

Conflict Resolution among the International Consortium Partners to enable the opening of the Rail Link for the new Hong Kong Airport



A technical challenge was preventing the release of the operation permit for the rail link to Hong Kong's new airport. Without the rail link, the airport would not be able to open. As huge late completion penalty payments loomed, consortium partners were apportioning blame while the client was losing patience, the local media was being highly critical, and the government was applying pressure for a solution. The focus was not on solving the technical problem, but on attempting to avoid responsibility.

After I was engaged as a Mediator with a simple brief – get the airport open by enabling the engineers to find a solution – the extent of the conflict, coupled with fear and lack of alignment on responsibilities quickly became apparent.

People: Hong Kong Mass Transit Railway, consortium partners (rail systems and component manufacturers based in Germany, France, Hong Kong, Spain), engineering consultants (based in UK and Hong Kong).

How we succeeded

1. Preliminary meetings with Client, Project Manager, Senior Engineers and Consultants, to ascertain the broad range of perspectives on the source of the problem as well as hidden agendas.
2. Negotiation of a focused working framework which included an agreement to exclude all commercial experts from the problem-solving workshop. (Commercial experts are not qualified to solve complex technological problems.) Commercial observers were permitted for the opening hour and the concluding session on the condition they did not contribute.
3. Intensive multi-day workshop in which the sole focus was to find a solution to get the railway operational.
The problem was clear. We quickly established and visualised a clear picture of the range of perspectives on responsibilities and required interfaces among all parties, after which we created the space that enabled them to align. The group understood intuitively that they were the only ones able to design the technical process towards finding a solution. The political and time pressure certainly helped the group to focus, as did our sole concentration on the technical challenge – engineers like to solve problems.
The inherent cultural differences across nationalities, organisations and professions were relevant (they always are) but not significant in the light of the actual problem. We focused on the Business Question.

Result

The airport was able to open as scheduled.