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Achieving a balance
The role of the Partnering Adviser

In its Guide to Project Team Partnering the Construction Industry Council (CIC) recognises the role of a Partnering Adviser which it defines in broad terms as "*facilitat[ing] the smooth creation and development of the project partnering team"*. This is detailed as guiding the selection of the team, assisting in team building (to which I shall return later), recording the relationship between the parties and being a "*first port of call in the event of misunderstanding or disagreements"*.

Within PPC2000 the role is further defined and the Partnering Adviser is recognised as having a key role in the delivery of the project. The responsibilities of the Partnering Adviser are clearly set out in clause 5.6 and include very specific duties such as the preparation of the contractual documentation, review of Specialist Contracts and the "*provision of fair and constructive advice as to the partnering process"*.

So who is best qualified to be a Partnering Adviser? The Partnering Adviser needs to have a range of skills; none of which is necessarily technical. I have worked with excellent Partnering Advisers whose backgrounds vary from quantity surveying, to law and engineering. The key attributes are understanding of the partnering process, a very large helping of common sense, and an ability to remain "independent" of the Partnering Team.

The ability to remain "independent" is, in my experience, by far the most difficult part of the role. I admit I have not always been successful in this myself. As I mentioned earlier, one of the duties of the Partnering Adviser is to assist in *building the team* (my italics): a specific and limited role and one which, arguably, does not extend to assisting the team in the actual running of the project. However, surely it is part of our professional training to "step in and help" where needed? If a project is encountering difficulties, this pull to provide more practical assistance if we are capable of doing so can prove hard to resist. If the Partnering Adviser's skills are in quantity surveying this may involve assisting the Cost Consultant, if the skills are in project management it may involve assisting the Client Representative. Surely this form of direct, practical support to the Partnering Team can only be beneficial, not to say desirable.

I would sound a warning. Once this line is crossed there is a very fine balance to be achieved between assisting and supporting the Partnering Team and undermining their confidence and ability to function as a team. How to maintain this balance is not easy. Once the Partnering Adviser steps across the line from "supporting" to "doing" the whole dynamic of the Team is altered – and issues of responsibility become blurred.

Achieving the balance of independence is made more precarious by the way in which the Partnering Adviser is appointed and reimbursed – like crossing the Niagara Falls on a tightrope and facing gale force winds at the same time. In my experience the Partnering Adviser is appointed and paid by the Client. The argument has been made that this financial arrangement creates a potential conflict of interest, precisely in relation to a party that must maintain independence at all times in relation to the Partnering Team (which necessarily includes the Client). However, over time, often over the life of several projects, a "special" relationship builds up with the Client and, when advising on potential disputes, it can be a brave act to support others in the Team and be critical of the Client. I would argue that the best interest of all the parties involved, not least the Client, is the optimum achievement of the Project and that if it is necessary to support another member of the Team against the immediate wishes of the Client in pursuit of that end, then to do so is ultimately still in the best interest of the Client. This often requires what feels to be the wisdom of Solomon coupled with the patience of Job, but I am very fortunate to have clients that are willing to change and have reacted well (although sometimes with surprise!) to some of my comments. Nevertheless, this is unlikely to be the same for all clients and it is an added problem when trying to maintain independence.

A further ethical dilemma faces the Partnering Adviser as to how much involvement they should have as the Project progresses. If the Partnering Adviser remains remote, only becoming involved in the Project at the outset, how can he or she know how the Partnering Team is developing? It is very easy for a Team to wave goodbye to the Partnering Adviser once the initial documentation is in place only to face problems in developing the partnering relationship. If the Partnering Adviser is not known and trusted by the Partnering Team then they are less likely to approach him or her to discuss an impending problem.

To counteract this there can be a temptation to attend Partnering Team meetings – just to "see how the team is doing". This can be useful but, again, there is a fine balance to be achieved between being interested and concerned and interfering in the natural development of the Team. There is also the issue of cost. If we are not adding value to the process we should not be there.

I have no magic answers as how Partnering Advisers can achieve this balance. Perhaps the most important factor is recognising that the balance exists and to solicit views from the Partnering Team as to their satisfaction with the levels of service provided.

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