

The definition of alliancing in construction as a Wittgenstein family-resemblance concept

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Abstract

There has been increasing interest in the concept of alliancing in construction stemming from the late 1990s. In spite of the fact that project partnering is a widely understood concept, the same is not true for alliancing. By using Nyström's similar approach to define construction partnering, this paper focuses on alliancing and family-resemblance and makes two contributions to the concept of alliancing in construction. The first one is to clearly distinguish amongst *general prerequisites*, *hard (contractual)* and *soft (relationship-based) elements*, and *goals* when discussing the concept. For the sake of thoroughly understanding what is specific about alliancing, the focus ought to be on the *hard (contractual)* and *soft (relationship-based) elements*, which are identified through a literature review. The second one is to make use of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of family-resemblance when defining the alliancing concept. His idea is that a complicated concept can be understood as a network of overlapping similarities. It is concluded, based on the literature review, that there are two necessary hard (contractual) elements – *formal contract* and *real gain-share/pain-share arrangement*, and three essential soft (relationship-based) elements, *trust*, *long-term commitment*, and *cooperation and communication* in construction alliancing, and that a number of different elements can be added to constitute a specific variant of alliancing. This provides an innovative and useful method to define the vague and versatile concept of alliancing in construction in a flexible and structured way. By doing so, industrial practitioners may find the alliancing sunflower model useful in the procurement phase of a building and construction project, particularly if needed, as a description of the concept and as a common starting point for discussions between a client and a contractor on how to procure a specific alliancing projects, thus avoiding any misinterpretations of what an alliancing project is.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of alliancing, like partnering, has received a great deal of attention from industrial practitioners and researchers in the construction industry since the late 1990s [1]. Despite the fact that more and more articles have discussed the characteristics of alliancing, there is still no consensus on the precise and comprehensive meaning of the concept. In fact, alliancing can be characterised as a complex concept where it has been difficult to reach an agreement on a standard type of definition. An explanation

for the increasing number of alliancing definitions is that the concept is yet to mature. If this is true, a comprehensive and conclusive definition of alliancing, which states the necessary and sufficient conditions, will finally arise. However, the reality is just the opposite. It appears that the first step to clearly understand the conception of alliancing is probably to realise that such a definition does not exist for this versatile concept.

Nevertheless, there is still a need for a common conception of alliancing because discussions will be cross-purposed and ineffective if there is not any mutual starting point. The following two examples explain this situation. Firstly, when evaluating different alliancing projects, what do the evaluators comprise in the alliancing concept,

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meaning that do they refer to the same concept? Secondly, when two industrial practitioners have different opinions about the potential with alliancing, are they really talking about the same thing, meaning that do they include the same elements?

The purpose of this paper is to present an innovative and useful method to define alliancing in construction. Earlier studies [2,3] mentioned that the critical success factors of the concept can be determined from reviewed literature. However, similar to Nyström's [4] approach in defining construction partnering, the first step towards defining alliancing is to distinguish amongst *general prerequisites*, *hard (contractual) and soft (relationship-based) elements*, and *goals* of alliancing. This distinction will make it clear that when the essence of the concept is searched, focus ought to be on the *hard (contractual) and soft (relationship-based) elements*. The second step is to make the use of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of family-resemblance when the relation between these elements and alliancing is defined. This innovative approach will generate a useful method to define different variants of alliancing within the same structure. By doing so, industrial practitioners may find the alliancing sunflower model useful in the procurement phase of a building and construction project, particularly if needed, as a description of the concept and as a common starting point for discussions between a client and a contractor on how to procure a specific alliancing project.

Like partnering, alliancing has been described as a panacea in the unhealthy construction industry. However, it

should be noted that this paper does not set out to evaluate the strength or weakness of alliancing, but it just discusses how alliancing can be defined precisely and comprehensively in a systematic way. On the other hand, it should also be noted that the approach presented here is applicable to both project alliancing and strategic alliancing because the literature review covers both.

2. General prerequisites, hard (contractual) and soft (relationship-based) elements, and goals

It has been a more and more popular subject in conducting research by sorting out the major factors of alliancing in order to understand the concept. What has been conducted here applies to the same principle in which the factors mentioned in Fig. 1 are extracted from the alliancing literature. It is concluded, when looking closely at these factors, that they can be classified into three separate groups (Fig. 1).

The general prerequisites are factors, which are not necessary to be unique for alliancing. *Top management support* [2,3,5,6] and *Adequate resources* [2,5] are almost required in all kinds of construction projects. As a matter of fact, when studying these factors, they do not add to our knowledge on alliancing because they are very general. This approach is similar to Nyström's methodology in defining construction partnering [4].

Clearly, the goals of alliancing are the most vital thing to be pursued. In getting this, it should be helpful to clarify what alliancing is composed of, which is not conducted

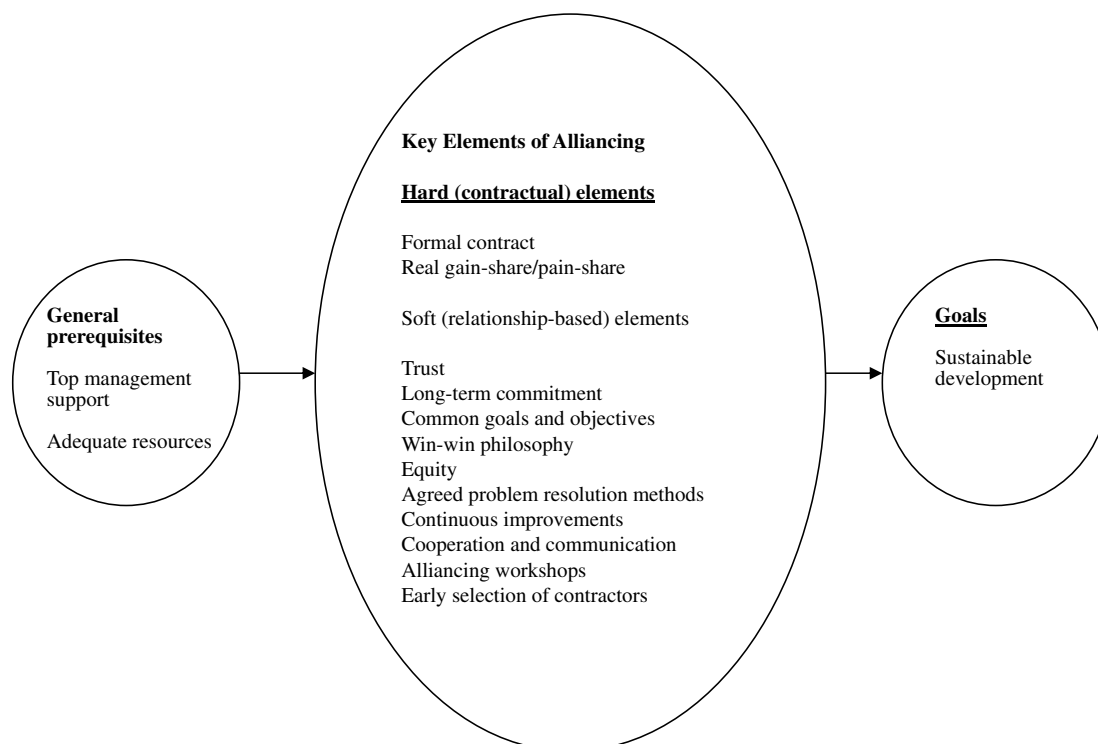


Fig. 1. Distinction of alliancing factors (adapted from Nyström [4]).

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