Book review

MANAGING PEOPLE ON CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

R. Soetanto, S. Weatherly, A. D. F. Price, A. R. J. Dainty, A. Bryman, K. Greasley and N. King, European Construction Institute, 2005, ISBN 1 873844 62 X.

Managing People on Construction Projects is an interesting publication by the European Construction Institute (ECI) not only in terms of its content but also in the way this is presented and made accessible. The ECI has taken a useful piece of research and made it applicable to the reader by going far beyond a simple set of results by introducing practical suggestions based on the successes of other organisations. The handbook introduces a series of evidence-based recommendations and leads the reader through the process of their implementation, providing managers with a means to directly measure and assess aspects of their own organisational performance.

The handbook uses a mixture of research evidence and anecdotal findings to encourage managers to put people at the heart of management considerations. The ECI Respect for People taskforce set out to provide

- (a) guidance through value enhancing practices (VEPs) on appropriate behaviours and practices that would improve individual and team performance
- (b) a tool to measure and benchmark leadership, teamwork and empowerment within construction projects.

The ECI attempts to show how empowerment can be applied in practice to establish integrated project teams that fully engage and mobilise the supply chain to contribute effectively to project team success. While the authors seem to successfully put the emphasis back on teamwork and leadership in projects amid all the attention paid elsewhere to systems and processes, they attribute a lot to this concept of 'empowerment'. A full discussion on the working definition and suggested merits of empowerment would go beyond the scope of this review so the point to make here is simply that the reader should pay close attention to how the authors build their argument around the notion of empowerment.

Before describing the content of this text, it is important to note the contextual background of this ECI publication (i.e. coming through the Respect for People taskforce). Although this should not take away from what has been done, readers should recognise the inherent potential for a specific agenda to underlie

this research and the ECI's rationale for creating the handbook and what purpose it serves. Admittedly, many readers would quite rightly identify and align themselves with the underlying sentiment of the text.

Managing People on Construction Projects is primarily a practical handbook that makes use of background research. The research acts as a built-in toolkit that aims to help readers conduct their own research and assess it against the precedent of existing results. The implications of the research are expanded into recommendations on three main areas: project leadership for managers; achieving project team performance; effective supply chain engagement in projects. These main topics are presented as VEPs and offer a practical insight on how to improve performance in project teams.

The authors devote the first section of the book to introducing empowerment in the construction industry and set forth an argument for the importance of empowering employees within this context. The authors suggest that empowerment can be seen as a means of overcoming the negative effects of using a fragmented supply chain and the challenges this brings, such as cultural conflict and divergent project objectives.

Following this, the reader is taken through a summary of findings from the ECI's survey of managers and employees concerning current practices and climate of leadership, teamwork and empowerment. The results are based on 32 case study interviews with managers from 31 different firms who were working together on four different projects. The appendices provide more extensive details of the research process; there is definitely value to be found here in further analysis of the results. The discussion in this section is mainly intuitive but remains quite complex, so some technical expertise or at least considerable time would be required to make use of this resource.

The VEPs act as the key components of the book and are successful in part because of the weight put behind them by the research. Generally, they outline a framework or map of what you, as a manager, should be looking for. For each of the topics discussed, the VEPs define each aspect and explore what this means in the industry, the indicators to look out for and general descriptions of how this thinking might be applied in different organisations.

The short VEP sections make it easy to quickly absorb the main points and get an idea of what you are looking to achieve. This section of the handbook acts as a simple, effective and practical guide that could be treated as a checklist or something to rate or compare your organisation against.

As a result of being a practical guide, the handbook can be quite prescriptive with what it is saying and as a result has lots of 'what to do's. Although there is an attempt to provide help on *how* to develop these effective practices, in such a short text this valuable side of the discussion remains quite generic.

The case studies put the discussion into context and offer practical insight into the VEP discussions, particularly in the second and third VEPs. These give readers a useful resource that can easily be applied to their own situations, although more case studies could have been useful in these sections to go into more detail on the experiences of other organisations.

Two sizeable appendices are included, the first being the managerial and employee questionnaire. This is a ready-made template that could be used to measure the climate of leadership, teamwork and empowerment in your project environment. The second appendix explains how the questionnaire can be used to measure and compare current practices and how to analyse the results alongside the study's benchmark figures.

Choosing to release *Managing People on Construction Projects* as a handbook works really well and gives readers a very

accessible and valuable resource. The discussion progresses in a logical manner and uses an efficient and structured approach to lead readers to the main points.

A small complaint is that the size of the text makes reading a bit laborious. In the sections where content becomes heavy it was difficult to maintain concentration. With everything considered, however, and with respect to cost and so on, this would not be a decision the ECI could be criticised for.

The text is quite clearly aimed at management-level practitioners within the project management field – it is pitched at quite an advanced level and relies on a reader's knowledge of technical references. Practitioners aside, there does appear to be enough rigour in the discussions and the research results for it to be useful to academics. The research methodology and analysis seem to be robust enough for use within academic reviews of the subject and the findings may present some researchers with the possibility of exploring certain themes further and in greater depth. The text could potentially be useful for some students in the latter stages of degree courses. Such undergraduates would be able to make use of the research results and conclusions in relevant subject areas, but this text would not likely be an initial point of reference.

Managing People on Construction Projects is a useful analysis and a valuable addition to the body of knowledge on the subject in the construction field. This handbook is an excellent example of making practical use of research.

DONNIE MACNICOL