Facilitating Collaboration Between Federal Agencies to Improve Border Security and Infrastructure

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After the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, it became apparent that communication between the combined 22 agencies was going to be a challenge because of the differences in standard procedures, recognized practices, and inherent mindsets rooted in years of practice. Differences continue to exist and affect how they operate across agencies; these differences may be driven by varying historical perspectives, budget spending, or mission priorities. As consultants, we find ourselves supporting initiatives across agencies with different (even conflicting) philosophies, processes, and requirements. To be successful, we must understand how to navigate and overcome these differences and share successes so that others may capitalize on our experiences.

Facilities within DHS may be managed by one agency, owned by a different agency, and have maintenance performed on them by representatives of a third agency. To demonstrate this, we will explore two border security projects: the Office of Field Operations’ Cross-Border Expressway (CBX) at the Tijuana Airport and the Arizona Regional Preventive Maintenance Contracts from Border Patrol Air and Marine. Each example includes a brief description of the project, a challenge that affected the project, and the way that challenge was mitigated.

The Cross Border Xpress (CBX), opened in 2015, is an airport terminal located in San Diego, California with an access bridge connecting it to the Tijuana International Airport in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. Funded by Mexican and U.S. private investors and Grupo Aeroportuario del Pacífico, the total project cost was $120 million U.S. dollars.

Extensive coordination and communication was required from Federal, state, and local government agencies in the U.S. and Mexico. The project team’s most valuable asset in facilitating cooperation, however, was encouraging positive and professional interpersonal relationships between stakeholders. This was best exemplified prior to the facility’s opening, when project teams from the U.S. and Mexico joined for lunch on the bridge. Each team member remained within their respective country, and stakeholders had the opportunity to shake the hands of their neighbors in a receiving line at the connecting point on the International Border after the meal. It was a visual reminder of the greater vision of the project itself – to foster positive international relationships, to facilitate trade and travel, and to encourage the building of both a literal and figurative bridge between nations. The gesture created a positive working environment and lifted spirits in the midst of the daily construction challenges.
The Arizona Regional Preventive Maintenance Contracts cover more than 14,500 scheduled preventative maintenance actions for more than 139 separate buildings with a combined total contract value of $9 million U.S. dollars.

The primary challenges that consultants faced in managing these contracts were in gaining program trust and ensuring satisfaction for clients and business partners. Securing and fostering trust from stakeholders is paramount to the day-to-day management of preventive maintenance contracts. For the most part, actions associated with these contracts involve managing work order requests and determining the correct level of priority to assign the requests. What one stakeholder feels is an urgent request may be viewed by others as routine, and this determination can lead to frustration at all levels. To overcome this frustration, the program management office instituted a process whereby work order requests are simultaneously delivered to all involved parties. All project stakeholders are updated regularly, and educated discussions can happen real-time, allowing for critical decisions and actions to be executed faster. Close communications and discussions enable priorities to be established, which are agreed upon and publicized among stakeholders. In this way, execution timeline schedules can be developed, and expectations can be managed across the stakeholder community. Ultimately, the preventative maintenance contracts are more effectively and efficiently managed, thereby assuring overall client satisfaction.

One overlying theme is present: to successfully manage projects across varying agencies, effective communications are vital. It is critical to properly identify all the relevant stakeholders, effectively encode the messages that need to be conveyed, and successfully time accurate messages. Well-informed project managers who know the stakeholders and understand the project can create an effective communications strategy.

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