

Making Multidisciplinary Practices Work

By David H. Maister

Many, if not most, of the problems for which clients employ professional firms are inherently multidisciplinary.

For example, if I am going to build a new electricity generating plant, I'll need advice on law, finance, economics, engineering, environmental considerations and a whole host of additional disciplines. If I am going to launch a new product, it makes sense to coordinate efforts across a variety of marketing disciplines such as advertising, public relations, brand identity, web marketing and so on.

If, as a client, I have a multidisciplinary need, I face the decisions of how I am going to assemble my diverse team and how I am going to manage it.

One approach, of course, is to seek out specialists in each area at whatever institution they may be found and coordinate the joint effort myself.

However, it can be a pain to be my own "prime contractor," and I might prefer to deal with an organization that can take responsibility for managing the whole project, providing a single point of accountability.

Note that none of this is about "cross-selling" or introducing separate disciplines to work on distinct projects. That's a different topic, with its own problems (see my chapter, "Why Cross-Selling Hasn't Worked" in *True Professionalism*, 1997).

We are talking here about the situation where I, the client, don't want separate teams on separate projects: I want one team working simultaneously, and in harmony, on my complex, multidisciplinary issue.

Many providers seek to gain a competitive advantage by stressing the range of disciplines they have in their firm (their "menu").

Stressing this too much can backfire. When doing some construction work in my home, some contractors tried to win my trust and confidence by pointing out that I would need electricians, carpenters and plumbers for the job.

They went on to claim that, by the sheerest coincidence, the best plumber in Boston (my home town) was in their firm; that they just happened to have the city's greatest electricians; and, of course, that their carpenters were head and shoulders above any other carpenters in the entire region.

The more they asserted the excellence of their own people, the more I came to doubt them. Rather than building trust and confidence by pointing out that they had everything in-house, they raised my level of concern that I would get what they had to offer, which was not necessarily the best for me.

This doesn't mean that there is no virtue in having many disciplines in-house. I might be persuaded that because your

firm enforces a common culture, work ethic, values and high standards, those people in your firm can provide a guarantee of quality.

But, to be persuasive, you had better have some concrete evidence to back up such a claim. I, together with most clients, am aware that the majority of multidisciplinary firms were put together through mergers and acquisitions, which doesn't usually help in the creation of common cultures and standards.

Yes, having things in-house should mean better coordination, but we've all been around long enough to know that it doesn't always happen that way.

When considering you as my prime contractor, I am most concerned about your ability to coordinate, integrate, supervise and manage the various disciplines I need for my project. From my point of view as a client, this is not about cross-selling different services for different phases of an assignment.

That's nice for you but does nothing for me. It's about your ability to deliver a truly integrated service designed to meet my inherently intertwined, multidisciplinary need.

A clue as to whether or not you are truly a prime contractor is given by how you are organized internally. If your firm is organized around separate disciplines, each in its own organizational unit (or worse, each with its own profit center), then I will be skeptical about your ability to coordinate even your own people.

I am much more encouraged if you have people from various disciplines organized around client types (by industry) or, better yet, by problem types. Then I know your people are used to working in multidisciplinary teams for a common cause.

So, do I care about whether your services are in-house or you use third parties? Not a lot.

I care that you demonstrate the ability to put together a custom-tailored team for me and that you have full operational control over everyone on the project. The fact that you share common ownership with other entities is a matter of complete indifference to me. Management, not ownership, is what affects *me*.

On the other hand, I will worry if you end up using people you have never worked with before, so at a minimum I expect you to have a well-developed network of contacts for every specialty need I might have. Someone you have an alliance with is just fine.

As noted, it's the operational experience I worry about, not the form of ownership. Alliances might represent the best of both worlds, giving me the comfort of knowing that you can work together and diminishing any fear that you are self-dealing.

All this is harder to pull off than it might appear. For decades, marketing communications firms that centered on advertising agencies have tried to market themselves as advisors for their clients' total marketing needs. A few clients have gone for this approach, but the majority has not.

In part this is because many so-called marketing integrators have failed to shake off the perception that advertising is their core. When the multidisciplinary team is seen to be led by advertising agency people, the client may be skeptical as to whether they will get "objective" advice on the best way to come to market.

Clients are also skeptical about whether the lead coordinating agencies actually do have operational and quality control over the other disciplines, which are usually housed in separate companies under a holding company umbrella or, at best, in distinct profit centers.

Whether the subcontractor services are provided in-house or through a third party, there is one key thing that clients want to know from their prime contractor: Whose side are you on?

Your task as prime contractor is to manage the project and all the subcontractors on my behalf. Accordingly, I expect you to act as my representative in dealing with everyone on the project, that being the main reason I need a prime contractor rather than performing the role myself.

If I have the slightest suspicion that you are more interested in generating incremental revenues for your firm (or protecting your relationship with third-party subcontractors) than in serving my interests, then you have disregarded a key element of your prime contractor status, and I will begin to treat you like any other vendor—with grave caution.

How do you prove that you are on my side? You keep me informed at all times as to what is going on, both with good news and bad (none of the “let’s not bother the client with this problem” behavior). You involve me in all decision making, giving me real options and not just conclusions already arrived at. You consult me before doing anything of any significance.

You document everything so that I feel empowered and in control of everything that is going on. You create opportunities for me to ask questions (no matter how dumb) and provide

reassurance about my fears and insecurities. In short, you act as a trusted advisor, not as a technical expert.

Since you are my representative toward the rest of the project team, I expect you to get to know me and my business in great depth. You need to be sensitive to how I like to do things, how I like to be communicated with and what my preferences are (logical or not).

You are my agent in the world of the project and I expect you to represent me accurately to everyone involved. If I tell you something once (provided it is not explicitly in confidence), then I don’t expect to have to repeat myself to others on the team. Your internal communications (about me as well as about the project) need to be both speedy and accurate.

Since the job of the prime contractor is to understand the totality of the project, I require you to demonstrate both a big-picture perspective (understanding the true goals of the project and where they fit in with other things going on in my business) and, at the other extreme, an obsessive attention to detail.

The most important aspect of any project is the one that goes wrong. And, as Phil Crosby pointed out in *Quality Is Free*, “When you solve your number one problem, number two gets a promotion.” It’s your job to worry about these things so that I can sleep peacefully at night. Your key role is to absorb all the hassle for me.

Obviously, absorbing hassle doesn’t mean keeping things from me. If there’s a problem or a missed delivery or an unforeseen complication (and, of course, there will be all these things) then let me know what’s happened, what my options are and what you recommend that we do

about it. I won't hold you to a standard of perfection, but I expect you to keep me informed.

Develop a sense of when to bother me and when not to. And you can only do that if you have taken a lot of time to listen to me and understand me. And keep listening.

There probably has never been a complex project where the client's needs and preferences did not evolve during the life of the project. (That's what "change orders" are all about!) Stay tuned in. I need wise counsel, not only at the beginning of a project, but all the way through.

I will be particularly impressed if you have project management software that not only schedules all the work and keeps track of finances and costs, but also serves as a common communications vehicle between you, me and everyone working on the project. (Such software is now fairly common in the engineering and construction professions, though relatively scarce elsewhere.)

When trying to win my business, show me the systems you have for communication, control and cost management. Give me the comfort that you truly are ready to manage complex assignments. Don't promise me that you'll develop a system just for me. I need the confidence that you've done this before, and your having systems in place already is reassuring evidence. I expect you to be immensely well organized.

Discuss with me what kind of reporting I like to have. Don't just tell me "your firm's methodology" for this. Let me decide if I want a lot or a little and in what form. And make sure that I can

obtain extra documentation at any time. If something goes wrong, I want to get my hands on a complete history of who said they'd do what by when. I don't want to waste energy and time recreating history.

While I want you to "run interference" for me in dealing with the technical subcontractors, I reserve the right to deal with them directly and personally if I choose. Who knows? I might have a future need for just a plumber, and I might want to judge for myself whether your plumber (or other technical subcontractor) is someone who I would consider using.

Absorb my hassle, but don't try and act as a barrier between me and others on the project. If I want to communicate directly, I will.

Do I care which of the various disciplines on the project plays the role of prime contractor? Phrased another way, do I care about what the prime contractor's "home" discipline is?

Not really. Being a prime contractor is not about any technical discipline but is about management, communication, organization and negotiation skills (on my behalf), along with trustworthiness and understanding of my business.

I'd be just as happy if you didn't have a home discipline, as long as you have the ability to understand my needs better than anyone else and manage an multidisciplinary team. I don't care about what field you got your technical training in—I want to know that you can manage.

All this is very demanding. So why should you bother? Apart from the fulfillment of playing a leading role within interesting, complex and challenging projects, there is one great

benefit in being the prime contractor rather than a technical subcontractor: money.

Technical subcontractors are not hard to find, and while they may be paid well, they will receive market rates for their discipline. But finding a good prime contractor is difficult, and therefore such a person or organization is invaluable.

If clients are going to pay premiums, accept value-based billing or be less than completely fee sensitive, it is the prime contractor who is going to benefit. That's where the money is now and where it will increasingly be.

There is nothing more worth paying a premium for than the peace of mind that comes from knowing someone you trust is absorbing all the hassle for you.



David Maister is the author of *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000) (coauthor), *Practice What You Preach* (2001) and *First Among Equals* (2002) (coauthor.)

Prior to launching his (solo but global) consulting practice in 1985, he served as a professor at the Harvard Business School.

TEL: 1-617-262-5968
E-MAIL: david@davidmaister.com
WEBSITE: www.davidmaister.com

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