

EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Self Defense for Architects

THE CARE AND FEEDING of your project after it leaves the drawing board may be your best insurance that it will finish the way you planned. When a project is in the construction phase, and questions or issues come up... who knows anymore? Depending on who you ask on the team, the answer will be different. The expectations of the parties have become reality; proper or not. Who reads specs anymore... or looks at the plans? Have you ever heard "this is the way we always do it"? How the team responds and what gets done on site varies wildly from project to project. Why is that? What should you do when your project goes to construction to make sure you reach your goals and provide your client with a successful project?

Self defense has now become that all important first step – sad to have to say, but critical none the less. This is the stuff they dare not discuss in architecture school. Who would have stayed?

So how do you start? Well, at the beginning of course; with a strongly devised and thoroughly researched contract for architectural services. It cannot be overstated how critical it is to define the proper scope of work, have the fee and basis of the fee completely understood, establish the limits of liability (both personal and business), and spell out the warranties and guarantees implied... just to name a few. The list to cover goes into the abyss of "what do you think may come up or be an issue... and then add more" kind of an exercise. Then you go deeper. What about your consultants? How do you contract with them? (Answer: you hold them to the requirements of your contract with the client, silly). But, you also do not take on the liabilities and responsibilities that travel with their licensure. Indemnify yourself. And, by the way, require their proof of liability coverage. Again, a short list of the many requirements.

All this and we haven't even lifted a pencil – excuse me – turned on a computer to start the reason we all got into this business: DESIGN! For brevity sake, I am skipping the design phase portion of the project process completely. I know it is just as critical as construction, but there are so many quality-control programs, firm- management processes and software, team-building seminars, practice management guidelines and websites... the resources are abundantly available to manage a successful design phase for the project and your firm. Remember, all of these and more are important components to that end goal: a clean, organized, coordinated and buildable set of construction documents.

I want to spend my time here focused on the portion that doesn't get the spotlight, that gets blamed for all the financial loss the firm takes on a project, which we all realize deep down, really isn't true. It's that damn flashy designers fault, I digress, anyway...

Now we get into the difficult part as some see it – or fun part for me – bidding, awarding, constructing.

Do you prequalify your bidders? Did you date your wife or husband before you married them? You are getting ready to spend more time with this construction team than you do at home. So, come on; take the time and make the investment to thoroughly vet your contractors – before you allow them on the list. Yes, you "taxpayer-funded-work-only" firms out there can do the same thing. Go even deeper; have the primary subcontractors pre-qualified. They are also critical members of the team and if any one of them fails they all may. Get the best that you can, in all regards.



JIM RAINS, AIA
Rains Studio, PA

“**CONVERSELY,
LISTEN TO WHAT THE
PROFESSIONAL BUILDERS
IN THE FIELD ARE SAYING.
SOME OF THE BEST
SOLUTIONS I HAVE EVER
HEARD TO FIELD ISSUES
CAME FROM THOSE DOING
THE WORK. TAKE TIME TO
LISTEN.**”

Bid day. Great news, the project is in the money. The bids are back and good. The team is ready to go. It is time to start. But, wait a minute – there is more to do than fire a starter's pistol. Awarding and then setting a start date should not be an arbitrary decision. Involve the successful bidders. Mediate the decision between your firm, the owner and the constructors to a mutually agreeable date. In the REAL WORLD of construction today, buy out (the selection of subcontractors and the signing of all the contracts required to build the job) is the biggest challenge facing the primary contractor/project expeditor. Basing this example on a design-bid-build format for a government entity, the successful low bidder has been forced to include subcontract prices from companies they do not know or with whom they have never worked. To get solid contracts and to be able to deal with all the "qualifications" they received on bid day will take some time. Help with that. Getting a strong team with solid agreements between them will make a successful project more likely – and keep you out of trouble.

One more step before we get in the dirt. Expectation Management. Start it now. Meet with the owner and the owner's team of facility/staff/occupant folks along with the constructors. Talk candidly about what they all are about to experience. Be explicit about the real problems that are about to occur. Tell very graphic, very bloody war stories. Define terminology they are about to hear over the next two years. What is a rebar; is the radiant flux within acceptable tolerances; why don't plumber's pants stay up?

How are you planning to communicate with them all? When does that little exclamation point on an email really mean something? How long does it take them to get their hands on money to cover the change orders that ARE going to happen? Explain that processes and how it works. Now is the time for the elementary education in the process we all take for granted. Talk about it all before it happens, and you make the whole group part of the team and start to build that critical foundation of trust. Do it now; there is no turning back.

BANG. The mad dash is on to the finish. Construction has begun. So much to cover here with such limited space. Oh well, here goes. Just a taste.

This is the easiest part of the whole project. Here is the big secret: communication, communication, communication. It's just that easy. Start off the construction phase with the appropriate pre-construction conferences. But don't mess around; get into gritty detail of the most complex portion of the structure(s). Be at the table to help, ahead of construction, focus on the tough areas that require a lot of field attention. Dig into the means and methods. There. I said it. I know we hear we should not – but do it to the point you are comfortable. An example: talk in detail about project sequences and how you "built" the plans. Get into phasing thoughts you had... that sort of thing. Do not assume it is apparent. Or intelligible. I have worked with wonderfully talented superintendents who could not read. Set up realistic agreements for submittals and other documents to be turned around. Then keep your word and call to say you are going to be late before you are. It works better with your spouse that way, right? Add large doses of reality for the team.

Another example: there is no way that all the submittals are going to be submitted in 90 or 120 days. The jobs just don't work that way anymore, so be mindful of that. Be patient. But, there are times when turnaround of things like RFIs and Change Orders will affect completion if it isn't quick, so help all you can. Be available and be "conspicuously present" at the site when you can. Don't get there in a rush. Don't walk the job without looking at the plans and getting into the detail of questions that come up. Conversely, listen to what the professional builders in the field are saying. Some of the best solutions I have ever heard to field issues came from those doing the work. Take time to listen.

We have looked here at just the "tip of the iceberg" as they say. That being so, I believe if you stay in touch with your team on the timeliest basis professionally possible (I don't mean 24 hours a day), and you have done all the above, you WILL have a successful project that will leave you at the interview table for the next project – not on the steps of the court house waiting for your attorney to arrive. Don't get here. Act first, in self-defense. The rest will come along just nicely. 🍷

Jim Rains is a South Atlantic Region Director for the American Institute of Architects. He operates Rains Studio, PA, in Ramseur, N.C. His firm's mission is to provide honest, focused and timely support services for projects in all phases of construction.