Does it help us do good work?

An invitation to rethink how we deliver construction

Reflecting on two recent construction industry conferences, I was struck by how often we seemed to be revisiting old ground. At one, we were discussing Latham and Egan. At the other, the merits of bringing back the Clerk of Works.

More than thirty years after the late Sir Michael Latham's *Constructing the Team*, why are we still asking how to get people behaving like a team? And after decades of developing increasingly sophisticated management systems, why are we rediscovering the value of an experienced person standing beside the work, paying attention?

That ought to make us think: Have we become so focused on managing construction that we've lost sight of what it takes to build?

How did we get here?

In 1994, Latham challenged an adversarial and fragmented industry to work together. Four years later, Sir John Egan's *Rethinking Construction* called for better performance through leadership, customer focus, integrated teams, quality, commitment to people and the elimination of waste.

Neither ambition has expired. The uncomfortable question is why, thirty years later, we are still grappling with so many of the same problems.

It would be absurd to suggest that nothing has improved. Professionalisation has brought expertise. Digitalisation has transformed how we share information, coordinate designs and identify problems. Better safety standards and management systems have delivered important benefits. Nobody should wish away those achievements.

But somewhere along the way, have we confused better management processes with better project delivery?

Over the past three decades, we've progressively professionalised, specialised, subcontracted, contractualised and digitised construction. Each development has brought benefits, but collectively they have also introduced layers of management, fragmented responsibilities and increasing administrative demands.

We have become extraordinarily good at recording, allocating, escalating and reporting problems. Yet a problem can pass through an elaborate management process without anybody actually resolving it.

> The dashboard turns green. The work remains wrong.

Perhaps the most significant consequence is what this has done to the people delivering projects.

Good people want to do good work

Most people come to work wanting to do a good job. They want to use their skills, solve problems, take pride in what they produce and go home knowing they've achieved something worthwhile.

Yet we've created an industry in which capable people can spend extraordinary amounts of time demonstrating that they're managing the work rather than actually doing it.

In professionalising construction management, have we inadvertently separated some of those managing projects from the practical business of building them?

The best project managers, engineers and supervisors understand the work, the people doing it and the consequences of their decisions. They exercise judgement, anticipate problems and make things happen.

No amount of reporting can substitute for that experience.

That's why I found the discussion about the Clerk of Works so interesting. Since the 1990s, I've been concerned about the gradual erosion of independent inspection and an increasing reliance on people checking and certifying their own work.

If somebody doesn't recognise what's wrong with their work, asking them to certify it won't improve their understanding.

Trust doesn't mean an absence of supervision. Quite the reverse. Competent, independent eyes close to the work help identify problems before they're covered up, repeated or handed over.

The objective isn't to catch people doing something wrong. It's to help them get things right.

Good work isn't just about what we produce. It's also about the experience of producing it. People who can exercise their skills, make decisions and take pride in what they achieve are more likely to deliver the quality and value we're looking for.

Trust and promises, not trust and money

Another thought from these conferences particularly resonated with me. We often talk about trust and money, but perhaps we're putting the emphasis in the wrong place.

As Stanhope put it on their website: *"Our work is fundamentally about trust and promises."*

> A construction project is an enormous network of promises.

We'll provide the information. We'll make the decision. We'll give you access. We'll complete our work properly. We'll leave things ready for the next trade. We'll pay you when we said we would.

When those promises are kept, work flows. When they're broken, people wait, productivity suffers, costs increase and relationships deteriorate.

I've long believed that a construction project's fundamental profitability is largely won or lost at the interfaces between work packages. Leave a gap and something doesn't get done or there’s a change. Create an overlap and people duplicate effort or get in each other's way.

Good coordination, clear responsibilities and reliable promises eliminate much of that waste before it occurs.

Contracts, management systems and digital tools all have their place. But they should support the relationships through which work gets done, not substitute for them.

A contract cannot create trust. A dashboard cannot exercise judgement. And a common data environment cannot resolve a problem that nobody is prepared to own.

The hidden cost of busy work

There's a commercial argument for all this, too.

Every unnecessary report, meeting, approval or procedure consumes time and money. Worse, it takes capable people away from the work they should be managing.

And there's a tendency for these activities to accumulate. Every incident, audit or review can generate another control, another form or another approval. Rarely does anything disappear.

Requirements relating to health and safety, quality and HR can be particularly susceptible to overinterpretation. Who wants to be the person questioning something introduced in the name of safety, wellbeing or compliance?

Yet a proportionate method statement that genuinely identifies and controls the risks is far more valuable than a lengthy generic document that nobody reads.

The same principle applies elsewhere. A skilled supervisor identifying a defect before it's covered up can save thousands in rework. An elaborate assurance process that fails to prevent that defect may achieve little beyond demonstrating compliance.

This isn't an argument against safety, regulation or proper governance. Quite the opposite. It's about ensuring that our efforts and resources are directed towards the activities that actually deliver those outcomes.

Nor is it simply about cutting overheads.

The objective isn't to spend less on managing construction. It's to spend more intelligently on the things that actually *improve* construction.

Even programmes can become an end in themselves. These are essential tools for planning and coordinating work, but they shouldn't become a substitute for actively managing it. If we can find a better, faster way of delivering something safely and properly, surely the programme should reflect that opportunity rather than constrain it?

Strip away the busy work, restore experienced judgement, improve coordination and help people deliver what they've promised, and we create the conditions for greater productivity, fewer defects, less rework and more efficient programmes. The potential rewards are lower costs, reduced preliminaries and stronger margins.

Not by squeezing another participant in the supply chain, but by making the whole enterprise work better.

Of course, projects still need sensible pricing, fair risk allocation and timely payment. But perhaps we've become too focused on managing the money and not focused enough on managing the work.

> Profit shouldn't have to be extracted from a badly functioning project. It should be the reward for delivering a well-functioning one.

A manifesto for good work

Perhaps it's time to stop looking for another construction improvement initiative and return to a few simple principles:

01 **Build a better world.** Start with the people who will use what we build and the value it should deliver.

02 **Do good work.** Create the conditions in which people can take pride in delivering safe, high-quality, lasting results.

03 **Trust people.** Give competent people the information, time and authority to exercise judgement, alongside clear accountability.

04 **Keep promises.** Make realistic commitments, honour them and speak up early when they're threatened.

05 **Stay close to the work.** Value practical experience, independent inspection and effective supervision, and pay attention to the interfaces.

06 **Fix problems while they're small.** Encourage constructive challenge, raise concerns early, resolve problems together and prevent disagreements becoming disputes.

07 **Keep things simple.** Make every process, meeting, report and control justify the time and attention it consumes.

And underpinning all seven principles, one question:

> Does it help us do good work?

Not *can we justify doing it?* Almost anything can be justified.

Ask something harder: *what value would we actually lose if we stopped doing it?*

If an activity makes people safer, improves quality, prevents problems, supports better decisions or helps someone keep a promise, it earns its place.

If it merely demonstrates that a process has been followed, perhaps we should have the courage to question it.

A bigger purpose for conflict avoidance

Perhaps the Conflict Avoidance Coalition has an opportunity to champion something bigger than the avoidance of disputes: an industry organised around enabling people to do good work.

An industry where competent people are trusted, promises matter, problems are resolved early and unnecessary bureaucracy doesn't get in the way.

Better safety, better quality, greater productivity, more satisfying work, stronger businesses and fewer disputes could all become outcomes of the same endeavour.

We don't need another framework, charter or management system. We just need to remember what all those things are supposed to achieve.

Perhaps conflict avoidance isn't principally about avoiding disputes. It's about rebuilding the conditions in which disputes are less likely to arise in the first place.

Nearly three decades after Egan, and more than three after Latham, perhaps the most useful change we could make is also the simplest.

> Make it easier for people to do good work.

About the author

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Acknowledgements and references

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