

The Art of Collaboration: Illuminating Tomorrow's Project Landscape Through An Expert's Insight

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Legendary BAM Project Leader Alan Cox, lights the way to collaborative working in today's modern Infrastructure Project arena

The world of project delivery is undergoing a profound transformation. From ambitious infrastructure ventures to complex technological rollouts, project practitioners globally face a common set of formidable challenges: shrinking budgets, the relentless pace of technological change, persistent skills shortages, and the urgent imperative for sustainable practices. It's a tightrope walk between maintaining razor-thin margins and investing in the innovation and talent crucial for future success. Yet, amidst these pressures, a powerful antidote is emerging: collaboration.

At a recent thought-provoking Institute of Collaborative Working (ICW) event at the House of Lords, in the United Kingdom, the essence of this transformation was brought into sharp focus by **Alan Cox, Managing Director Regions & Transport for BAM UK & Ireland**, a major UK engineering and construction firm and a founding member of the ICW. Alan's compelling keynote address on "The Art of Collaboration" illuminated its critical role not just as a buzzword, but as the indispensable bedrock of successful project execution. Drawing from his extensive experience and BAM's deep-rooted commitment to collaborative practice, this address offered invaluable insights that have reshaped my own understanding of true partnership and reinforced my conviction that it is the only viable path forward.

The Interconnected Challenges and the Collaborative Solution



As Alan powerfully articulated, we too often tackle the monumental challenges of our time in isolation. Reduced government spending, the integration of new technologies, the global talent crunch, and the crucial journey towards a sustainable built environment are typically addressed by discrete strategies. It was particularly insightful to hear how this industry veteran connected these seemingly disparate issues, highlighting that the true barrier, surprisingly, is often our own hesitance to fully embrace collaboration. Alan's argument that only genuinely collaborative organisations can truly “back themselves” and break through innovation barriers resonated deeply, underscoring a critical shift in mindset.

The ongoing skills shortage presents a significant challenge for our industry. At the same time, there is a growing push toward modern methods of construction (MMC) and improved sustainability. Rather than approaching these as separate goals, Alan illustrated how a truly collaborative strategy can align them. By investing in the development of homegrown, skilled talent to deliver products with a higher level of off-site assembly, we can:

- Reduce on-site labour requirements and the need for highly specialised artisan skills.
- Shorten construction periods, leading to significant cost savings and enhanced value.
- Deliver more sustainable, higher-quality, and more easily replaceable products.

This holistic approach not only addresses multiple challenges simultaneously but also elevates productivity and value significantly. Alan's point that the biggest obstacle is often our own reluctance to innovate because “it hasn't been done before” served as a powerful call to action for all project leaders to foster environments where shared risk-taking is embraced.

Collaboration in Action: Beyond the Contract

The profound power of collaboration, as vividly illustrated by BAM's teams, transcends traditional boardrooms and finds its most potent expression in the most demanding environments. Alan's firsthand account of a recent experience at the British Antarctic Survey research station in Rothera offered a truly compelling insight into collaboration at its purest. Here, a diverse team comprising clients, users,

contractors, suppliers, and maintainers worked in an environment where mutual dependence was absolute. Witnessing contractors assisting in kitchens, clients stripping electrical equipment to help suppliers, and suppliers aiding in unloading boats wasn't a series of transactional favours; it was the manifestation of true collaboration. It was people helping people, driven by an unshakeable focus on collective outcomes.

This powerful anecdote, shared by an individual who candidly admitted they had always aspired to collaboration without fully knowing its true potential, further underscored the critical learning that such synergy cannot be bought, only cultivated. It requires effort, unwavering commitment, and above all, profound trust. The challenge then becomes how to replicate this ethos in more conventional project settings, where contractual protectionism often stifles genuine partnership. The ideal, though perhaps idealistic, is to resolve issues without recourse to the contract, asking instead, "What is reasonable in the circumstances? What is fair?" While alliance-type contracts move us closer to this ideal, ultimately, success hinges on three critical factors: people, people, and people – and how they interact.

Our speaker's subsequent reflections on his own career, including the transformative management of a significant framework, further reinforced this principle. It was particularly striking to hear how simply by setting the annual task of understanding the client's key personal and business objectives, he unlocked unprecedented success, turning a struggling venture into a high-performing success. This testament to the practical application of collaborative values, by focusing on what truly mattered to the client and their superiors, became an enduring lesson for me in fostering mutually beneficial relationships that transcend formal engagements.

When collaboration flourishes, projects become enjoyable, challenges are embraced and overcome, opportunities are seized, and risks are proactively mitigated. It fosters not just successful deliverables, but often lifelong partnerships and friendships. For projects to reach their full potential, every partner must contribute their unique talents and knowledge, forming a cohesive team that delivers superior results and greater value for funders, stakeholders, and society at large.

Cultivating the Collaborative Mindset: Developing Tomorrow's Project Leaders

As highlighted by Alan, the ability to truly collaborate rests squarely on the individuals doing the collaborating. While robust working practices and processes provide a framework, it is the skills, behaviour, attitude, and leadership capabilities of our people that define success. And the most effective collaboration, the kind that drives transformative outcomes, is often intrinsic – it comes from within.

One of the most impactful takeaways from Alan's address was the urgent call to actively dismantle the combative perceptions that have long plagued industries like construction. He passionately argued that younger generations, seeking a different professional experience, will not be attracted to adversarial environments. This emphasis on mentoring new voices and integrating collaborative values from the very start of a career, as exemplified by BAM own practices – where collaboration is a core business value ingrained in apprentice programmes, recruitment, and leadership development – provided a clear roadmap for cultivating the next generation of project leaders.

Furthermore, Alan's plea for greater diversity across our talent pools resonated strongly. The industry faces a significant skills gap, and shifting the perception that construction is merely about erecting structures is vital. It's about solving complex problems in teams, leveraging cutting-edge technology, and making a tangible, positive impact on society. This broader appeal, championed by individuals like Alan Cox, is essential to attract the diverse talent needed for future project success.

Ultimately, collaboration is no longer a "nice-to-have"; it is a "must-have." In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, and as powerfully underscored by the insights shared by Alan at the ICW event, it is the indispensable key to ensuring the long-term success, resilience, and sustainability of projects across all sectors, and indeed, of our collective future. Alan Cox is BAM UK & Ireland's Managing Director for Regions and Transport in the Civils business. He's a passionate Yorkshire native, originating from Leeds and with strong ties to the area still. Alan holds a wealth of experience in the construction industry and has been with BAM for over 35 years. His career started in the Rail sector, before he progressed through a series of senior roles across Pre-construction, Transport, Regions and into his current director role. Alan is also the Chair for CECA (Civil Engineering Contractor's Association) Southern. You can link in with Alan via his LinkedIn profile [here](#), and find out where the Bam team is collaborating next.