Breaking up is hard to do

MARK WHEELER – CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, DRIVER TRETT EXPLAINS THAT WHILST ENDING A RELATIONSHIP CAN BE PAINFUL, TIMELY ENDINGS ARE THOSE THAT ARE MOST BENEFICIAL TO THE PROJECT IN THE LONG TERM.

Projects involve relationships. No one goes into a project planning to have a poor relationship with another party, but the stresses of delivering a large and complex project on time can cause problems. The relationship issues that arise then in turn cause more problems as collaborative working becomes impossible, and relationships that have soured start to cause new issues themselves, point scoring, etc.

No matter how much effort has gone into selecting the best possible team, the top people in the world at what they do, things can still go wrong. Examples of this abound. Along with many others who follow motorsport, I have been surprised and disappointed in equal measure as one of the world's best F1 teams, has partnered with one of the world's best automotive manufacturers and capped off this partnership with arguably one of the world's best drivers. Between them they have more world championships than you can shake a stick at. Coupled with an almost unlimited budget, success was guaranteed. The best of the best expected early results and, after three years at the middle and often the back of the grid, are now rumoured to be considering parting company.

Our construction consultants work on many of the world's largest and most complex projects. The recurring theme of relationships comes up time and time again. Often, after a good start, one or two key issues or problems arise which need to be dealt with. These usually involve dealing with late or incomplete design work, dealing with an unforeseen project risk, or with unexpected client change. The lead staff members from the client's team, the contractor's team, and the key designers can often impress; by following the contract and taking the right approach to working together to resolve the issues. Commercial problems are usually the spark that cause things to go awry. One party feels hard done by or unfairly treated, and the tone of the working environment changes.

Not too long ago, I worked with a great team of engineers on a significant civil engineering project. Innovative methods of remediation were being used to clean up a large brownfield site, before the development phase could begin. Large industrial sites often have secrets under the surface, and those who prepare surveys are often adept at digging in the places least likely, with the benefit of hindsight, to reveal problems. A year into this two-year project, it was clear to all that there were at least two more years yet to go.

The client had a fixed budget, which was somewhat more than the contract

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value due to a healthy contingency. The contractor had already discovered enough problem issues to exceed the contingency threefold. Relations had deteriorated, with some of the team on site taking a very personal approach to the contract. The client's project manager would sit in his site office and stare across the compound at the contractor's project manager, who would stare back. Each of them had an assistant. Sternly worded contractual correspondence was drafted by each of them and the assistants duly walked back and forth with the envelopes containing these letters, and replies to the letters, and replies to the replies. Each would use increasingly aggressive language in their correspondence and phrases such as "with the greatest respect…", which of course means the exact opposite, started to give way to "…any competent contractor would have known this…", inevitably replied to quickly with a sharp view on how it takes a competent project manager to know a competent contractor when he sees one, etc, etc. I had recommended to the leadership of the parties concerned that a series of workshops be conducted to resolve the issues, and that if the situation did not improve, the people concerned should be replaced with others, who could start afresh. The leadership was reticent to make a change, as it was a complex project and they considered the loss of job knowledge would be detrimental. They were correct to be concerned about that, but it was hard not to see what was already

happening as detrimental to everyone.

At the end of year three, a change was made on both sides, and year four (yes, year four of two!) actually went smoothly, with the account being agreed within three months. What could have been achieved if the change was made a year before, we will never know. The energy that went into all of the harsh correspondence could have been channelled at completing the work sooner, of that I have no doubt.

I am often in the challenging position of knowing both parties reasonably well, and am frequently asked to help resolve issues informally between parties. I would never advise changing a team member unless I thought it absolutely imperative to achieve a better result, but if it does need to be done, sooner is always better than later.

Putting together the best team possible is what everyone strives to do. No matter how much effort goes into that process, no matter how fantastic the parties involved are, this is still not a guarantee of pole position. If things go wrong, there are a number of ways of intervening early to bring things back onto the right course. However, there comes a time when something is not working you have to call it a day. My experience is that when you come to that point, acting quickly is essential. Sticking together to the bitter end, ensures a bitter end.

Breaking up is hard to do. But sometimes you have to do hard things, for the good of the project, and everyone concerned. ■