley Division, if not the world, partnering was beginning to lose its luster. It was no longer a new, hot fad. No longer could an *individual* “lead the way” in partnering. Most of us had the “been there, done that” mentality.

In some cases, the term “informal partnering” had been relied upon to cover the situations where partnering should have been done but wasn’t. It was said that all projects were “informally partnered” as a standard approach. This was a cop out excuse for the fact that the old ways of adversarial relationships with contractors were re-emerging.

It was time for partnering to either become institutionalized or die. If, after a decade, it was not a routine, normal course of business and it had lost its’ glory days, partnering could not survive.

Not only had partnering lost its luster, but there was an even deeper cancer. Even those “formal” sessions that were done with an outside facilitator had become mundane. There was no longer a “Significant Emotional Event” involved in a session, no heart-to-heart communication, no excitement.

For a session to really effect a change in the participants there needs to be a degree of emotional investment - a serious voicing of obstacles to trust. This open exchange then becomes a foundation for relationship building. It is, in a way, like alcoholism. The problem must be admitted before it can be laid frankly on the table for all to view and examine its ugliness.

Corps of Engineers Headquarters and the National AGC organization saw that excitement had dwindled. A national effort at “revitalizing partnering” began in 1999 with a meeting in Tampa, FL. That effort continues today. It is a beginning for a top down commitment to partnering. The historic effort at Olive Branch, Mississippi is the next step.

The Associated General Contractors Version of Reality

The contracting community had felt for years that the top level management at MVD was talking the talk of partnering, but the field level people on the ground were not walking the partnering walk.

The annual meeting was being held each year with top level management of the Corps who kept telling of their commitment to the partnering concept, but that commitment was not being lived by the field personnel on the jobsites on a day to day basis.

Contractors were looking for a way to revitalize the partnering concept from top to bottom within the Mississippi Valley. They were looking for a cultural change. Most felt that the only way to effect real change all the way down to the smallest contracts being awarded was to have a true cultural change rather than just another partnering meeting.

The Corps was by no means the only party at fault for the faltering partnering ideal. Contractors who had been through the process many times had begun to think that the same old same old was beginning to be nothing more than another unwelcome demand on their time. There were also smaller contractors that had never been through a formal partnering session who had monumental misconceptions about what partnering was meant to accomplish.

The Meeting

For the last two years, at the Mississippi Valley Flood Control Branch of AGC’s annual meeting, partnering has been raised as a concern. As a result of this expression of concern, MG Phillip R. Anderson, MVD Commander and Bill Carder, President of the AGC Branch, jointly referred the topic to an issue resolution committee.

After considerable study and thought, this committee agreed that to re-invigorate partnering would require a top down commitment clearly and visibly made. This top down commitment would, first, refresh the senses of leaders on the basic concepts and effects of partnering.

Once the basic precepts are understood, a critical decision point is reached as to whether contractor and Corps leadership believe it is worthwhile to expend precious resources on partnering - are there sufficient benefits to justify our attention?

Finally, once agreed as useful, the parties initiate a dialogue to enhance the productive relationship between contractors and the Corps of Engineers.

A meeting for this purpose was convened in Olive Branch, MS. A total of forty-six participants represented top leaders from both groups, MVD and AGC.

The format followed a typical formally facilitated project partnering session: first, to get to know each other and the personality types involved; then to have frank discussions about issues, concerns and values; develop action plans to address concerns; finally, to document our values and commitment to partnering through signing of a partnering agreement.

Cartwright Consultants of Jackson, MS acted as facilitator for the meeting. In the intervening night of this day and a half session, an opportunity for team building and cementing of relationships was afforded through a group social hour and dinner.

The physical product, the partnering agreement, was signed but was really only symbolic of the real effect of the session. The renewed recognition of absolute necessity to partner for best odds of project success and the beginning of new joint discussions were the real long-lasting benefits.

This event in Olive Branch laid a firm foundation for extensive use of partnering in the Mississippi Valley. Such increased emphasis will be for the mutual benefit of AGC and the Corps, but more importantly to the benefit of our customers and sponsors.

A positive, proactive relationship between these two key elements will ultimately provide the best use of resources and most timely project execution with a working environment most conducive to innovation. It just plain loads a project for success where success is defined as customer delight.

Two weeks after the Olive Branch meeting, the annual meeting of AGC's Mississippi Valley Flood Control Branch in Biloxi, Mississippi was held. This meeting traditionally includes heavy Corps of Engineers representation from MVD as well as other Corps districts and divisions.

Many attendees at this meeting both from MVD and from the AGC branch commented that this was the best and most productive annual meeting they had ever attended. You could feel the excitement in the air and the easing of tensions between the two organizations.

After reporting to the general attendance on the partnering agreement that was signed in Olive Branch, all in attendance were afforded the opportunity to add their signatures on the border of the Olive Branch agreement. This additional signing symbolized their renewed commitment to the new culture of partnering. As they signed the document, they received a sticker that read, "I signed up to Partnering" – an outward token display of the renewed commitment.

To Where From Here?

The course is now set in the Corps' Mississippi Valley Division to renew the partnering spirit and effect. Cascading from the Executive Session in Olive Branch will be individual partnering sessions in each of the six districts. These sessions, while still with multiple contractors both large and small, will focus more on the issues specific to work types and contractor group associated with the particular district. The sessions will also serve as a pathway for small contractors, who might not otherwise have an opportunity for a formally partnered session, to participant in a formal session.

These two levels, then, cast a die for project partnering on every project in the Mississippi Valley. Though not all will necessarily be formally partnered, every job will use partnering principles to build or further a relationship. We anticipate the synergy effect of our joint effort to allow the Mississippi Valley Division of the US Army Corps of Engineers and the contractors of the Mississippi Valley Flood Control Branch of AGC to approach with a distinct advantage, the challenges of construction project execution in the 21st century. Hooah!