



## Building Effective Partnerships in Professional Services

This paper provides guidance to government managers who are or will be actively engaged in managing large professional services contracts with private-sector contractors. Senior leaders in three government agencies were interviewed; the result is a set of recommended actions for building and sustaining an effective partnership between government and contractor entities. Here are the recommended actions, organized by key characteristics of a successful partnership.

**A Clear Vision:** Government leaders need to have a clear idea of the objectives of the contracting solution and a clear rationale for why the work is best done by a contractor. This vision serves as input and a foundation for all aspects of a project. Recommended actions:

- Conduct a cost/benefit analysis to determine the most effective and efficient way to accomplish the agency's goals to ensure a contracting solution is the best approach.
- Establish and communicate clear expectations as to the purpose, goals, and objectives of the contracting relationship.
- Learn about the industry from which you are seeking services and what drives contractors' business in this industry.
- Involve contracting and procurement professionals in developing of the request for proposal and statement of work to ensure the contract will be structured to meet the agency's needs.
- Involve members of the impacted community (e.g., users) to gain their perspectives before the contract is awarded to ensure the proposed solutions will serve the agency's needs.

**Leadership:** Senior members of the project team on both the contractor and government sides need to be united and demonstrate a "one-team" mentality through their actions and words. These leaders need to make clear to all project staff what their role is and how it fits into the larger goals of the program. Recommended actions:

- Clearly articulate the purpose, goals, and objectives of the partnership consistently and regularly to all levels of the workforce.
- Reinforce a partnership mentality through actions and words, and hold others accountable for the same.
- Make a personal connection with members of the impacted community by explaining how their efforts contribute to the larger mission and goals of the project.
- Clearly articulate roles and responsibilities of contractors and agency personnel as well as decision-making authority among agency staff.

**Communication:** Both formal and informal communication channels need to be in place to ensure information is conveyed in a timely manner to the right people. Recommended actions:

- Establish formal communication processes (e.g., regular meetings, newsletters, podcasts, e-mails) to ensure the right message is heard by the right people at the right time.
- Foster informal communication processes to adapt to changing circumstances and to build trust.
- Create and use direct communication channels among contractors, users, and agency program staff to promote mutual understanding of the project status and direction.

**User Engagement:** Each stage of the project must involve the users or impacted community — those who the contractor-operated solution will most affect. They need to work with the contractor directly to solve problems and convey requirements. Recommended actions:

- Involve impacted users early to be sure the contracting partnership's solutions are implementable, practical, and effective.
- Listen to those users and members to understand their concerns and to solicit ideas from them.
- Test ideas and prototypes with actual users for early feedback on proposed solutions.

**Control and Accountability:** Government and contractor partners need assurance that their objectives will be reached as an outcome of this relationship. Thus, open dialogue regarding drivers of success for each party need to be communicated in honest and frank discussions. Recommended actions:

- Set measurable goals to be met at regular intervals to ensure the project is staying on course and meeting objectives.
- Create fair agreements that give the contractor incentive to meet the goals most vital to the agency's mission.

**Achievement of Objectives:** Both parties in a contracting relationship want to achieve their organization's objectives through a successful project. Difficult challenges will arise throughout the contracting relationship. These challenges and obstacles are more readily overcome through active participation and collaboration between the government and contractor. Recommended actions:

- Determine the impact of the contracting relationship on each of the stakeholders (e.g., customers, the public, government personnel, the contractor, the community) and communicate it regularly.
- Expand the partnership mentality by sharing successes with other members of the public sector.

This paper provides insights gained from agencies with significant experience partnering with contractors for professional services. Interviews conducted with senior leaders of these agencies serve as the basis for the aforementioned success factors and recommended actions.