



URI

# WHAT GREAT OWNERS DO

*A Design & Construction Industry Study*

The University Research Institute, Washington, DC



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## Forward

There are, of course, many variables that influence project success, most of which are already well understood within the industry. Our purpose is not simply to repeat conventional wisdom, but rather to highlight several less-discussed practices that consistently produce positive outcomes. Our goal is to stimulate discussion, challenge assumptions, and encourage better project leadership.

We also recognize that today's professionals are inundated with information, much of it offering limited practical value. Accordingly, this article is intentionally brief.



# Headlines

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## 1 THEY CREATE A CLEAR MISSION, CONSTANTLY COMMUNICATE, AND REGULARLY TEST

**Major Challenge:** *It is risky to assume that a well-crafted mission statement will remain clear and relevant throughout the life of a project. Teams evolve, personnel change, and priorities shift. Effective owners recognize that mission management is an ongoing responsibility that requires continuous communication, reinforcement, and validation.*

## 2 THEY REMAIN VISIBLE AND ENGAGED THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE PROCESS

**Major Challenge:** *Some owners assemble a highly qualified team and assume success will naturally follow. In reality,*

*team effectiveness fluctuates throughout the project. Challenges emerge, relationships evolve, and circumstances change. The need for an engaged, visible owner never disappears.*

## 3 THEY ACTIVELY MANAGE COLLABORATION ACROSS THE ENTIRE TEAM

**Major Challenge:** *Too many owners assume that strong professional credentials automatically lead to effective collaboration. They do not. Even highly capable professionals who genuinely want to work together often need structure, guidance, training, and support from ownership to achieve the level of collaboration required for project success.*



**4** THEY HELP THEIR PARTNERS  
SUCCEED

**Major Challenge:** Most *project participants arrive with professional motivations already in place. However, owners have the ability—and the responsibility—to influence additional factors that drive commitment, engagement, and performance. Exceptional owners actively create conditions that help their partners succeed.*

**5** THEY THINK BEYOND ONE  
PROJECT AT A TIME

**Major Challenge:** *Managing an individual project and managing an overall development program require different perspectives and skill sets. Owners who fail to distinguish between the two often make decisions that optimize one project at the expense of broader program objectives. Effective owners keep both horizons in view.*



# They Create a Clear Mission, Constantly Communicate, and Regularly Test



It is not uncommon for a project to begin with a clear mission—yet that mission often exists only within the minds of a few senior leaders. This condition is surprisingly easy to identify.

One effective method is to interview selected team members across different organizational levels and ask two simple questions:

- *What is the overall mission of this project?*
- *What is your role in achieving it?*

The consistency and clarity of the responses are revealing.

## 1.1 Critical Elements of an Effective Mission Statement

An effective project mission statement must include several essential characteristics:

- **It must be brief, simple, and clear.**  
Complexity weakens alignment.
- **It must be emotionally compelling.**  
Projects are executed by people, and people are motivated as much by emotion as by intellect.
- **It must establish clear project priorities.**

During execution, teams will inevitably face competing demands and conflicting pressures. In those moments, consistent reinforcement from the owner becomes critical.



**ESTABLISH THE “WHY” - THE NORTH STAR OF EVERY PROJECT THAT GROUNDS ALL CONCERNED.**

*STEPHEN C. WOOLDRIDGE*



**OWNERS SET THE PRIORITIES AND THE TONE OF PROJECT DELIVERY. IDENTIFYING HOW OWNERS CAN DO THAT TO GREATER EFFECT IS A PRIMARY FACTOR IN PROJECT EXCELLENCE.**

*COL CHRISTOPHER W. KISS*



### 1.2 Repetitive Messaging Matters

Owners should never assume the team fully understands the mission simply because it was communicated once. Even when alignment exists at the outset, it should not be assumed to endure indefinitely.

Repetition is essential.

Over time, clarity of mission and role definition naturally deteriorates. The focused behavior of most teams tends to drift without deliberate reinforcement, and this condition rarely corrects itself organically. Consistent communication from leadership is therefore indispensable.

### 1.3 Testing Alignment

As the project progresses, does the original mission still live within the minds of the team members? Most management teams assume it does.

Great owners do not rely on assumptions. They establish deliberate methods to repeatedly test alignment, identify drift, and recalibrate when necessary.



**AS PART OF THE GOVERNANCE DESIGN, THE TEAM NEEDS A WORKING CHARTER, A JOINT TEAM BUSINESS PLAN. IT'S EASY TO SAY YET VERY HARD TO MAINTAIN BECAUSE IT TAKES DISCIPLINE AND ACCOUNTABILITY.**

*THOM KURMEL*



# They Remain Visible and Engaged Throughout the Entire Process

## 2

Don't assign the overall endeavor to consultants. Show up in person.

### 2.1 Typical Assessments

All owners assemble a multi-disciplinary team of qualified professionals. Typically they use traditional assessments: (a) Professional Credentials and (b) Professional Experience.

Great owners add an important new criteria: team collaboration credentials. It's a mistake to assume professional skills predict effective teamwork.

We hire companies, but the work is done by individuals. Consider con-

tractually required personnel commitments. It's a good idea to spend just as much energy vetting individuals as companies.

### 2.2 Institutionalized Adversaries

There are no team participants with a role as imposing as the owner. There are also an interesting collection of problems that can't be effectively addressed by any other team member. This condition is exacerbated by the fact the adversarial relationship have, throughout history, been institutionalized in our work. We are all working to mediate this condition, but for now, an active, visible owner is a powerful tool.



**GREAT OWNERS DON'T JUST BUILD FACILITIES—THEY TRANSLATE OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS INTO CAPABILITY.**

*RICARDO J. RODRIGUEZ*



**GREAT OWNERS MAKE COLLABORATION THE CORNERSTONE OF PROJECT SUCCESS. THEY SHOW UP, STAY ACTIVELY ENGAGED, ENSURE CLEAR ROLES, AND MANAGE TEAM DYNAMICS JUST AS DELIBERATELY AS BUDGETS AND SCHEDULES.**

*CORY ANDERSON*



# They Actively Manage Team Collaboration

# 3

Before a project falls behind schedule or exceeds budget, there are almost always measurable indicators of team stress and declining performance. Most traditional project management information systems are retrospective—they tell us a project is over budget only after the overrun has already occurred. The more important question is whether it is possible to identify variables that reliably predict team stress before it impacts project outcomes. The answer is yes.

## 3.1 Early Warning

Advances in organizational behavior, industrial-organizational psychology, and data analytics now make it possible to identify early indicators of project stress that are often invisible to traditional project management systems. These indicators provide an accurate measure of team integration and collaboration, allowing managers to identify and address issues before they negatively affect cost, schedule, or performance.



**GREAT OWNERS RECOGNIZE THE BUSINESS VALUE OF MEASURING DELIVERY TEAM PERFORMANCE AS A FORM OF HIGH-IMPACT PARTNERING—ONE THAT DIRECTLY INFLUENCES PROJECT COST, SCHEDULE, RISK, AND OVERALL OUTCOMES. THEY TREAT COLLABORATION AS A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT, NOT A CULTURAL ASPIRATION.**

MICHAEL D. BRENNAN



### 3.2 Collaboration Indicators

There are an untold number of articles out there about the characteristics of high-performance teams. Our research tells us to pay particular attention to these:

- 1 Team members devote more energy to solving problems than assigning blame.
- 2 The team takes collective ownership of project outcomes, not just individual responsibilities.
- 3 Team members share in the benefits of achieving desired outcomes.
- 4 The team recognizes and effectively leverages mutual dependency.

In simple terms, meaningful collaboration depends on two factors: trust and need. If team members do not need one another, collaboration is unlikely. If they do not trust one another, collaboration will not occur effectively.

Importantly, trust-based collaboration is not dependent on agreement or even personal likability. Rather, it is built on perceptions of predictability, reasonableness, and openness. Team members do not need to be close friends in order to work together successfully.

### 3.3 CNT: Critical Node Teaming

One of the most promising developments in project collaboration research recognizes that not all professional relationships have equal influence on project success. Certain relationships are more critical than others. This emerging management approach, known as **Critical Node Teaming (CNT)**, identifies the relationships that matter most and provides a framework for actively monitoring and strengthening them throughout the project lifecycle.

Teams generally view this approach as both insightful and practical because it focuses attention on the interactions that have the greatest impact on performance and project outcomes.



**GREAT OWNERS ARE CONDUCTORS OF SUCCESSFUL TEAMWORK. THE INSTRUMENTS OF BOTH SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL PROJECTS ARE OFTEN THE SAME. THE DIFFERENCE LIES IN HOW THE OWNER ORCHESTRATES THE INTERACTION, SO THE TEAM PERFORMS TOGETHER ACCORDING TO THE SCORE.**

ADAM BAZER



# Great Owners Help Their Partners Succeed

# 4

Modern project teams consist of highly trained professionals representing a wide range of disciplines and organizations. Each participant brings clear business objectives and performance incentives. At the same time, however, every individual is also influenced by a complex set of human motivations that are often more difficult to identify and manage.

Historically, project leaders have attempted to navigate these dynamics largely through intuition.

## **4.1 Social Physics: Moving Beyond Intuition**

Today, owners have the opportunity to take a more sophisticated approach to understanding team performance. The emerging discipline of social physics offers tools and methodologies for analyzing the patterns of human interaction that influence collaboration, trust, and execution.

The industry should increasingly move from intuition toward measurable analysis.



**GREAT OWNERS CONSIDER THEIR  
CONSULTANTS, VENDORS, AND  
SERVICE PROVIDERS AS EXTENSIONS  
OF THEIR STAFF, AND THEIR TENANTS  
AS PARTNERS IN ACCOMPLISHING A  
COMMON MISSION.**

MICHAEL J. CARRANCHO



**DATA...DATA...DATA...  
WE ALL KNOW THAT YOU  
CAN'T MANAGE WHAT  
YOU DON'T MEASURE.**

ANDY WOOMMAVOVAH



### 4.2 Alignment Requires Measurement

Project team alignment has been a major topic of discussion for years—and it is easy to promote in theory. Nearly every project team has experienced the familiar tools of alignment initiatives: presentations, workshops, posters, social events, and motivational messaging.

The important question, however, is straightforward:

### 4.3 Do these efforts actually work?

Sometimes they do. Sometimes they do not.

The more important question is whether the owner has a reliable method for determining the difference.

### 4.4 The Danger of Imaginary Alignment

One of the most common leadership failures is the assumption that general positivity equals genuine alignment.

This condition often develops when management avoids measurable indicators and instead relies on broad, encouraging language intended to maintain morale and optimism. While well intentioned, this approach can create the illusion of alignment even when substantial disagreements exist regarding priorities, accountability, or methods of execution.

Great owners understand that alignment should be verified—not assumed.

Another common mistake is assuming that time alone will resolve collaboration issues. Some leadership teams recognize early signs of dysfunction but postpone intervention in the hope that problems will naturally improve.

They rarely do.

Effective owners identify collaboration issues early and address them directly before they become institutionalized.



**GREAT OWNERS RECOGNIZE THAT THE MARKET IS FLOODED WITH WORK AND THE SKILLED WORKFORCE IS SHRINKING, SO IT'S WISE TO BE THE KIND OF OWNER THAT DESIGNERS AND BUILDERS WANT TO WORK WITH.**

*HOWIE FERGUSON*



**GREAT OWNERS CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR THEIR CONTRACTORS TO BE SUCCESSFUL. THEY HAVE AN “ABUNDANCE MENTALITY” VS A “SCARCE MENTALITY” MEANING THEY SEEK WIN-WIN.**

*MICHAEL D. BELLAMAN*



#### 4.5 Differing Perspectives Are Natural

High-performing professionals inevitably bring differing worldviews, experiences, and priorities to a project. The objective is not to eliminate those differences, but to establish a shared commitment to clearly defined performance expectations.

Strong collaboration does not require identical thinking. It requires disciplined alignment around mission and execution.

#### 4.6 Understanding What Truly Motivates Teams

Many important performance drivers are already embedded within project

participants. Most professionals are naturally motivated to:

- **Perform at a high level**
- **Earn recognition for their contributions**
- **Deliver value to their organizations**
- **Achieve financial success**
- **Satisfy the stakeholders who entrusted them with responsibility**

Owners do not need to spend significant energy reinforcing motivations that already exist.



**IT'S IMPORTANT TO FOSTER A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT WHERE EVERYONE FEELS COMFORTABLE SPEAKING UP, KNOWING THEIR PERSPECTIVES WILL BE HEARD, UNDERSTOOD, AND MEANINGFULLY INCLUDED IN THE DISCUSSION.**

SPENCER MOORE



The more important question is this:

***Are there behaviors or priorities that would significantly benefit the project, but are not naturally embedded within team culture?***

The answer is often yes.

Great owners recognize the difference between naturally embedded motivators and those that can be purposefully added to improve team performance.

#### ***4.7 Identifying What Is Actually Working***

Exceptional owners can distinguish between alignment initiatives that

genuinely improve performance and those that merely create appearances.

They move beyond assumptions and conduct deliberate behavioral analysis throughout the life of the project.

On long-duration projects, alignment is never static. Some team members will be highly engaged and effective while others struggle—and those conditions are constantly evolving. Teams that are functioning effectively today may require recalibration tomorrow.

Great owners monitor these dynamics continuously and adjust accordingly.



**I FREQUENTLY REMIND OUR TEAMS THAT WE ARE IN THE PEOPLE BUSINESS FIRST AND THE CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS SECOND.**

STEVE GRAUER



# Great Owners Think Beyond a Single Project

# 5

Most major organizations are not managing isolated projects; they are managing long-term facility development programs. This creates an important opportunity: the ability to systematically transfer lessons learned from one project to the next.

Successful owners intentionally document leading practices and create systems that allow project teams to learn from one another rather than repeatedly rediscovering the same solutions.

## 5.1 Learning Beyond the Industry

The most advanced owners also recognize that valuable lessons exist outside the construction industry itself.

Many industries rely on multidisciplinary teams to solve highly complex operational problems. Leaders in those sectors are often willing to share proven methods and insights.

Learning from external industries is frequently one of the most cost-effective ways to improve team performance and project execution.

## 5.2 Scale Changes Everything

Not all projects are equal in size, complexity, or risk. Scale matters.

Success on smaller or moderately complex projects does not necessarily translate into success on mega-projects. Larger programs introduce fundamentally different operational challenges, communication demands, and risk profiles.

Great owners recognize that mega-projects require a fundamentally more sophisticated management and delivery strategy. They understand that increased scale dramatically increases the likelihood of disruption, misalignment, and execution failure if traditional approaches remain unchanged.



**DATA CONSISTENTLY SHOW THAT MEGAPROJECTS FAIL ON COST AND SCHEDULE AT FAR HIGHER RATES THAN TYPICAL PROJECTS. GREAT OWNERS AVOID FAILURE BY DEMANDING PROACTIVE PLANNING, ENFORCING RIGOROUS GOVERNANCE, AND DRIVING DISCIPLINED EXECUTION TO MITIGATE RISK AND DELIVER SUCCESS.**

MICHAEL D. BRENNAN



## Final Thought

The purpose of this article is not to provide definitive answers, but to encourage discussion around several practices that we believe deserve greater attention within the industry.

There are many worthwhile topics still to explore. We welcome your thoughts on which issues should be examined next.

The complaint window is officially open.

**JOE M. POWELL**

*Chair*



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