The Seven Paradoxes of Partnering (and Seven Deadly Sins?)

Mike Bresnen
Email: michael.bresnen@wbs.ac.uk
Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of books, articles and reports devoted to exploring the theory and practice of partnering (for a review of this literature see Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). Prominent among this work have been studies undertaken in the UK, which seek to distil what is currently known about partnering into a set of principles that can be used as the basis for practical recommendations (Bennett and Jayes, 1995, 1998; Bennett et al., 1996). These principles are perhaps best expressed in The Seven Pillars of Partnering (Bennett and Jayes, 1998), which neatly sets out many of the major elements that most commentators would agree are essential if a collaborative approach is to be successful. Other reports are, of course, also available which mark out the foundations for a more collaborative approach by clients and contractors (see also ACTIVE, 1996; CII, 1989, 1991, 1994; CRINE, 1994; Egan, 1998; NEDO, 1991; Latham, 1994).

As valuable as these reports are, they nevertheless represent only one shade of opinion on the nature and prospects for partnering in construction. More critical views on the benefits and limitations of partnering (see, for instance, Green, 1998, 1999) tend to get overlooked or ignored (Bresnen and Marshall, 2001). Instead, an emphasis is put upon the search for general principles and universally applicable tools and techniques that can be used to support a partnering approach. However, the effect of this more prescriptive approach is to promote a model of partnering that is stylised and abstracted from any immediate practical context in which it might be applied. Moreover, the research upon which any examples of ‘good practice’ are identified is typically limited in scope or superficial and often heavily reliant upon supportive case studies and anecdotal evidence. Rarely is partnering systematically examined in sufficient depth (or from different points of view) to present a rounded and convincing picture of its benefits and limitations in practice. Instead, accounts of the principles and practices of partnering commonly rest upon an uneasy fusion of description and prescription, as opposed to informed, penetrating analysis.

Such limitations in the research database underpinning partnering are particularly important, given its many intangible and elusive aspects, such as attitudes, motivations, openness and trust (Barlow et al., 1997). Indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that research to date is very limited in the extent to which it adequately explores psychological and social aspects of collaboration based upon theory and research in the social sciences.
(Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). Moreover, even ‘hard’ elements of partnering seldom receive proper, systematic attention. So, for example, although most formulations refer to the benefits of using financial incentives to reinforce collaboration, the positive effects of doing so tend to be presumed, rather than proven (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000b). Similarly, information technology is often assumed to be a vital tool for integration, despite evidence of unintended consequences and of the premium placed instead upon social relationships in partnering situations (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000c).

This paper is based upon the author’s recent research into partnering in construction and sets out to present an alternative perspective on partnering that draws much more heavily than existing accounts upon critical thinking about organisations and their management. In particular, the approach emphasises the importance of viewing partnering from multiple perspectives and departing from unitarist assumptions about the nature of organisational or inter-organisational practices (cf. Burrell and Morgan, 1979). It also acknowledges the contested nature of much research and theory used to explore particular aspects of partnering and emphasises the importance of context (economic, social, organisational, institutional) in understanding the formulation, implementation and success/failure of partnering in practice (cf. Bresnen and Marshall, 2001).

To develop this perspective, the paper employs a framing device similar to the one used by Bennett and Jayes (1998) in The Seven Pillars of Partnering. However, it does so in ironic fashion to explore the many inconsistencies and contradictions embedded within the approach (hence the title). The argument presented is that, depending upon the assumptions one makes about the nature of collaboration in practice, each of these ‘seven pillars’ are easily converted into a fundamental paradox that, in fact, makes successful partnering less likely. As such, the paper presents a deconstruction of the functionalist, prescriptive view of partnering represented in such works (cf. Linstead, 1993). By adopting such an approach, it explores the many ways in which the prescriptive approach often fails to acknowledge and incorporate critical success factors that can determine the effectiveness of partnering in practice.

Although the orientation of this paper is a critical one, it should however be emphasised that the intention is to contribute constructively towards the debate about partnering. The presumption here is that a more realistic and grounded understanding of the intricacies and dynamics of a partnering relationship can only be helpful in developing more complete, appropriate and effective recommendations for partnering practice. The more general implication to be drawn from the paper is that partnering involves the ‘management’ of a series of contradictions or paradoxes, making it a much more challenging approach than some of the earlier, more prescriptive accounts make out.

The Seven Pillars of Partnering

Partnering involves a commitment by organisations to co-operate to achieve common business objectives. Sometimes the term is used solely to refer to long term commercial relationships, whereas ‘alliancing’ refers to collaboration on single projects. At other times, the terms are used interchangeably. Indeed, there is some debate concerning the feasibility of short term, single project partnering (see Barlow et al., 1997). There is also debate concerning the practices associated with partnering. Some take a pragmatic approach, emphasising the use of charters and dispute resolution mechanisms, contractual incentives, teambuilding workshops and similar formal tools and techniques (e.g. Loraine, 1993). Others stress the importance of informal social relationships and the more emergent nature of relationships built on trust (Bresnen and Marshall, 1999, 2002). Either way, partnering is very much seen as an ongoing process, in which progress is made on several fronts towards improved co-operation (Holti and Standing, 1996, p. 5).
The intention here is not to review the broader literature on partnering or to address definitional issues in more detail (for a more extended discussion, see Barlow et al., 1997; Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). Indeed, there now exists a quite extensive literature that explores partnering’s basic principles and practices, the tools and techniques involved and the major factors that encourage or inhibit partnering (e.g. Barlow et al., 1997; Bennett and Jayes, 1995; Bennett et al., 1996; Holti and Standing, 1996; Larson, 1997; Loraine, 1993; Rackham et al., 1996; Thompson and Sanders, 1998). Instead, the focus is upon one particular approach which neatly encapsulates much current academic and practitioner thinking about the nature of partnering and the factors crucial to its development, implementation and success.

In The Seven Pillars of Partnering, Bennett and Jayes (1998) argue that a new, second generation of more sophisticated partnering arrangements is developing that represents more intense, long-term collaboration between clients and contractors than anything previously seen in construction. Drawing upon evidence from a number of case study companies, they outline the major foundations that they see as necessary to support a partnering strategy and to make it successful. These seven ‘pillars’ of partnering are: strategy, membership, equity, integration, benchmarking, project processes and feedback. Using case study evidence, they highlight successes in the application of ‘second generation partnering’ and look forward to the development of ‘third generation partnering’, which “turns the building process into a cycle of fundamental activities linked by co-operative decision making activities” (ibid., p. 84).

Although the attempt to establish a blueprint for the future of the industry is laudable and timely (cf. Egan, 1998) and although the arguments and evidence presented are sometimes compelling, on close inspection they leave many questions unanswered. For example, although the authors readily acknowledge that partnering may not be universally appropriate, they are less hesitant in accepting the universality of Japanese management principles and practices (see also Bennett and Jayes, 1995; Bennett et al., 1996). This is despite the enormous debate that has raged over the last 20 years concerning the transferability of management practice from one national system and institutional context to another (e.g. Sackman, 1997). They also tend to side-step the fundamental problem that it is difficult, if not impossible, to attribute the successes reported directly to partnering, in the absence of any controlled assessment of what might otherwise have happened under different contractual arrangements (see Bresnen and Marshall, 2001).

As a result of these and other problems (explored below), it can be argued that to try to prescribe the correct approach to partnering (allowing of course for contingent variation) is somewhat premature. That there is much still to be gained by understanding the complexity of what actually happens in a partnering relationship (as opposed to prescribing what should happen). The rest of this paper is an attempt to elaborate on the more problematic aspects of partnering. Each of the seven pillars will be addressed in turn, leading to the identification of a fundamental problem or paradox, which goes further than simply recognising that there are challenges to be overcome in developing a partnering relationship. These seven paradoxes in turn form the basis for the identification of seven tendencies that, if left unchecked, have the potential to undermine each of the main foundations of the partnering approach. At the risk of over-using the rhetorical device (and also somewhat tongue in cheek) these are identified as the seven deadly sins of partnering (wrath, lust, avarice, gluttony, envy, sloth and pride).

Identifying Seven Paradoxes of Partnering and Seven Deadly Sins
The relationship between the seven pillars of partnering as set out by Bennett and Jayes (1998, p. 4) identifies strategy as the most important and the one that underpins all others. The seventh pillar, feedback, is seen as forming a link between the five other pillars and strategy.

Strategy

The importance placed on strategy reflects the emphasis placed on the coherent and long-term thinking behind partnering initiatives and the systematic linking of partnering with organisational goals, as well as specific project objectives. Strategic planning therefore becomes essential and a number of mechanisms are regarded as important in spelling out the longer term ‘vision’. These include mission statements setting out long-term objectives, partnering charters setting out specific project objectives, and business plans for the short and long term that relate partnering to strategic goals and objectives (Bennett and Jayes, 1998, pp. 52-4).

Accompanying these practices are a number of more general recommendations concerning the ‘softer’ side of strategic partnering that are presented as a set of imperatives. These include:

- the need to generate commitment to the approach
- the need to maintain continuity
- the need to rationalise (i.e. standardise) processes
- the need to concentrate improvement efforts
- the need to give freedom to individuals and encourage them to live with ambiguity
- the need to understanding who the client is and effectively make the case for partnering

Although many of these suggestions might appear eminently sensible and desirable, they suffer from a key paradox that relates to wishful thinking about strategy, organisation and practice. The model of organisation that lies behind these prescriptions is an all-embracing, unitaristic one, in which fundamental assumptions about goals, objectives and means are expected to be shared and in which there are no alternative perspectives or sources of influence that need to be considered (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The challenge for management thus becomes one of mobilising enthusiasm and energy behind the pursuit of a chosen strategy and dealing with deviations from the path as aberrations.

Yet, this is far from a socially realistic account of the nature of organisations. Indeed, the fundamental problem of organisation is precisely about reconciling and bringing together individuals and groups with divergent, often conflicting, interests and perspectives. Moreover, the design of organisations itself actively encourages differentiation in order to maximise efficiency and adaptability (e.g. Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). To emphasise strategic intent is, of course, relevant and useful. However, to do so underplays wider observations about the difficulty of sustaining coherent and consistent strategic action (Marchington and Parker, 1990) and about the problems of introducing change (e.g. Beer et al., 1990). In other words, to regard strategy as part of the solution, rather than as part of the problem is to discount or ignore some of the basic dilemmas involved in converting partnering principles into practice.

There are many examples that could be given to demonstrate the paradox. The obvious one relates to the fundamental tension between the collaborative and commercial aspects of the relationship. At times, this can lead ironically to the use of quasi-market mechanisms (e.g. occasional competitive tendering) to help sustain faith in the value of
partnering (Bresnen and Marshall, 1999, 2000c). Moreover, assuming that companies have a wide portfolio of work with different partners over time, then there are likely to be conflicting demands that pose almost schizophrenic requirements. How, for example, does a company sustain a partnering culture when some of its work is still won under cut-throat competitive conditions?

Other manifestations of the paradox arise from internal organisational differentiation and the effects this may have upon efforts to sustain a partnering approach (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000a). What is agreed at one location or level within the organisation as a set of principles to adopt by no means easily translates into practice at other organisational locations or levels. The problem may be partly a management of change issue (which is itself neglected in many accounts) and partly a result of the failure to match the rhetoric of partnering with the reality (cf. Legge, 1995). However, it is also a result of paradoxical effects that stem from internal differentiation and which make developing and implementing partnering strategies inherently problematic.

Such differentiation can be horizontal, in the form of professional/functional specialisation that, while necessary, can also create divergence and conflict in perspectives, norms and values (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967) – including those relating to partnering (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000c). Differentiation can also be vertical, in the form of the decentralisation of control. While this may be necessary too for project teams to function effectively, it can also create problems of control for the organisation. Indeed, such paradoxical effects are apparent in the checklist above, if the need to rationalise/standardise processes (i.e. to control) is juxtaposed with the need to generate commitment and give freedom to the individual (i.e. to motivate). More generally, such problems reflect an uneasy tension between the more flexible, informal and empowering nature of partnering, on the one hand, and a predilection for retaining managerial control, on the other. Perhaps it is not too difficult to see how the desire to control behaviour in ways which further the partnering philosophy but which show insensitivity to individual and group needs may lead to the first of our deadly sins – wrath. This is especially likely to occur in the event of a ‘top-down’ imposition of change to counter perceived indifference or resistance.

Membership

The first of the five elements that Bennett and Jayes argue derive from a strategic view of partnering is membership. This concerns the choice of appropriate firms as partners and ensuring that all necessary skills are developed and available (p. 4). Key elements that are identified here include (p. 56):

- the need for a careful and intense selection process
- a balance between single sourcing and being 'locked in' to the relationship
- structuring membership and workload to encourage repeat business
- being 'open'
- creating certainty for clients
- selecting project core teams (including 'clusters')
- developing partnering skills (e.g. training in process analysis, problem-solving)
- reviewing membership.

The focus on membership consequently relates to the development of appropriate processes at both the organisational and group (i.e. project team) level.
Again, although the above list would seem to be perfectly reasonable, there is a paradox here that is signalled up in the concern in the second item regarding over-dependence. The paradox is in the fostering of relationships built on exclusivity, in which conformity is encouraged to particular norms and values (i.e. those associated with partnering). It is apparent, for example, that in their approach to partnering, firms often find it useful to develop common approaches and to ‘weed out’ organisations and individuals who do not conform to the partnering ideal (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000c). This selectivity has its benefits, but it also has its costs. The potential commercial costs of over-dependence are made apparent in the above checklist, which refers to the potential problem of being ‘locked into’ a relationship. However, there are also more intangible costs, associated, for example, with the creation of inward-looking tendencies and reduced access to innovative ideas (cf. Granovetter, 1973; Uzzi, 1997). If the development of innovative capabilities linked to new ways of working is seen as increasingly important in construction (Gann, 2000, 2001; Winch, 1998), then there is a danger that exclusivity reduces, rather than increases, access to new knowledge and learning.

At a group level, particularly when it comes to decision-making processes within the team, those who deviate from group norms can be extremely important in helping overcome ‘groupthink’ (Janis, 1982) and other forms of dysfunctional group behaviour. Non-conformity is therefore potentially important as a way of enhancing the team’s collective knowledge and learning capabilities. It is also potentially helpful in giving members of the group access to a wider potential range of (non-redundant) contacts, thus helping maximise the benefits of social capital (cf. Adler and Kwon, 2002). The membership dimension, therefore, although important in helping improve team performance, also has the potential to create conformity, over-cohesion and exclusivity (Bresnen et al., 2003a, 2004). The potential problems of over-involvement and over-commitment to a relationship bear many of the hallmarks associated with our next deadly sin – lust.

Equity

Equity is the third pillar identified by Bennett and Jayes (1998) and one which reflects a desire to move away from exploitative supply chain relationships towards a balance of rewards and risks that is fair and commensurate with the efforts put in by the respective parties towards achieving common goals. Equity is therefore at the heart of the partnering philosophy. In practice, it is often manifested in different forms of risk-reward or ‘gainshare-painshare’ contractual arrangement (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000b).

Again, there are many specific elements explored by Bennett and Jayes, including (pp. 56-9):

- alternative funding arrangements (e.g. via PFI)
- sharing savings and other benefits fairly
- maintaining commitment to long term development of the relationship
- agreeing ownership of innovations
- looking after key people
- project incentives based on realistic costs, prices and fair distribution
- open book accounts
- benchmarks for demonstrating ‘value for money’

Some of the limitations of these forms of financial incentive have been discussed at length elsewhere (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000b). For the purposes of this paper, the key point is the need to recognise the inherent tension that arises in a commercial transaction between parties of unequal power that tempts one party to increase their gain at the expense of the other. In other words, the paradox is in the inherent danger of encouraging
exploitation or opportunism. It comes as no surprise then to identify the deadly sin as avarice. With the best will in the world, it is difficult for a powerful client simply to give up their power to dictate terms and conditions in their favour to a smaller contractor who is dependent on them for future work. Not only is this commercially counter-intuitive, it is also contrary to what many would regard as the prevailing, highly contractual culture of relations within the industry (e.g. Latham, 1994; Egan, 1998). Attempting to create equity therefore ironically creates opportunities for exploitation and opportunism, to the extent that it fails to redress underlying imbalances of power. Research by the author, for example, has identified that, even in a number of exemplary partnering projects, incentives were by no means perceived equitably and there were still problems in agreeing satisfactory formulae for the sharing of profits and risks (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000b).

Integration

Of course, partnering is all about the substitution of competition and conflict with greater co-operation and trust, leading to a much more integrated and equal relationship between contractual partners (Barlow et al., 1997). Integration, therefore, is meant to create the conditions that help eliminate exploitation and opportunistic behaviour.

Bennett and Jayes (1998: pp. 60-2) identify again a number of specific ways in which more effective integration and therefore greater equality is to be achieved:

- developing trust
- continuity and building long term cooperation
- integration (both external and internal) at various levels (strategic, tactical, operational, interpersonal, cultural matching)
- getting rid of internal conflict (internal partnering needed)
- joint IT strategies
- supporting/rewarding integrating behaviour
- competence of people

Importantly, the need for integration is seen as spanning not only organisational boundaries, but also internal boundaries within the firm. Moreover, the range of integrating mechanisms includes not only the use of appropriate technologies (especially IT-based), but also various structural/cultural mechanisms – including the use of supporting human resource management practices (for competence development and reward).

Research on the dynamics of relationships within a partnering context is at a comparatively early stage. However, it is clear that, while there are many examples given of the creation of trust and co-operation (e.g. Green, 1995), there are also many examples where the development of co-operation and trust is, at best, fragile and, at worst, non-existent (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000c, 2002). The fundamental problem is that, in project settings, there is often the opportunity only for the development of non-resilient forms of trust (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Ring, 1997). The author’s own research has highlighted how the sustaining of collaborative relationships can in fact depend on the use of technologies of distrust, such as auditing (Bresnen and Marshall, 1999). Furthermore, attempts at partnering often involve the application of quite formalised means of ‘engineering’ the relationship and thereby of developing trust (e.g. through complex selection procedures, charters, contracts, workshops and performance incentives). This clearly contrasts with the more organic evolution of trust that is supposedly at the heart of strategic partnering and which operates according to a quite different set of relational dynamics (Bresnen and Marshall, 1999, 2002).
The paradox that emerges here is therefore in the tension between the desire for co-operation and trust, on the one hand, and the reinforcement of a desire for control, on the other. The point being made here echoes that already made about strategic intent and practical reality. Namely, that empowering project teams to realise the partnering ideal (or any mode of contracting, for that matter) also tends to go hand in hand with a desire to control what happens. Decentralisation and empowerment therefore constitute forms of control, albeit via ‘responsible autonomy’ (Friedman, 1977). Trust within and between organisations is a complex construct to untangle and a full discussion of trust is well beyond the scope of this paper (see Kramer and Tyler, 1996; Lane and Bachmann, 1998). However, it is clear that trust and control are not simple substitutes for one another and that the relationship between the two is more complex, particularly in an organisational context (Reed, 2001). The fact that developing co-operation and trust leads to no necessary lessening of control and even encourages the use of less obtrusive but more sophisticated and powerful control mechanisms (e.g. surveillance through audit) means that heightened control may co-exist with a rhetoric of co-operation and trust. ‘Having your cake and eating it’ is surely a sign of gluttony.

Benchmarks

The comparative absence of absolute standards to judge project performance by and the problem of attributing individual project performance directly to partnering effects naturally puts a strong emphasise on benchmarking to allow effective evaluation and continuous improvement. Again, there are a number of suggested ways in which benchmarking acts as a pillar or foundation of the partnering approach. According to Bennett and Jayes (1998: 63-5), these include:

- the need for simple, robust and widely-understood benchmarks
- to generate quick wins
- agreeing how to measure improvements and what improvements to measure
- use both objective and subjective measures
- benchmark project and firm performance
- involve workers
- overcome resistance to value engineering

An interesting feature of this list is the emphasis placed on motivational aspects of benchmarking – through the effects that ‘quick wins’ can have in stimulating acceptance of the strategy and in the process of involving workers, for example. Benchmarking is therefore recognised as having social, as well as economic, purposes.

Notwithstanding the recognition of the difficulties surrounding benchmarking and the dangers of relying upon obvious, quantifiable measures of success, there is the obvious paradox here that benchmarking – although valuable – can undermine the very success and improvement it is supposed to achieve through the setting of inappropriate targets. As has been suggested elsewhere, one potential downside of benchmarking is an over-emphasis on easily measurable and quantifiable aspects of performance (Bresnen and Marshall, 2001). This is recognised as a problem, but not seen as the paradox that it is if it leads to goal displacement. Significantly, the search for relevant key performance indicators (KPIs), critical success factors and the like continues to be an important part of the industry’s agenda for change and one that is centrally concerned with quantification and objective measurement (e.g. the DTI’s Construction Best Practice Programme). The effective use of benchmarking also obviously depends on there being comparable companies or projects against which to benchmark – an inherent problem to the extent that the epithet ‘no two projects are alike’ holds true. Performance benchmarks also need to be acceptable and sustainable if they are not to be seen as simply a means of
‘ratcheting up performance’ at the expense of those further down the supply chain (see avarice above).

Given the difficulties companies face in developing customised partnering strategies and also the complexities of benchmarking, it is not surprising that companies (and commentators) often look across the sector for examples of ‘best practice’. Indeed, the literature on partnering is dominated by case studies of (often successful) partnering relationships (e.g. Cowan et al., 1992; Knott, 1996; Weston and Gibson, 1993). Moving towards an industry ‘ideal model’ is perhaps not surprising given tendencies towards institutional isomorphism that prompt organisations to copy directly or learn from others’ experiences (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Furthermore, the existence of other models of best practice and experience to draw upon helps companies to legitimate and thus reinforce their own attempts at introducing new practices (cf. Meyer and Rowan, 1977). However, it does lead to further aspects of the problem – for example, the search for universal solutions when only contingent solutions apply. Conversely, it may lead to the adoption of a piecemeal approach which effectively undermines the coherence of a partnering strategy (for a further discussion of these points see Bresnen and Marshall, 2001). Looking to benchmarking and other continuous improvement techniques within this more general institutional context create just the right conditions for our next deadly sin – envy.

Project Processes

The identification of project processes as the next pillar of partnering draws attention to the importance of establishing standards and procedures that embody best practice based on process engineering. According to Bennett and Jayes (1998: 4 and 66-8), it becomes important to develop and use common standards and procedures, to move towards product and/or process standardisation, to increase the use of generic designs and to seek opportunities to gain the benefits of repetition. Achieving greater standardisation of processes (including product designs and methods of building) has been on the agenda for industry practitioners and researchers for many years and continues to form part of more recent, prominent agendas for change within the industry (e.g. Egan, 1998; Gann, 1996).

The aim of standardising project processes of course immediately draws attention of course to the limits to standardisation in the construction industry, as well as to the dangers of ‘over-engineering’ processes, both of which may produce unintended and undesirable consequences. A good example here is in the use of IT to assist design-construct co-ordination. Through enabling constant re-iterations to the design, complex CAD systems can potentially increase the difficulties of achieving closure on the design process and encourage clients to make variations that lead to greater work, cost and claims. Such an example neatly illustrates some of the paradoxical effects created by the over-engineering of processes.

More generally, many commentators have observed that process re-engineering tends to discount the human and social element in work, leading to systems that are insensitive to the ways in which they are interpreted and enacted (Green, 1998). The danger here is that system standardisation becomes the primary goal, rather than contingent application or customisation of processes. This can have significant knock on effects that undermine the value of the system. Recent research by the author, for instance, provides an example of how the introduction of a new progress review system within a UK contractor was undermined due to its failure to allow for intra-organisational variation (Bresnen et al., 2003b). At the risk of deeply offending those concerned with system design and
implementation, the tendency to default to a standardised approach and to eschew the complexities of customisation could be taken as amounting to sloth.

Feedback

The final pillar identified by Bennett and Jayes, and which provides a filter of experience back to strategy, is in the form of feedback. Again, a number of key aims are identified, which include (pp. 69-72):

- process improvement based on process standardisation
- robust systems of feedback, based on measurable targets (CSFs and KPIs)
- walking the job
- final workshop
- telling senior management

A number of these areas and the problems they entail have already been touched upon, particularly in the discussion of benchmarks and project processes as means of formalising and codifying the learning gained from partnering projects. These problems are compounded further when one considers that the knowledge and learning captured about partnering is more likely to be of the tacit variety (cf. Nonaka, 1994), in so far as partnering depends upon personal skills and relational attributes.

The other suggestions about disseminating knowledge and learning about partnering (via walking the job, a final workshop and telling senior management) are more informal means of capturing knowledge and learning. However, they too suffer from a number of problems that revolve around the paradox of failing to capture knowledge and learning, as a result of basic discontinuities in project organisation.

There is an inherent assumption in the above list that individuals are not only motivated to feed back relevant knowledge and learning, but are also able to do so in an undistorted way. Apart from the obvious issue of sustaining senior management commitment, the difficulty with motivation is that, at the end of each project, there may be little incentive for project team members to collate and reflect upon their experience, particularly with the next new project looming. This is particularly so if the results of the exercise are not obviously or immediately relevant to other (very different) projects being undertaken within the firm. In other words, the capture of cross-project learning is inhibited by the closure and finality associated with the end of the project (Bresnen et al., 2003a).

Problems with distortion are potentially numerous and depend upon the ways in which reports on progress and performance are used by individuals and groups within the organisation. One problem relates to the potential disconnect already identified between strategic discourse within the organisation and partnering at an operational level. Project reports and reviews inevitably are used for different purposes and in different ways at different levels of the organisation. In the process, important understandings and details can get lost or re-presented – for example, the tendency to privilege ‘hard’, objective measures of performance over ‘softer’ performance criteria. Another problem is that there is inevitably a difference between performance criteria associated with a particular project and performance criteria associated with a strategic partnering relationship – individual project performance can, on occasion, be less important in commercial terms than high levels of client satisfaction with the process.

A further, more intangible problem is that there may be differences in the propensity to report on and learn from mistakes and successes. On the one hand, those most directly involved with successful partnering ‘on the ground’ may be more aware of and thus able
to learn from mistakes made. On the other hand, those less directly involved may see fewer of the problems and more of the overall successful out-turn, leading to an emphasis on positive aspects of the experience (‘basking in the warm glow of client satisfaction’). Indeed, it is not too difficult to see in many case study reports the pride that goes with successful project completion under partnering arrangements. Such pride, however, can create a blinkered view of the partnering experience that has longer term implications – perhaps through reinforcing tendencies towards ‘single loop learning’ within the organisation (cf. Argyris and Schon, 1978; Argyris, 1999). It is also not too difficult to see how project performance measures – particularly the ‘softer’ variety – can be used for purposes other than pure internal financial accounting (namely, marketing and public relations). As we have all been led to believe, ‘pride comes before a fall’.

Conclusion

The table below summarises the paradoxical effects explored in the discussion above.

Table 1: Seven Pillars, Paradoxes and Deadly Sins of Partnering

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pillar</th>
<th>Paradoxical effect</th>
<th>Deadly Sin</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Wishful thinking about strategy, organisation, practice</td>
<td>Wrath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>Fostering of relationships built on exclusivity</td>
<td>Lust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Encouragement of exploitation and opportunism</td>
<td>Avarice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Reinforcement of a desire for control</td>
<td>Gluttony</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benchmarks</td>
<td>Setting of inappropriate targets</td>
<td>Envy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>Over-engineering of processes</td>
<td>Sloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Failing to capture knowledge and learning</td>
<td>Pride</td>
</tr>
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The aim of this paper has been to use the framework developed by Bennett and Jayes (1998) in a more critical and subversive way to deconstruct the phenomenon of partnering. Emphasis has therefore been placed upon exploring partnering from a perspective which involves over-turning some commonly held assumptions about the nature of organisations and management, highlighting many of the unanticipated and potentially undesirable consequences that can stem from closer client-contractor relationships. The identification of seven ‘deadly sins’ associated with each of these main foundations or pillars of partnering has been used in a more ironic and light-hearted way to accentuate the particular dangers and challenges faced.

The intention has not been to question or undermine the phenomenon of partnering itself, but to highlight in a hopefully provocative yet constructive way that the challenges involved in developing a partnering relationship are numerous and difficult. That they require a higher degree of commercial and organisational realism than is sometimes found in more prescriptive accounts and ‘toolkits’ developed for implementing partnering. And that the development, implementation and success of a partnering arrangement is very much concerned with the management of paradoxes, contradictions and unintended consequences.

Partnering might be seen as, in many ways, a fragile phenomenon, often dependent on the convergence of a number of key commercial and organisational supporting conditions. As such and, in the continuing absence of systematic research that unambiguously points
to its benefits, it constitutes something of a leap of faith. To base such a faith on slim philosophical and empirical foundations is to court the possibility of that faith being undermined when problems are encountered and the complex reality of partnering is confronted. A more critically informed view, on the other hand, at least offers a clearer recognition of the challenges and dangers that lie ahead on the journey towards more effective partnering.

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