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Summer slammer: Despite complexities, there is a recipe for success predicated on basic fundamentals

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Among construction industry professionals there is a challenging project type that can make any seasoned veteran cringe: the dreaded "summer slammer". A summer slammer condenses a full-scale construction effort (one that might otherwise span four to six months) into an often daunting 10-12 week schedule, which is usually filled with more pit falls than a scene from Indiana Jones. These projects are primarily seen in higher education, where colleges and universities want to perform work while students are away from campus during summer break. Despite the complexities associated with these projects, there is a recipe for success predicated on basic fundamentals that can keep any project on track. It starts by thinking of your project in much the same way Henry Ford might have in creating the assembly line for building a car. You need a design, parts, and a plan to put it all together. Typically you wouldn't start building a car until you had all three ready to work in harmony; the same is true for a summer slammer.

I have had the opportunity to work on many summer slammers with all different types of delivery methods. I have found that even though there are many savvy education project and facilities managers in the New England area, many projects are unintentionally and unknowingly set up for failure. Why? The simple answer is that awareness, understanding, and buy-in of the process necessary to ensure a successful outcome is often lacking on some level. Perhaps a general contractor is hired too late, or facilities personnel themselves don't fully understand the project as far as equipment and materials lead times. It may also be that owners do not effectively communicate their own expectations. The result is often a "fire drill" where the project team feels pressured and makes poor decisions, rushes to order equipment and materials, and hastily communicates expectations, ultimately costing the project money and the team's sanity, which could leave everyone with dreams of a career change.

At JM Coull, we use our patented "StartSmart®" program to plan our projects with owners, project managers, and facility professionals. The concept of StartSmart® is similar to a mantra a former baseball coach of mine used to drill into us at every practice: the five "Ps" - Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance. For example, in some of the more challenging cases I've seen, the construction manager/general contractor (CM/GM) was not hired until a month or two before the project was scheduled to kick off. The most successful projects need at least double that time if not more to properly plan for a project on a condensed timeframe. If there is any way to select a CM/GM at least four months before the project kick-off, or even better, during the design process, do it. This will allow for the project team to correctly work through issues, plan ahead, and offer solutions to potential issues before they actually materialize.

Selecting a project team early also helps you overcome that pesky problem of diminishing subcontractor capacity, which is becoming more prevalent as the market continues to rally. Good,

qualified subcontractors become inundated with summer work early and often. The longer you wait, the harder it is to find subcontractors whose calendars aren't already booked. The most successful projects are those where subcontractors have been identified in advance and are dedicating their resources to your project.

Identifying equipment and material lead times is crucial for summer slammer success. If you hire a contractor to replace your air conditioning unit, but forget to mention that the unit takes 10-12 weeks to get from the factory to the site, your schedule can be in severe jeopardy. Then you could be paying high fees for expedited shipment and overtime charges, not to mention battling a domino effect of schedule delays. The most successful projects are worked through early; materials are released, perhaps even prefabricated, and in the most ideal situations, sitting in storage before the project even begins. This eliminates the chance of materials being held up on the Canadian border, for example, and ensures your project team gets a sound night's sleep.

Finally, communication and effectively identifying expectations are extremely critical to project success - I cannot emphasize this enough. I actually had a situation once where the principal of school came to me in the middle of a summer project to tell me that he forgot they had planned a week-long power shut down to replace the main transformer on campus. Needless to say this was a huge bottleneck in overall project progress. Again, proper communication and outlining potential issues that only you as an owner may be privy to can help any plan stay on track. Creating a project-specific events calendar with team vacation times, shut downs, and special events ensures everyone is on the same page and helps prevent any surprises.

Although a summer slammer can be difficult, it can also be tremendously rewarding when everything goes according to plan. The same can be said for most projects and businesses alike. With proper planning, early team selection, and good communication, you can tackle any fast-paced project with some of the similar efficiencies that industrial manufacturers first perfected.

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