

Is the Owner the Problem? Four Ways Owners Can Help Drive Project Success.

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When projects encounter cost overruns, delays, or quality concerns, it's not uncommon for construction teams to point to one of the familiar culprits charged with executing the project: the contractor and the designer. Over my career, spanning roles in design, construction management, and as an owner, I believe the owner plays a critical yet often overlooked role in a project's success. Owners have unique responsibilities that can either support or complicate project outcomes. When they struggle with challenges like scope definition, internal alignment, or setting realistic budgets, these issues can ripple through every phase of a project.

I recently facilitated a panel discussion on this topic at the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA) Annual Conference (CMAA2024) in San Francisco, California. The panel featured CMAA volunteer leaders who represent significant owner organizations. The panel shared valuable insights into the unique challenges they encounter as owners and offered strategies to help other owners manage these complex responsibilities more effectively.

While construction management traditionally emphasizes contractor and designer performance, it rarely examines the owner's organizational structure and decision-making. In this blog, I'll share what we discussed and how owner-led decisions are just as influential to project success as the actions of contractors or designers. The core question of our session was: How can owners help drive project success? Here are the strategies that emerged from our conversation.



1. MAKE TIMELY DECISIONS

Owners provide the essential function of directing the project through the decisions they make, since every decision affects timelines, costs, and quality. One key insight from the panel came from Tom Lyon, PE, CCM, Senior Vice President of Airport Development for DFW International Airport, who spoke about the owner's role in making decisions in a timely manner. To cut through the often-lengthy process of approving change orders, Tom recommended a "change review board" as a practical approach to streamline decision-making and reduce delays, as is used at DFW. "This ensures everyone involved understands the rationale behind each change order, creating a collective commitment to decisions made on the spot," he explained. This strategy not only helps the project maintain momentum but

also reinforces accountability among team members.

Tom noted that a critical challenge for owners is to motivate their internal teams to appreciate the significance of timely decision-making in construction. Project decisions can have major cost implications, tying up capital and creating risk for everyone involved if they are delayed.

The concept that “time is money” is embodied in the Federal Highway Administration’s “Every Day Counts” initiative, as discussed by Mike Mendick, PE, CCM, District Engineer for the Connecticut Department of Transportation. He highlighted the importance of decisions that are data-backed and leadership-supported, and – most of all – made timely to limit cost overruns associated with extended performance of a project.

2. DEFINE AND ALIGN PROJECT SCOPE

Katie Choe, CCM, Chief of Staff for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), emphasized the importance of owners determining their project’s scope from the outset, which is difficult in an organization such as MBTA, given the complex demands of aging infrastructure. However, Katie also noted the need for realism when defining scope to avoid scope creep, especially with stakeholders who do not necessarily fully understand the design and construction process. “We have to know what we want to be successful, and we’re not always good at defining that,” Choe said. “We emphasize engaging our end users – the actual facility occupants and users – to find out what we need.”

As Katie observes, in large public sector projects, it’s common for internal and external stakeholders (including elected officials) to have differing goals and opinions, which can make alignment challenging. Sometimes, due to conflicting priorities within an organization, there’s a lack of agreement on what’s truly important. Katie stressed that if stakeholders aren’t engaged early, scope adjustments mid-project can drive up costs, cause delays, and create stress across teams. The owner’s role is crucial in securing buy-in and establishing alignment, ensuring the project’s scope is realistic and prioritized.

3. PRIORITIZE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

The panel also discussed the value of engaging the right stakeholders at the right time, which is a critical factor in the success of any public project. Skip Vaughn, Chief Facilities

Management Officer and Director of the Office of Facilities and Property Management at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), stressed the importance of clear, consistent communication with all stakeholders – particularly when technical expertise is involved. “Clear, consistent communication across all organizational levels and with contractors is essential,” Vaughn said.

Skip described how NIST’s leadership works hard to keep both technical and non-technical stakeholders – including scores of scientists working in custom lab space – informed on the project’s progress, which helps to ensure alignment and prevent miscommunication. Darrin Lambrigger, PE, CCM, FCMAA, Director of the Construction Management Division for the Port of Long Beach, echoed this approach, noting he had worked with a politically appointed board, including members with limited construction experience who expected no change orders whatsoever. In cases where stakeholders lack familiarity with construction, Darrin’s solution included regular briefings and consistent updates to help bridge gaps in understanding and encourage informed decision-making, including why changes may be necessary.

4. VIEW CONSULTANTS AND CONTRACTORS AS TRUE PARTNERS

The panel wrapped up with a discussion on how owners can foster strong, collaborative relationships with third-party service providers like consultants and advisors. Katie expressed frustration that large consultants distinguish themselves during selection with impressive national-caliber experts, only to deliver familiar local resources when the project begins. Instead, she emphasized the need for consultants to actively bring best practices from other projects, helping improve performance and providing actionable insights.

Similarly, Mike expressed the hope that consultants provide their clients with a “curated” experience and shared an example of how a consultant led his team, through tours of similar facilities, to select the best flooring material for a maintenance facility. By seeing how similar projects were handled and the outcomes achieved, owners can better evaluate their options and understand the benefits and trade-offs associated with different approaches.

Darrin described an ideal consultant as one who acts as both advisor and advocate. “An ideal consultant doesn’t just execute

orders; they act as a counselor, pointing out when issues arise or when a decision might steer the project off track,” he shared.

Finally, the panelists admitted that owners are often more comfortable treating their designers as partners than the consultants. Skip noted, “We work for several years with a designer and they really get to know our project and our organization. Then, the tendency is to throw it to a contractor and get really demanding in them delivering performance.” Investing effort in building a successful partnership with the contractor or CM at-risk can pay great dividends.

FINAL THOUGHTS

These insights reveal that owners have a considerable impact on project success, not only through their decisions but also through the relationships they establish and the structures they create to manage complex undertakings. For owners committed to improving their processes, empowering their teams, and embracing collaboration, the opportunity exists to advance successful project outcomes. Moving forward, it’s clear that owners who are willing to self-assess, set clear priorities, and work closely with contractors and consultants can help create an environment where all parties – and the project itself – can thrive. 🦋



About the Author

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