

Board Reflections

The Perfect Storm

By Walker Lee Evey

There is a storm of historic proportion gathering on the horizon for the design and construction industry. It differs substantially in character from those the industry has experienced in the past. It is a business storm that will fundamentally change the character of our industry and will unfortunately force many companies to fall by the wayside. Even some companies that have achieved success in the past will unsuccessfully navigate their way through this storm and will founder.

This “Perfect Storm,” as in the famous book by Sebastian Junger, describes a circumstance in which a series of phenomena, each of which individually would have limited impact, combine to cause a total change greater than the sum of the individual changes. Just as one might watch in wonder the growth of a huge summer storm, we have all watched this one grow larger and more menacing. Just as that summer storm, it carries both threat and promise. There is threat for those companies that do not evolve and acclimate to the storm. There is promise for those that do.

The Perfect Storm for the design and construction industry is composed of many changes developing from within, and they vary in type and nature. Virtually none of them results from the traditional sources of change for our industry. They are not the result of new developments in materials or equipment. The changes are not derived from the hard world of steel or stone. Instead, they come from nontraditional directions and are derived from the soft world of ideas.

Some are basically technically driven and have as their genesis new developments in areas such as software programming or database management. Others are basically guided by new developments in the management or business environment. The changes don't result from new products or new materials in the conventional sense, but they may enable the more effective utilization of both new and old materials, producing results which make our work easier, faster and more productive. Representative elements include such developments as integrated teams, building information modeling (BIM), sustainability, public/private partnerships, lean construction, commissioning and others. Significantly, only

design-build enables each and every one of these elements to optimize and to produce maximum positive impact.

Let's take integrated teams as an example. The integration of individuals and companies into a single highly functional organization in order to accomplish a task more efficiently and effectively has been a core focus of design-build and DBIA since its inception. When DBIA first began to push for integrated teams within the design and construction industry, the response was derision — or worse. The very idea of architects, engineers, owners and constructors working together with a common purpose and pursuing a common goal was criticized as being (among other things) an unethical business practice. Contrast that attitude with the prevailing attitude today where virtually every organization involved with design and construction is scrambling to figure out how to add integration to their skill sets. Fortunately, for DBIA and the design-build community, we have little to fear from those trying to figure out how to accomplish integration while simultaneously retaining design-bid-build organizations and attitudes. The goals are incompatible and the methodology is hostile to the climate needed to achieve real and meaningful integration.

Similarly, BIM has become a rallying point for many organizations that are trying to improve the performance and increase the productivity of the design and construction workplace. Unfortunately, many do not grasp the point that BIM is not about achieving better renderings, it is not about elegant “fly-through” electronic tours for potential customers, and it is not about colorful 3-D presentations. BIM is all about communication and teamwork. Promoting a promising new technology while shackling it to outmoded methods, however, is simply doing business at cross purposes.

Individuals and organizations committed to old ways of doing business see an increased capability for communication as a threat, not an opportunity. They see the risk that could result from that communication, not the opportunity for increased innovation and creativity and the chance to actually reduce risk that it inherently provides. Much is made of the potential increase in risk that undisciplined access to the design process might bring. But few projects have suffered from increases in risk as communication has increased, and few projects have seen their risk profile improve as a result of decreased communication.

The same kind of argument can be made across the spectrum of new technologies and ways of doing business. Increased integration, increased communication,

increased flexibility, increased innovation and increased creativity have seldom been identified as the drivers of poor performance. Instead, each clearly contributes to improvements in the design and construction environment.

The Perfect Storm is coming. Prepare for it and embrace it.

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