



Book Review

Construction Management: Understanding and Leading an Ethical Project Team

Jason G Smith, Construction Analysis and Planning LLC, 2011, ISBN-10:061540314X, ISBN-13:978-0-615-40314-4, USD 32.50

Introduction

The book's title, "*Construction Management: Understanding and leading an ethical project team*" was initially, at least, somewhat misleading. I made the mistake that I often tell my students not to make by simply reading the first part of the title and assumed that the book was simply about Construction management. It wasn't until I got into the book that I realised that in fact the book was about more than that and that its major focus was really about ethics, leadership and management generally. These aspects are applied to the construction process and this grounding gives them relevance to our industry be it Construction itself or education.

The book is well written and is worth reading especially if you have an interest in ethics in the construction industry or you aspire to a leadership position in the industry.

Background

The structure of the book soon makes it clear that the book is really intended as a series of exemplars based on case studies presumably from the author's own work experience. If you are an academic you will be disappointed if you expect to find references, citations and sources throughout the book. They simply do not exist and it is clear that the book is really a compilation of the author's own experiences. In a sense the examples used could collectively be referred to as components of one large case study based on the author's own work experience. Whether or not this "case study" was based on an appropriate research methodology is simply not clear. My feeling is that it is really an anthology of lessons learned by a person with significant construction experience. That alone is good enough reason to read the book.

The book is well written and easy to read. It is not a particularly long book and can be read in an afternoon. The writing style is uncomplicated and engaging; the messages are clear and I often found myself wondering how I would have dealt with some of the situations cited in the book.

The book is also written from a North American perspective and although many of the lessons are generic the reality is that not all of them are and there are differences in terms of industry structure, industry practices and industry legislation that may make some of the situations cited in the book inapplicable to other countries e.g. I understand that many large construction companies in the USA still maintain a pool of labour that they can use as Field crews when required. In Australia this practice ceased several years ago and almost all people working on a construction site today are actually sub contractors. Similarly the terms used in the book are American terms and it does take a bit of time getting used to what they mean; however most meanings are clear.

The one thing that did annoy me when reading the book related more to the production process i.e. I found the contrast between the stark black print on the brilliant white glossy paper background upsetting as no matter where I sat or what lighting I used the glare emanating from the pages was disturbing.

Structure

The book is structured around 3 modules and a series of chapters written around the different members of the procurement team. Each chapter is followed by a series of questions and scenarios that are intended to consolidate the learning gained from the readings. Clearly the intention is that the book be used as a text.

Module 1 deals with sub contractors, general contractors and field crews. The predominant message for me was the vastly different perspectives that each player brings to the table especially with respect to money and the actions used to acquire it during the construction process. There were some scenarios that upon first reading appeared to be quite normal and ethical and it wasn't until I read the explanations from other perspectives that I began to get a feeling of exactly what was going on and how easy it is to convince oneself that one is acting in the interests of the client when in fact the interest was often self serving. When and if you pass on discount or interest savings was a case in point. As the author says, *"People have a tendency to view money differently when it is their own than they do when it belongs to someone else"*.

Module 2 deals with architects and sub consultants. The predominant message for me was the working relationship between the architect and sub consultants. Architects seem to accept unreasonable design schedules and then find themselves cutting corners, in terms of documentation, in order to fulfil the tight schedule. Unfortunately, this impacts on both the quality and accuracy of the architects' and sub consultant's documentation and can set both groups against each other. Similarly, because sub consultants rely on the architect for interdisciplinary co-ordination, this lack of time can lead to lack of leadership and will almost certainly lead to significant coordination issues and possible conflict when progress claims or variations are refused by the construction manager. As one can appreciate, this is not a tenable position for members of the design team who are, *"contractually obligated to provide the most economical and efficient design possible.....not solely for direct work but also for indirect costs"*.

Module 3 deals with project owners and construction managers. The predominant message for me was the relationship between the owner and the construction manager and the fact that, at times, the owner may well coerce the construction manager into actions that go against the interests of other project team members. This places the construction manager in an ethical dilemma as his/her professional and ethical obligation is to all the members of the project team. *"As the ultimate project authority a construction manager has a professional and ethical obligation to ensure that all those involved with a project are treated fairly and impartially in all financial matters"*.

In each of the examples cited in the book the author suggests a way of dealing with the issues such that the basic tenet of the book, namely ethical action and strong leadership, are maintained.

Conclusion

The book is easy to read and, although North American biased, is generic enough to be understood by most construction industry professionals in most countries around the world. As such it adds to the knowledge base of our industry and proposes a series of actions that support ethical actions and leadership. From an academic perspective, the book would make a good text in most construction programs although I would leave it to be used towards the end of a 4 year construction degree when the student has acquired a broad enough knowledge base and industrial experience to both understand and appreciate the value of the book.

The author's fundamental ethics revolve around collaborative teams and respect for all members of the team. In support of this he cites several lessons that his grandmother gave him when he was a child and how these can be translated to modern business practices in our industry. Unfortunately as the author himself points out there are many people in our industry who treat unethical action as simply the cost of doing business.....a lesson that I learnt many years ago as a young architect when a client refused to pay my bill. When I asked him if there was anything wrong with my work, he responded, "*No. Your work is fine. It is simply good business for me not to pay you. Eventually you will settle for half the amount that we agreed to*". I wish that I had read this book back then.

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