

COLLABORATING WITH SUBCONTRACTORS

Nine Keys to Team Success



BY AJ ORRICK

Even a global engineering, construction, and consulting company with more than thousands of professionals around the globe, subcontracts with local and diverse suppliers are typical to carry out projects.

A case in point: Black & Veatch's ongoing work with Georgia Power's "Grid Investment Program" is a great example of how right of way (ROW) and land survey subcontractors have been engaged to support the easement-acquisition process for undergrounding distribution and rebuilding transmission lines throughout the state. As part of the ROW effort, a team of five different ROW firms and three land survey firms were onboarded to ensure schedule adherence and to meet the program's growing needs. With ROW acquisition being a critical path to construction of these linear projects, success inherently is tied to the subcontractors' performance.

During my 10 years as a ROW attorney at a small law firm and now managing subcontractors as the lead for nationwide ROW services, I've been fortunate to obtain different subcontractor perspectives. What's clear is that the partnership between engineering, ROW and survey firms can quickly make or break a project.

Here are some keys I've found to be critical to the team's success:

- 1. Act as a team.** No matter if you work for the engineering, ROW, or survey firm, your team will succeed or fail as one in the client's eyes, given how the disciplines so closely intertwine. Playing the blame game if problems occur doesn't help the client, so if challenges arise, communicate the issue and don't be afraid to ask your team for help because everyone's success is dependent upon your success.
- 2. Communication is king.** Everything will suffer (schedule, budget and costs) if effective communication is not established. Whether it be from weekly meetings, email updates, setting up a Smartsheet to track each project status — a consistent way to keep all team members updated must be established.

3. Key performance indicators benefit everyone. The only way to ensure consistent improvement and be able to accurately forecast schedules is to track historical data. How much data? That depends upon the nature of the program or projects, but I've found the more data points you can track, the better it is. Clients and engineering firms alike love key performance indicators (KPIs) because it helps evaluate subcontractor performance. ROW and land surveyors should equally embrace KPIs as a great way to track performance over time and show areas needing improvement.

4. Be open to and request feedback. Feedback is the way you improve. A wise manager recently told me "someone will only give you feedback if they care about you improving, so be appreciative of the feedback" even if it shows negative performance.

5. Diversification brings in new viewpoints. When working on a large project, I've found great success in onboarding multiple subcontractors for each discipline. Not only does it mitigate risk if one subcontractor isn't performing, as you already have a backup firm working on the project, but it brings different perspectives. Also, by having different subcontractors — local firms or nationwide firms, women- or minority-owned, or small business enterprises — a more comprehensive and agile service is provided to the client.



6. Engineering doesn't know everything. This isn't just this is a dig because I couldn't cut it as a civil engineer after one semester of undergrad, so I eventually became a lawyer; I mention this to reiterate that everyone must act as a team, meaning EVERYONE is equal. Just because engineers said an easement needs to be acquired in a specific location, that doesn't mean it's the best location. You would be failing your team, your client, and the customer if as the employee of a ROW or survey firm you were afraid to challenge engineering. No person is perfect, and no person knows everything; if you see a problem, then please speak up. It's much better that the issue is addressed during the early acquisition phase rather than just before construction begins.

7. Think long term. It's amazing how small our industry seems at times despite how big it actually is. On countless occasions, I've witnessed staff from different firms coming together and somehow realizing several people worked together years ago in a small city in Texas (oddly, it's typically Texas). My main takeaway here is that if you keep doing good work, earn yourself and your firm a good reputation, then eventually work will find you.



8. Assume positive intent. This is one of Black & Veatch's "Aspire" principles. Many people get so reliant on emails these days, and it's important to remember sarcasm doesn't come across in email. If you get an email and you don't completely understand how to interpret it, give the person the benefit of the doubt and call them to discuss the issue.

9. Get to know your partners. Inevitably problems are going to occur. But if you previously took the time to get to personally know your partners and establish a foundation of trust and respect, it makes it a lot easier to resolve issues. 🌟



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