



International Partnering

5 Tips for Successful Partnering Abroad

Partnering is growing. Not too long ago, people were asking the question of whether or not partnering was still relevant. The answer has been a resounding yes! Recently, we at Ventura Consulting Group have conducted sessions in Argentina, Israel, Dubai, the Bahamas, Peru, Spain, Guam, and Africa and international work is increasingly becoming part of our consulting practice. You might be thinking that these sound like fun and exciting boondoggles or mini-vacations, but in our experience, delivering quality sessions with real results take a good deal of up-front work with the client to make these sessions successful. I will share some of our best tips to deliver a successful session overseas.

Create a Common Definition of Partnering... “This isn’t just a team-building session”

In the continental US, the majority of our session attendees have previously experienced partnering. On international projects, you might get one to two people who have experienced partnering on a past job. It is therefore essential to acknowledge the various (and often inaccurate) definitions of what partnering might be and create a common definition. Prior to the session, the facilitator should send out materials on the process along with information on their firm and the desired outcome, well ahead of any phone calls or interviews with the team. IPI has a good deal of “Partnering 101” materials that can help you.

Understanding the Project

For most of our projects in the US, Partnering starts during planning and design or just after the project is awarded. International requests are usually from projects that are already experiencing challenges and are quite frankly, “Problem Projects”. This type of project requires a deep dive where the facilitator and client must create a common understanding of where things stand, what has happened and what the client hopes to achieve. This might sound like a no brainer, but since the definition of partnering is not always clear, we need to manage expectations right out of the gate.

Interviews with Clients, Team Members and Other Stakeholders

For International projects, “Pre-partnering interviews” are essential. For most projects, we send out information and conduct phone interviews and discussions, but for international projects, we find it is best to arrive a couple of days early and have face-to-face meetings with as many key people as possible. This does a few things:

- First, it gives the consultant and the team member a chance to meet, and establish some rapport. This way the consultant has some familiar faces in the room, which improves participant engagement.
- Second, it gives the team member a safe place to air challenges, experiences and also share what their personal goals.

- Third, it provides a chance for the facilitator to educate the team members on the process and desired results.
- And finally, it gives the team members an opportunity to ask questions and develop an ownership stake in the process.

We have found that one to two days should be spent on this imperative process.

Understanding New Cultures

You can read blogs or travel books, but really understanding a culture comes with in-country experience. Many international projects have international teams. International teams bring a variety of approaches to construction. Scheduling, tracking information, sequence of work or even what time we come into the office and how long we take for lunch can cause major conflicts. Expectations vary widely. Some teams use this as an excuse, while others embrace the differences and create a “culture for the project”. You can guess which teams are the most successful.

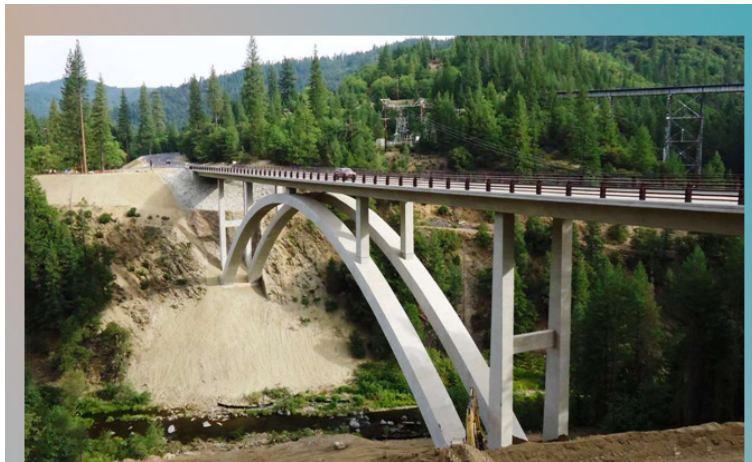
Furthermore, the consultant must be aware and sensitive to the use of language, examples and analogies around a culture. The consultant should do background research to understand and design a process that honors the client’s needs and culture. I recommend two rules for the consultant:

- One, if you have a question, ask it. Don’t hesitate to run an idea, slide or story by a team member to see if it might resonate before sharing with the team.
- Two, if you have any doubt, leave it out. If an example has the potential of being misconstrued or misinterpreted, then it probably will be.

Buy In of Management and Leadership

Project leadership is key for every project. For international projects, a lack of buy-in from senior management can be a killer. Team members will look to leaders and will follow their level of engagement and participation. If a leader is skeptical and challenging to the consultant, team members will follow suit. We have found a half-day executive session with team leaders prior to the general session helps greatly. This gives project leaders the opportunity to set the tone and identify what they would like to get out of the session. It also is a place to develop the framework for the goals that we will develop in the general session. This also cultivates trust between the facilitator and the leadership, so the facilitator can check-in on the process at lunch time and adjust it if necessary.

By developing a common definition for Partnering, taking additional preparation time to educate and understand your clients and getting buy-in from leadership for the process,



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Neal Flesner, MBA, MA, SIPI, of Ventura Consulting Group, has been facilitating partnering on large, complex projects and programs since 2007. With an MBA from the University of Oregon and a Masters in Organizational Development, Neal works to enable his clients and teams to deliver extraordinary results.

