



Hard work with Soft Skills

Helping teams win business and stay in business

We've all heard the saying '*soft skills are the hardest to master*' and many people working in complex integrated project or alliance teams understand the implications of failing in this area. Partnerships and joint ventures have been around since stone-age man first had the idea that two clubs against a dinosaur was better than bashing each other over the head. One can only imagine how negotiation and agreement took place but it's a safe bet to assume it would not have required an Away Day or series of cultural alignment sessions! If, however, the caveman who controlled the narrow pass through to where the dinosaurs grazed had several potential 'clubbers' lining up to provide their services, then he would have had to use some kind of selection process. (We've featured some of the work we're doing here in a previous article [Winning Ways.](#))

In today's business context, clients seeking to partner in long-term contracts need to be as sure as possible that the relationship they are committing to is sustainable. By the time the tendering process has reached the final stages where three or four bidders remain, the focus shifts onto 'who do we think we can work with most effectively?' As we know, all relationships need to be worked at and in a business alliance the same is true. However, when several sets of people in different geographic locations with a history of adversarial relationships decide to collaborate in order to win in a bigger market or to tackle a significant shared challenge, some sort of structure to the relationship is required.

Over a period of 5 years people=positive™ played a key role in supporting the Subsea Vertical Alliance (SVA), involving Shell Expro and its key suppliers in well drilling and completion services. One of the critical building blocks to embedding Alliance behaviour across the six companies was the 'Connect 6' Programme – a 3-day diagonal-slice workshop where senior managers would work alongside operations crew from different companies to explore what it really takes to make an Alliance work. The 'contract' then became personal – the relationships 1:1 not just names on an organisation chart and a set of principles on a charter.

Currently we are involved with several major UK construction projects where collaborative working in alliances and joint ventures is central to success. We are helping the Steering Groups and senior leadership teams of these projects to reach a new level of communication through structured practice of a few simple tools.

There's an old Cliff Richard song – 'It's so funny, how we don't talk anymore' that captures the importance of communication in a healthy relationship. Too often you hear the expression, "If I'd only known . . ." when relationship counselling reveals needs or concerns that have not surfaced when they should have. In a business alliance, no matter how complex, there are three things you must do: **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!**

There's no short-cut to success here – if you aren't prepared to put the time and effort in then don't sign up to collaborative working. If you do, the rewards are not just limited to the business.

Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm. Publius Syrus