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Health Care Breaks Proving Ground With Private Insurance Exchange

By Steven J. Storts
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IN what could serve as a future health care benefits model for other professional and trade organizations, the Associated General Contractors of America recently unveiled a first-of-its-kind private insurance exchange to serve the commercial construction industry.

Appropriately coined as "The AGC Alternative," the association began in late August offering competitive quotes to its member firms, featuring comprehensive health insurance coverage from Aetna, MetLife, and Group Vision Service as part of its introductory suite of benefits. The private exchange was developed in collaboration with Willis North America, a unit of Willis Group Hold-ings, a recognized global risk advisor and insurance and reinsurance broker. AGC selected the program's insurance providers based on their experience with similar private exchanges, strong brand recognition, and a nationwide network of physicians and health care providers.

Stephen Sandherr, AGC's chief executive officer, notes that the new private exchange was designed by Willis for AGC to reduce costs and the administrative burdens for association members that provide insurance benefits for their employees. "Because the exchange offers a broader range of options than are typically available to individual firms, employers and their employees will get more of the benefits that meet their particular needs," he emphasizes.

The new exchange will allow employers to define the coverage para-meters they will provide to their employees for health and other insurance benefits and then direct their employees to an online store where they will have more options than previously offered. Sandherr points out that AGC's new private exchange — unlike many public exchanges — will provide employees with the guidance and support they need to make good decisions. Willis of Maryland Inc. will act as the broker of record for all insurance products offered on the new private exchange. The coverage quotes for the exchange policies are expected to go into effect as early as January 1 next year, and AGC officials say they plan to add additional coverage options.

Commenting on AGC's new venture, Jim Blaney, CEO of Willis Human Capital Practice, says, "We are thrilled to partner with AGC to deliver this unique solution to its members. As organizations face rising health care costs and increasing regulatory demands, this unique, customized approach is an effective tool for firms looking for a new way to deliver market leading health and other insurance benefits to their employees."

There are still challenges, though, that lie ahead for both AGC member firms and the general construction community that are interested in private exchanges. For instance, a recent MetLife survey found that only 36 percent of employers are "very satisfied" with employee participation in voluntary benefits. An analysis of MetLife's 12th Annual *U.S. Employee Benefit Trends Study* contends that the disconnect between employees' positive views on benefits and their enrollment actions highlights the need for more tailored education aimed at increasing employee knowledge and confidence in the benefits enrollment process.

"Healthy enrollment rates are a good indicator that an employer's benefits program is working effectively, and the study found that 62 percent of employers say enrollment rates are the most important criteria for evaluating the success of their program," says Michael Fradkin, senior vice president for markets and growth strategies at MetLife. According to the study, nearly 60 percent of employees are very interested in a greater variety of benefits from which to choose. "However, with more choice, there may also be confusion," Fradkin adds. "If employers add to their benefits offering but aren't seeing the employee participation levels they anticipated, this may indicate a need for better education and communications relating to benefits, rather than a lack of interest on the part of employees."

In fact, MetLife's study indicates that employees may be having trouble navigating the different benefit options available to them, with 38 percent reporting they are not very confident they made the right decisions during their last annual enrollment. More than half of the employees responding (53 percent) agree they need more help understanding how their benefits work or how benefits meet their needs.

On a different front, a recent Willis Human Capital Practice survey shows that although health care reform is a top concern for U.S. employers, most organizations have not selectively measured its cost impact. Only 37 percent of respondents have iden-

tified the cost impact of health care reform on their health plans this year. While this is an increase over the 28 percent of respondents identifying these costs in a 2013 survey, Willis says it demonstrates that for many organizations, determining an accurate assessment of these figures is still a challenge.

Also, the Willis survey indicated that despite some reports in the media to the contrary, employers generally do not plan to eliminate group medical benefits as part of their compensation practices, even though group medical costs for employers continue to rise. Sixty percent of respondents said they were "extremely unlikely" to move away from benefits engagement, and another 17 percent said that they were "somewhat unlikely" to do so.

The Willis survey further finds that cost-shifting is only part of the solution to rising costs. The majority of respondents experienced an increase in their health plan costs from 2013 to 2014, but of those who reported a cost increase, almost a quarter kept employee contributions the same. Not surprising, nearly one-third of respondents have already implemented or plan to expand existing wellness programs to help control rising group medical costs. Ironically though, despite the fact that one of the goals of health care reform is to expand coverage, the survey data suggests that coverage has been reduced for some part-time employees. Fourteen percent of respondents have already eliminated coverage for part-time employees this year, and another 8 percent plan to do so moving forward.

Willis notes that the use of private health care exchanges, an option that was unheard of just a few years ago, is being considered by a surprising number of employers, although actual adoption remains low. Still, the opportunity to control costs through a defined contribution approach while providing greater choice to their workforce is an attractive strategy for many organizations.

As an overall approach, businesses seeking to increase employee participation and engagement in their health care enrollment programs should address five key elements, according to MetLife: focus on the tools and tactics that matter most to employees; deliver benefits education when and where employees want it; boost communications by doing the basics better; be aware that online and mobile technology "talks louder" than paper; and get goal-oriented, with measurable results.

October 2014

Public Employee Motivation Requires A Cross-Generational Approach

By Steven J. Storts
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As discussed previously, engineering managers and supervisors in the public workplace can help improve their staff performance by tapping the generational diversity of their employees. To that resolve, management consultants and behaviorists have conducted considerable research into the distinctions and motivational interests of the four generational workforces: the Silent Generation (also called Traditionalists), Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Next (also known as Millennials, Generation Y, and the Net Generation). Amid those workforce distinctions, however, there can be consensus and shared motivations, particularly in public service.

One of the most effective motivational crossovers is the traditional work retreat. It has, though, experienced a renaissance in recent years. Due to broad agency cost-saving measures and increased public scrutiny, retreats are no longer characterized as expensive weekend excursions in remote locations. Many of today's organizational retreats have evolved into more scaled-down mini-retreats. Their venues are now hotel meeting rooms, food courts, movie theaters, trade shows, health clubs, restaurant dining rooms, museums and outdoor amphitheaters. The underlying motivation still exists, however. Get the employed staff out of the office where they are free of distractions and at ease to constructively brainstorm and provide knowledgeable feedback.

Because retreats are an excellent tool for combining both teamwork and individual creativity, the ground rules for mini-retreats remain the same as their traditional counterpart. Managers, supervisors, and team leaders must have a clear understanding up front of what needs to be accomplished. Motivational consultants generally recommend an agenda that focuses on only one or two primary objectives. Equally important, staff members must not be coerced into attending a retreat, nor should participation by all employees be mandatory; it should be optional. A feasible strategy is to invite key employees, in addition to those who will add value to the retreat — as well as implement agency development strategies and projects back in the workplace.

Finally, retreat facilitators should document all action items during the retreat. Activities should never be concluded without summarizing and writing down specific steps that each participant needs to address upon returning to work. The retreat may be the end of one exercise, but it should also lay the groundwork for following exercises. In other words, the retreat is not the end of the planning process; it is the beginning. Employee training and development programs are best implemented through strong leadership and a system of built-in accountability.

Although many organizations are shifting from an individual to a team-based approach to address a diversified workforce, teams may not always be the most practical motivational vehicle for all public agencies, depending upon their size, office location, work hours, and telecommuting policies. Actually, attracting and retaining members of any workforce generation is more of an art than a science, requiring creativity, customization, and sometimes a little innovation. In fact, careful observation of behavioral and motivational traits can be quite effective when staffing an agency.

What someone from the Silent Generation or a Baby Boomer values is not necessarily what a younger generational employee favors in the workplace these days. And while there is generally a set of common values shared by all generations at large, what constitutes a motivated work environment can differ greatly among Gen Xers, Gen Nexters, and traditional employees. For instance, younger employees may be less interested in hearing about agency tradition and public responsibility and more attracted to creativity and innovation. They may also be less enthused about rigid organizational policies and more energized in learning about a shift toward flexible work schedules and career development.

As another example, retirement planning or long-term health care may be attractive to Baby Boomers and some Gen Xers, but those same motivations will not retain Gen Nexters in the short term. Also, an informal and relaxed work environment may totally please Gen Xers and Nexters, but it has no appeal to Baby Boomers. Motivational gaps always require attention when reviewing employee retention programs. Retaining a Gen Nexter who may view work as a hobby requires a different approach than holding on to a Baby Boomer who lives and breathes work for recognition.

Knowing what motivates the range of talent and experience of a diversified workforce is a vital tool

for engineering managers and supervisors, in addition to having the flexibility to adapt any recruiting and retention efforts to individual generational workers within their agency. Choice, access, and personalization can be very powerful motivators. Remember, though, there are core motivational values that remain cross-generational. Some of these include:

- **Meaningful Work**. Employees want to believe they are contributing to something beyond themselves, perhaps a greater good, and that they are succeeding in their mission.
- **Job Flexibility**. Whether to care for young children, aging parents or relatives, or to pursue additional educational opportunities, flexibility is of value to all workforce generations.
- **Workplace Respect**. Respect among employees and management cannot be overstated, whether it means appreciating diverse opinions, having the right to challenge the status quo, or showing appreciation for talent and ideas.

- **Teamwork**. Being part of what an agency is trying to accomplish, as well as feeling accepted as a valued team member, crosses all age groups.
- **Peer Recognition**. Being recognized or praised for performance in front of peers is a reward that appeals to everyone.

Results of recent employee training programs and survey questionnaires reveal some of the more attractive motivational cornerstones, such as improving safety and security practices in the workplace, giving employees as much control over their jobs as possible, and providing upgraded equipment and systems to keep pace with a rapidly changing, competitive workplace. Other motivators include avenues for maintaining technical and professional competence and fast-track programs of career development that allow younger employees to advance into management leadership roles more quickly.

Moreover, management consultants have found that helping employees design their jobs to be as re-warding as possible and fostering teamwork rather than a hierarchy lead to better overall performance, in addition to rethinking the bottom-line value of rigid workplace rules and regulations for creative employees. For example, allowing employees to telecommute some of the time, where applicable, and encouraging employees to talk freely, use social media properly, and engage in sponsored leisure or recreational activities, are considered excellent motivational vehicles in the public workplace.

Of course, the motivational importance of equitable salary policies, employee feedback, and job performance recognition cannot be overstated, either. Among the continuous advancements in technology, which always draw the brightest spotlight these days, the contributions of public employees should never be regarded as merely routine.

October 2013

Successful Teamwork Calls for Visionary, Organized Employee Training

By Steven J. Storts
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As often noted, many companies choosing to utilize team concepts do so with the goal of sustaining and improving various operations within their organization. Successful enterprises also realize that through honing and expanding employee team strategies, the challenges of integrating organizational change can be better addressed, and any negative consequences or resistance to change can be reduced greatly.

Working as a team during training systematically guarantees success because everyone is encouraged to practice together and support one another. It is, in some form, built-in mentoring. When all team members under the direction of an engineering manager, supervisor, or team leader are learning new procedures together, the chances of transference and employee satisfaction dramatically increase.

In a group or team environment, employees are able to share their experiences, increase familiarity, and motivate each other across generational divides or cultural differences. These results are often difficult to obtain from webinars, prerecorded training, or canned presentations. The best starting point for team training is with a small group of employees that can work together and discuss or brainstorm resolutions to challenges. Of course, the objective should always be to equate training success with actual business performance.

A key point in maximizing training effectiveness is to ensure that team members remain actively involved in relevant learning — not sitting back passively. Active participation can be achieved through personal interaction, asking questions of the facilitator and each other, practice exercises, and self-defined activities such as selecting one or more aspects of the training for possible implementation in the work environment.

When developing team-building programs, a core set of elements must also be defined. These include such specifics as the theme of any exercises, the measurable objectives and achievable standards to be set, the relevant processes required, and a time frame for conducting exercises, whether an hour, a day, or several days. Equally important, all participants in team-building programs must understand the necessity for aligning their performance with the established overall performance goals and management systems of their company.

Additionally, it is a good idea to assign an individual to a team-building or training exercise to be solely responsible for keeping all participants updated with any relevant information. This will help guarantee continuity and smoothness among team participants during their training, especially if it is conducted over an extended period of time.

Nearly all team-building programs begin with simple problem-solving exercises. These can be fictitious scenarios, but they should have some applicability to actual workplace situations. They should also adhere to the same structural format, such as the following:

- Clearly state the issue and why it is a problem;

- Draft well-defined goals for addressing the problem, including the potential benefits for a successful resolution;

- Identify and prioritize all barriers to the goals;

- List the activities, methods, or approaches to be used in developing probable solutions to the problem; and

- Define benchmarks for the measuring success of the team exercise.

A cooperative "buy-in" among all team members is a necessity before any activity commences, as this one element can derail any problem-solving exercise if overlooked. Assuming everyone's cooperation is at hand, the team leader carries out the execution of the exercise, making sure that all team members are sharing an interactive role in the final outcome. Periodic checks should also be conducted to ensure that the exercise is kept on track, and that the defined problem is effectively resolved, or at the very least, progress is being made toward understanding the issue and addressing it.

Proper evaluation of job performance during any planned company change or transition requires constructive and timely feedback from individual employees on a regular basis. The same holds true for a team management system, and the most useful feedback comes from building team effectiveness. This process all begins with organizational leadership, focusing on five elements: vision, commu-

nicating the vision, trust and confidence, self-improvement, and challenges.

Effective team leadership begins with a company vision or reachable goal for employees, and that vision should encompass some facet of change that an organization is targeting. Several questions need to be answered while developing a team vision: What are the objectives in the change process? What is the blueprint for action? How is the strategy and performance evaluated? Team participation, involvement, and continually inviting feedback from every member will help answer these questions, but never assume that goals remain static. Visions and goals often require occasional updating.

Communicating a vision requires commitment, but it must always be on a one-to-one basis among team members — and in a comfortable or familiar environment to them. Team leaders should not be authoritative, but instead, listen. Use keywords and phrases to help create positive reinforcement and feedback. Questions such as "What can we do?" or "What do you think?" will go a long way toward instilling a continual feedback mechanism.

Moreover, managers and supervisors must avoid being lulled into thinking they are the only ones who evaluate. A team constantly evaluates its leader, and a team's trust and confidence in its leader must be earned the old-fashioned way through hard work and dedication, not authoritative control. Earning a team's respect will not happen until team members know that its leader means them no harm. In other words, a team needs participation from its leader, not another boss.

Finally, organizational leadership must keep in mind that no one wants to be on a team that is doing nothing; people want to be on a team that is reaching. When one challenging task has been successfully completed, those who contributed to the team's success should be praised. Then the next challenging project should be created. The best ideas for new tasks usually originate from a company's own employees or team members. Managers or supervisors should ask for suggestions to be e-mailed or submitted directly to them. One sure way to guarantee constant feedback is to personally acknowledge every comment, idea, or suggestion that is submitted, and then immediately request another.

October 2013

Honing a Public Workforce Requires Awareness of Generational Diversity

By Steven J. Storts
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ONE of the ongoing challenges for engineering managers and supervisors in the public workplace is maintaining productivity among both technical and nontechnical personnel and stimulating interest in new projects. While there is no magical silver bullet that can target work objectives with 100 percent accuracy, management consultants and behaviorists continually advocate a keen awareness of the basic perspectives and motivational interests of the four generational workforces: the Silent Generation (also called Traditionalists), Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Next (also known as Millennials, Generation Y, and the Net Generation).

Today, most government agencies staff few Traditionalists. More than 90 percent of them are retired or of retirement age in their 60s, 70s, and 80s. However, for those currently serving the public in a supervisory, management, or high-ranking support capacity, they continue to display a strong work ethic and devotion toward high ambition and achievement. The Silent Generation is touted as the one that helped create American prosperity — starting with nothing.

Predominantly in their 50s and 60s approaching retirement, with some in their late 40s, Baby Boomers account for more than 75 million people in the United States, with some estimates at nearly 80 million. Lauded as a generation representing optimism and exploration, Boomers were the first to break ground for personal mobil-

ity in the home and workplace. They are characterized as work-centric, independent, goal-oriented, and competitive.

Accustomed to long work weeks, and in many cases, thriving on extended hours or project durations, Boomers are motivated by accomplishment, financial rewards, public recognition, and job positions and responsibility. Their competitive nature is often directly linked to their self-esteem, which is driven by their careers and workplace environments. They are generally accepting of new management or public sector policies, especially if they have an individualistic or independent slant allowing greater creativity and greater rewards for achievement.

Generation X, the smallest of the generational groups, comprises about 46 million Americans in their 30s and 40s. As a whole, this workforce generation is more ethnically diverse, more formally educated, and more technically proficient than the Baby Boomers, with greater than 60 percent having attended institutions of higher learning. Sometimes described as culturally reactive, alienated, disenfranchised, or having a lack of identity, Gen-Xers are not considered as intensely competitive or overachieving as their Baby Boomer counterparts in the workplace.

Often viewed as prolific entrepreneurs in an era of emerging technologies, Gen-Xers embody a "work-smarter-not-harder" mindset. They also have a different vision of their preferred workplace environment. Proclaimed as independent, resourceful, and self-sufficient, they value freedom and responsibility but not

structured work hours. They also shy away from organizations with micromanagement philosophies and want as little hands-on, over-the-shoulder supervision as possible.

Composed primarily of children of Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers, Generation Next embodies a workforce now in their teens, 20s, and some entering their 30s. They currently represent one-third of the U.S. population, with numbers estimated from 75 million to more than 80 million. More importantly, they are the most racially and ethnically diverse of any generational categories, comprising significant numbers of Asians, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Native Americans. Middle Eastern, Indian, Pakistani, and cultures from developing African nations are also represented.

Having watched their parents or older siblings face potential downsizing and restructuring among their employers in both the public and private sectors, Gen Nexters often view work from a prism of uncertainty. They appear to be less committed to employers because they perceive employers as being less focused on long-term loyalty to their staff. Although they exhibit some workplace skepticism, Gen Nexters are also quite opportunistic on demand and extremely tech-savvy and tuned-in to the digital age, more so than any preceding generation.

Many Gen Nexters are still emerging into adulthood; they are not yet fully independent or self-sufficient; their set of life experiences is somewhat limited; and they can seem impatient at times. For some public agencies, however, this characterization can translate into a distinct ad-

vantage because these younger employees will, hopefully, embrace an organizational structure that supports personally tailored career guidance and mentoring programs. The end result could be a higher retention rate — not an early exit to look for more satisfying work environments.

While Gen-Xers and Gen Nexters will exert a significant influence in the public workforce in the foreseeable future, the still-productive value of Baby Boomers and Traditionalists should not be overlooked. Their motivation can be spurred by appreciating their resourcefulness, sense of loyalty, and civic-minded nature. Key management strategies should be a blend of traditional brick-and-mortar-style training, such as hands-on forums and lectures, and some newer online tutorials or Web-based learning exercises. A good motivational approach specifically for Boomers is that of

providing guidance on how they may retire into more leisurely pursuits or perhaps another career — something less stressful.

An effective motivational strategy for Generation X that public agencies can employ is the expansion of telecommuting opportunities, if feasible. This generation is technologically adept and quite comfortable using PDAs, cell phones, laptops, notebooks, smartphones, e-mail, instant messaging, and other forms of digital communication to work from home or other remote locations.

Gen-Xers also value long-term career opportunities and often seek out employment that will build upon and improve their individual talents and skills. A useful approach for courting these employees is to embed more personal mobility and portability into their job roles. Gen-Xers may be less inclined to move on to another employer if they feel more secure with their job assignments, can

accomplish organizational goals on their own terms, and can fuse some fun or humor into their workplace activities.

A simple tool for motivating Gen Nexters to exceed expectations is to utilize the team concept whenever possible. This generational group seeks input and affirmation from others, and it values teamwork, actually preferring to work on teams rather than individually. Engineering managers and supervisors should also note that Gen Nexters crave feedback and attention and seek constant praise and reassurance. Still, these young employees are confident, highly creative, ambitious, and have a thirst for tasks that challenge their skills and talents.

July 2013

Effective Teamwork Calls for Focused Strategies, Leadership, Respect

By Steven J. Storts
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SINCE the expanded quality movements of the 1970s and 1980s, the team concept has been a valued tool for industrial organizations aimed at improving their productivity, meeting the challenges of fluctuating economical markets, and helping to navigate policy changes. Although teamwork is widely practiced today, younger engineering managers and supervisors may occasionally require a basic orientation or additional guidance regarding the deployment of teams.

Generally, most companies that choose to utilize the team concept do so with the intent of sustaining and improving various functions of the organization. Functional teams can be aligned with task forces, process improvement or quality circles, or study groups. In a group or team environment, employees can freely share their experiences, increase familiarity, and motivate or even teach each other.

Most important, though, any team success should always equate to actual business performance, with established benchmarks for evaluation and feedback.

While teamwork among employees is usually considered a company cardinal rule, the actual formation of teams as an endgame does not necessarily ensure success. It is helpful for managers and supervisors to note the following:

● There is always the possibility for team formation wherever any organizational interfacing occurs, particularly when facilitating change.

● Teams can frequently achieve tasks that may not otherwise get completed through individual job functions.

● Teams are much easier to form than problems are to solve.

● Team consensus is not always the correct way to do business.

● A team must not degenerate into ineffectual committee behavior, with little or no direction.

Another key point in team training and development is that managerial or supervisory roles must shift toward that of a coach, leader, and facilitator. All team meetings should focus on a structured agenda: constructive news reports or announcements; discussion of recent performance; problem solving; news and information of value to the team's mission; and planning for the next event.

Contrary to some management theorists, meetings are not the problem when it comes to facilitating teamwork. In fact, team meetings can be one of the most effective communication tools for businesses when conducted properly. The problem is poor meetings! Without tight structure, purpose, and planning, team meetings will never become a contributing factor in confronting organizational challenges. Also, employees tend to respond better to what is measured and recognized. Companies need to take the time to identify where team objectives have been fulfilled, or where they may not be quite satisfactory. And even small victories should be celebrated.

"So, what's in it for me?" Managers and supervisors have heard this countless times in the workplace, but it's true. Employees often respond favorably and will more actively participate in team training and development when they know it will professionally benefit them. As with other business endeavors, outlining the benefits of teamwork can assume many forms, including:

● Helping employees succeed in a newly changed environment;

● Increasing job satisfaction and value to the organization;

● Preparing employees for a promotion or new career opportunities; and

● Encouraging licensing or pursuit of required credentials.

It is also a good practice for organizations to develop staffing procedures that encourage voluntary team participation, which allows for a platform where only interested or enthused participants form a team. Randomly throwing together a group of individuals and expecting them to work as a team is not good management strategy and can be costly and counterproductive. Strong leadership and a system of built-in accountability are required for implementing viable team training and development programs. After all, an effective team attitude also improves employee motivation and job satisfaction, which contribute to productivity, innovation, and retention.

However, consensus should never be regarded as a dynamic objective when involving collaboration and teamwork. If consensus becomes the end rather than the means, stagnation may result. Teamwork is a useful vehicle for many projects, but total agreement among team members

is not necessary on all issues. Moreover, someone's view or opinion should never be ruled out just because that person is not a team player — or does not appear to be.

Team leaders must encourage all participants to express their point, even it seems to be out of step with the team at the time. It could be an important element, and if not heard, the team may collectively lose an asset. As a training rule, it is never a team member's obligation to agree. If a team sets out to block dissension or controversy, it may also block out the one person who has the best idea at the table.

The lesson here is that team members can disagree without being disagreeable, and much responsibility rests on the team leader's shoulders. A team member should never be intimidated when stepping forward with suggestions if he or she sees the group straying off its appointed course. Remember the importance of maintaining a balance and be willing to listen to those who go against the grain of conventional wisdom.

The bottom line strategy for teamwork is to first listen and learn and then synthesize the best ideas out of the team pool. The other ideas can be put on hold for future discussion. Leaving it up to one person to make all the decisions does not necessarily result in the right decisions. Shared decision-making is what makes the team concept so effective.

Protocols for guiding team interaction obviously vary from one organization to another. Overall, though, the less complicated the protocols are, the better. The key components that prove most effective include the allocation of ample time to discuss issues and explore differences, encouragement of respect for all team members, and taking responsible action on all decisions made. In terms of motivation, it is also vital to provide important and meaningful work assignments, increase the team's visibility whenever possible, and link recognition or rewards to the collective goals of all participants.

Teams that are successful in satisfying their mission always create an environment of respect that allays any fears of reprisal for disagreement or conflict. At the beginning of each new project, team members openly discuss their challenges and then establish their shared goals. Each member's role and expectations must be clarified, and a system must be in place for measuring and recognizing results. Through this approach, participants can greatly reduce the potential for any negative consequences or resistance to final outcomes.

July 2013

Successful Project Partnering Requires Commitment, Teamwork, Patience

By Steven J. Storts
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THE formal management process known as partnering is touted by the U.S. General Services Administration and many public sector stakeholders as a team-based approach to project development and problem resolution aimed at eliminating or mitigating conflicts, litigation, and claims.

GSA and transportation agencies in Arizona, California, Illinois, Ohio, Texas, and other states cite further benefits of partnering: on-time completion, increased customer (public) satisfaction, better value for the taxpayer dollar, reduction of paperwork, enhanced communication, and improved relationships among all project parties — owner, design professional, contractor, subcontractors, and suppliers.

Not to be confused with joint ventures or public-private partnerships for managing and operating infrastructure, partnering is not a soft strategy for improving project oversight. On the contrary, this structured process requires considerable effort to initiate and diligence to maintain. All parties to a project must voluntarily agree at the outset to adopt a cooperative attitude and commit to the purpose of achieving specific objectives by maximizing the effectiveness of each participant and available resources.

Additionally, emphasis must be placed on team building, clearly defining common goals and objectives, developing synchronized systems for resolving conflicts quickly, and conducting regular evaluative sessions regarding the progress and effectiveness of the program.

Although detailed partnering structures may vary from agency to agency, all programs generally begin with a facilitated team retreat involving all project stakeholders — anyone who can impact a project. At this initial workshop session, the partnering team establishes a mission charter and guidelines for effective communication, identifies criteria for evaluating progress and performance, and agrees on methods for resolving disputes and promoting cooperation. All team members sign a formal partnering agreement to ascertain their commitment to the program, and follow-up workshops are conducted periodically for the duration of the project as agreed upon by the participants.

It is important to emphasize that partnering does not replace the need for standard contract documents to define the relationship between project parties under legal parameters. Also, partnering principles are not legally binding unless participants stipulate such intent during the charter's documentation. If the principles are to be non-binding, as is usually the case, then the language used throughout the partnering documentation must clearly reflect that intention to remove any doubt.

GSA notes that partnering participants in a majority of its public building projects report lower stress levels than in non-partnered projects because traditional adversarial attitudes lose favor and are replaced by a sense of mutual accountability and trust. Studies by other federal and state agencies show further that part-nering fosters improved safety, reduced construction time, and greater value engineering savings because of the cooperative environment.

Partnering, of course, is not for everyone, but it is a value-added incentive for public agencies that wish to subscribe to quality, trust, and cooperation in project management. However, the process often requires high-level management commitment to be successful and, consequently, a small project may not always justify such level of management investment. The key for newer participants is to steer clear of an "instant gratification" mindset. Successful partnering is not a one- or two-day event; it takes time and dedicated effort and must be cultivated through shared challenges.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration points out that most industry professionals realize that teamwork will produce a better, more efficient, safer, and cost-effective project. Likewise, these professionals generally understand that most construction problems are caused by a *lack* of teamwork. "They would also rather work *with* than *against* the other players," according to the *NASA Partnering Desk Reference*. "Partnering provides them the opportunity, the framework, and the process to do what they should do and want to do — work together."

The NASA guide also cites surveys by the Construction Industry Institute and others indicating a strong desire for repeating the partnering experience. Equally notable, partnering has probably not realized its full potential yet. NASA says partnering

veterans generally agree that the process improves with experience; the fifth partnered project is likely to have more benefits than the first. Moreover, partnering is not a panacea for all problems; it does nothing by magic, but it may salvage a disastrous project or make a mediocre one excellent.

Another recognized attraction of partnering is its versatility of arrangement: project specific or strategic. The former is simply applies for the duration of an individual project, whereas the latter is longer term for a specific period of time, usually addressing a number of projects. Strategic partnering can provide expanded opportunities for continued improvement in support of Total Quality Management initiatives or an enhanced quality control/quality assurance program. Engineers have an old saying: "If you can afford to do it *twice,* you can certainly afford to do it right *the first time*." When effective, partnering exemplifies the TQM experience and can advance zero-defect goals if uniformly adopted by all project stakeholders.

Finally, in terms of measuring performance, the Illinois Department of Transportation, in its model partnering agreement, recommends the following objectives:

- Construct project within the intent of plans and specifications;
- Promote highest quality workmanship;
- Utilize cost-reduction incentive proposals;
- Handle necessary work changes expeditiously;
- Meet all environmental commitments;
- Provide safe passage of the public through the project;
- Promote positive public relations;
- Provide a safe, enjoyable work environment;
- Construct and administer the contract so that all parties are treated fairly;
- Finish project on time, within budget, and with a fair profit for the contractor;
- Complete the project without unresolved disputes; and
- Issue final paperwork to representative parties within a specified number of days after completion of the project contract.

October 2012

Responsible Public Use of Social Media Calls for Leadership, Discretion

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UP until a few years ago, many public agencies or their employees were still reluctant to engage in online social networking activities in the workplace, particularly at the state and local levels. In some instances, agencies were blocking access to the more popular Web 2.0 sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube or banning their office use during business hours. To a certain extent, this reluctance was due to a lack of proper guidance on the use of social media by employees; for others, the anxiety was simply a matter of feeling uncomfortable at sharing information with an unfamiliar online audience.

Attitudes are changing, though, almost as fast as social media technology itself. Today, law enforcement and emergency preparedness officials across the United States, and some federal agencies, too, have become the pioneers in social media advancement in the public sector for the expressed purpose of safeguarding the citizenry.

Engineering professionals who work in the public fields of transportation, energy, environmental protection and infrastructure are also using social networking more frequently in their business activities to link with information sources and additional expertise outside the government environment.

Contrary to popular opinion, social networking is not a "millennial thing," as often touted. Pingdom, an online business monitoring service, reports that the average user of a major social media site is 40 years old. The average age breakdown for users is as follows: LinkedIn, 44; Facebook, 38; and Twitter, 39. More than 60 percent of Facebook users are 35 or older, and nearly 65 percent of Twitter users are beyond age 35.

For engineering managers in municipal government, civic engagement has become a critical factor not only in providing traditional services but also in finding new ways to meet rising challenges in growing communities. Social media are now serving as viable communication tools for getting the local public involved in a timely manner to help shape the policies and decisions that will impact their lives.

While some officials acknowledge that community outreach via online social forums can occasionally be risky, they also contend that failure to not make the social connection on vital public issues can have far worse consequences.

Nevertheless, if a public agency chooses to use social media on a wide or limited basis, it must be prepared to encounter both positive and negative content, regardless of how favorable or unpopular the message might be toward the agency or its mission. Most public officials agree, though, that any content from users that is ugly, offensive and completely out of context should not be posted or deemed worthy of consideration.

State governments have not been "socially" idle, either. Less than two years ago, the National Association of State Chief Information Officers conducted a survey of social media adoption by governments in 43 states and territories, representing nearly 80 percent of the U.S. population. NASCIO's research examined adoption trends, current applications and expectations of social media technologies, the extent to which implementation is governed by formal policies, and perceptions of risk associated with social media use.

Not surprising, the survey results reflect that social networking is being actively adopted and used throughout state governments across the country as a means of increasing transparency and opening dialogue with public constituents. However, the report also notes there is a "parallel lag" between social media use and policy or governance mechanisms at the state level. NASCIO cites cautionary concern in the areas of acceptable use, security, and legal terms of service that currently govern use of the free social media tools that state governments are now employing.

The Institute for Local Government, too, echoes potential concern for legal implications involving agency use of social media. These could include First Amendment issues relating to government restrictions on free speech or the use of public resources for both personal and political purposes. Other legal obstacles could evolve over restrictions on employee use of social media, both on behalf of the agency and personally, or challenge the more contentious issues surrounding the management and disclosure of public records.

Of those states responding in the NASCIO survey, only one-third currently have enterprise policy frame-

works addressing social media, but a sizable number of states have indicated the need for acceptable social networking practices or are in the process of drafting or adopting standards. Also in its report, NASCIO notes that many state governments, even in the absence of any formal policies, are still providing leadership and guidance informally to agencies regarding social media initiatives.

NASCIO points out that at first glance, it may appear that state governments are relying on individual responsibility or individual lines of public business to determine their own policies or the extent of social media use. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it is possible that some state agencies have some level of comfort or trust that individual units have valid reasons for compelling use of social media and are operating within broader legal policy context for acceptable use.

To help allay the legal concerns for advancing a fair and reasonable social networking framework in the public sector, the Center for Technology in Government recommends eight essential elements that should be considered as best practices in any policy adopted: employee access, account management, acceptable use, employee conduct, content, security, legal issues and citizen conduct.

And for those professional engineers who may be seeking a little more exclusivity in their selection of social media, there is a free members-only online community that is steadily gaining popularity: Gov Loop. Launched in 2008, this networking site encourages sharing of information in a professional manner among public employees and officials at all levels of government and has expanded its membership to more than 50,000.

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Congress, White House Push Legislation To Protect, Strengthen Employee Pensions

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IT'S been more than 25 years since any notable laws governing employee pensions were passed by Congress. At that time, workers had much less control over their retirement savings. That was then. Today, about 42 million American workers own 401(k) accounts totaling more than $2 trillion in assets. The recent passage of sweeping pension reform legislation by the House indicates a major shift toward protecting and strengthening worker retirement security.

Both White House and congressional officials have admitted they have an obligation to identify any problems in current pension and retirement system laws that may have exacerbated the problems resulting from the Enron collapse. The passage of H.R. 3762, the Pension Security Act, supports the president's four-point pension protection plan, which calls for giving workers more freedom to diversify; creating more parity between senior corporate executives and rank-and-file employees; providing workers better information about their pensions; and expanding workers' access to investment advice.

The House bill builds upon the president's plan, including new safeguards and options to help workers preserve and enhance their retirement security, and greater accountability from companies and senior corporate executives during "blackout" periods when rank-and-file employees are unable to make changes to their retirement accounts. As in the White House proposal, the Pension Security Act also bars senior corporate executives from selling their own stock at times when their employees cannot make changes to their 401(k) accounts. "If it's O.K. for the sailor, it ought to be O.K. for the captain," Bush noted in February, when he unveiled his reform plan.

A step back into congressional history provides a benchmark for the current Washington agenda. Under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, companies can force employees to hold company stock in their 401(k) plans for extended periods of time. Also, under current law, when 401(k) plans are controlled by workers, employers are not responsible for the results of workers' investment decisions. Further, ERISA only requires employers to provide retirement or pension financial statements to workers on an annual basis.

H.R. 3762, sponsored by Reps. John Boehner (R-Ohio), Sam Johnson (R-Tex.), and Ernie Fletcher (R-Ky.), eliminates this "safe harbor" from employer liability during a blackout period. During these times, employers would be responsible for the consequences of their workers' inability to independently control their investments if they violated their duty to act in the interests of the workers when they created the blackout. Boehner, who chairs the House Education and the Workforce Committee, says the bill is the first real step towards a consensus product that can eventually be signed into law.

Neither the president nor Congress hesitated to move on their reform plans. The president had already approved the findings of a cabinet-level retirement security task force, which recommended specific legislative measures to better protect workers' pensions. The administration says it will work with Congress on a bipartisan basis to ensure that these reforms become law.

Moreover, both the task force and congressional committee members have targeted specific concerns. For example, they point out that employers should be encouraged to make generous contributions to workers' 401(k) plans, including the option to use company stock to make matching contributions. However, H.R. 3762 provides that employees must be free to choose how to invest their retirement savings.

Further, the House legislation allows employees to sell company stock and diversify into other investment options after they have participated in the 401(k) plan for three years. While many companies already allow rapid diversification, others impose holding periods that can last for decades or until retirement, the White House notes.

To ensure that blackout periods are fair, responsible, and transparent, the president's plan would ensure that employees have ample opportunity to make investment changes through a provision that they be given a 30-day notice before any blackout period begins.

Also, to enable workers to make independent, informed decisions, employers would be required to give them quarterly benefit statements that include information about their individual accounts, including the value of their assets, their rights to diversify, and the importance of investment diversity.

Last November, the House approved H.R. 2269—the Retirement Security

Advice Act—with strong bipartisan support. The legislation, parts of which are also included in H.R. 3762, encourages employers to make investment advice available to employees through qualified financial advisors who act solely on behalf of the employees they advise. Typically, senior executives have had access to professional investment advice regarding their retirement savings, but rank-and-file employees have not.

The House leadership emphasizes that the Retirement Security Advice Act could have helped at least some of Enron's employees preserve their retirement savings, but the Senate failed to act last November. Bush is now calling on the Senate to pass the measure as part of the overall reform package.

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