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Association update: Design-build, done right

by Barbara Jackson, Design-Build Institute of America, Guest Commentary



Barbara Jackson

As popular as design-build has become, we have to remember that it is more than simply a contracting method that allows the owner to transfer risk to the design-build team. It is a method that, when done right, optimizes every aspect of project delivery.

DBIA best practices are derived from the collective experience of hundreds of design-build teams working on projects that met or exceeded owner expectations. Among the most important lessons learned: The power of the design-build process lies in the teaming relationship between the constructors, architects, engineers and specialty contractors and their ability to work successfully with the client, end users and stakeholders at the onset of the project.

DBIA teaches both owners and design-builders the best practices associated with doing design-build the right way. For example, DBIA recommends that owners select design-build teams through best-value or qualifications-based procurement models and that a shortlist consists of no more than three teams. DBIA suggests that design-build teams engage subcontractors and major vendors during the proposal stage in order to integrate their knowledge and expertise in the initial design scheme and cost model.

Trust and respect are the cornerstones of successful design-build. Adversarial ways of relating do not work in a team environment any more than managing design and construction as independent functions. DBIA urges contractors, designers and owners to develop risk assessments and contingencies jointly by working together to analyze, evaluate and mitigate their concerns. DBIA also suggests that owners refrain from adding prescriptive design to the RFP; let teams demonstrate their collective genius by addressing the client's needs collaboratively.

Design-build projects should be led by individuals operating from an integrated mindset who accept full responsibility for every aspect of the project — design, cost, schedule, quality, function and performance. To do design-build the right way, traditional allegiances to a discipline or a field must give way to a holistic perspective.

Unfortunately, previous design-bid-build dealings and experiences still cast a shadow. Resistance to fully embracing the very practices, techniques and tools that unleash the power of truly integrated design-build methodology exists. Despite all we have learned about the importance of trust, communication and transparency, we still operate as if we are on different sides. Remarkably, even these design-build projects produce results superior to design-bid-build.

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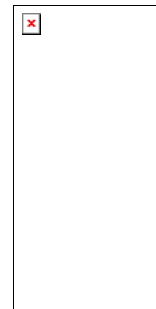
Skepticism and hesitation are expressed and demonstrated by some — including those experiencing significant degrees of success. RFPs continue to be issued with up to 50 percent or more design completed. Low-bid is still used as the basis for team selection and contract award on occasion. Team members unwilling to co-locate, architects insisting on the addition of unapproved design features and contractors refusing to fully vet their estimates with their design team for fear they may “leak” their numbers are all examples of old fashion design-bid-build thinking.

With the extraordinary challenges facing our country today, there has never been a greater need to leverage every resource and opportunity at hand to address problems and deliver projects. Many have dipped their toes into the design-build pool, but are hesitant to take the bold plunge. An abundance of success stories indicate that design-build is the way; however.

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Do you have the will to take it to the next level? Whether you are an owner or a practitioner, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain from design-build done right.

Barbara Jackson, Ph.D., DBIA, is director of the California Center for Construction Education and a professor at Cal Poly State University's Construction Management Department. This article previously appeared in the April 2010 edition of DBIA's Design-Build Dateline.

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