

**Leopards, pirates and blistering heat** are just some of the hazards facing Celerant Consultants Jean-Paul Sacy, Stefano Codega, Elie Al Kara and Bernard Sacy on a multimillion dollar road project in southern Oman.

# Into the Valley of Death rode the 1,000.

**T**his 90 km road connecting two coastal towns is a massive project, one of the most impressive we're involved with in the Middle East. The entire region is incredibly mountainous and it would have been much easier to build the road along the coast, but they're very future conscious here, so they rejected that because it would have destroyed all the natural beauty there.

So we're literally moving mountains to create this road. It's already 60 % complete and now we're facing the most difficult section, a place known as the Valley of Death. We have to cross this 4 km valley and then blast through the remaining mountains to reach our final destination.

#### Untouched by man

Up till now only wild animals like leopards have walked the Valley of Death. You can see them prowling around. This is the first time man has walked here. There are also pirates in the area. Somalia is very close to Oman and these pirates have set up remote bases inland to collect frankincense. This land was once controlled by the Queen of Sheba and frankincense has been traded here for more than 5,000 years.

The pirates collect the resin from the frankincense trees and sell it. We met some of them when we visited the caves where they sleep. We call them pirates because they come from the sea, but they're not armed and they don't look like the pirates you see on TV. They're just poor people fighting to survive.

#### Men as tough as machines

Almost 1,000 men work on the road. Roughly 20% are Omani and the rest are Indian or Pakistani. This represents an additional challenge because we have to understand each group and forge a strong relationship with them when we want to introduce changes. Our task is to improve performance and throughput. We make sure that the site workload is properly planned, people work the way they're supposed to and maintenance operations are conducted on time.

We do this by implementing the Celerant MCRS® Management System which is all about driving the right behaviours and making sure that the right information is available to the right people at the right time, so they can make fact based decisions. Working this way we've already increased throughput by 15 -20%, saving our client almost \$25,000 a day.





**Starting in the middle**

The project began in 2009 and is scheduled to finish in 2014. It didn't begin at one end, it began in the middle with the construction of an access road right out in the middle of the desert. This is where the main camp is and it takes 6 hours to get there by 4x4 from outside the region. Once that camp was fully operational they began building the road outwards in both directions.

The basic principle is that you blast the mountains, then excavate and either throw the extraction out of the alignment or compress it and build the road on top. The ground needs to be stabilised every half metre or metre. So if you've got a valley that's 100 metres deep and you're extracting stuff all the time, you have to ensure that you've always got access to go down and compress it. That's why it's such a long process and very equipment intensive. There are around 300 machines working on this road - diggers, excavators, bulldozers, drilling rigs, water tankers.

**Sand blasted and wind whipped**

3 to 5 Celerant Consultants rotate on site at any one time. We start work around 5.30 am, there's a pause in the middle of the day from 12 - 2pm and then around 6pm we come back to camp and have meetings till 8pm. It's a very intensive day.

We have to check that operations are being conducted correctly at 7 different work fronts on the road, some an hour away from camp. Conditions out there are incredibly hard. Temperatures reach over 45, so the men are completely covered up against the sun, sand and wind and everyone avoids being outside as much as possible.

We help the site management and the workforce identify and solve issues. One time for example, several machines were out of action because the A/C was not working. We had to check whether that was really the case and then negotiate with the men because working on that equipment with no A/C is tough, but it's doable. We added compensation payments to get them moving, but we also made sure that from then on broken A/C was fixed as fast as possible by reducing the lead time for maintenance operations on technical equipment.

**Clean plates and cricket balls**

When we first arrived at the camp conditions weren't that great. The food quality was not very good and it was impacting on workforce moral. So that was one of the first things we tackled because it was relatively easy to fix, it's a highly visible change and when you're working hard food is one of the few pleasures you have.



Better food made a big difference to the men.

They have just 2 days off a month. They're well paid, but conditions are incredibly tough. So we also helped the Camp Boss build a cricket pitch and a recreational area and made sure that the camp was always cleaned properly. Conditions changed radically and it had a huge impact on performance. People saw that we were delivering what we said we would.

**Leaving a lasting mark**

Skills transfer is one of the things we do naturally with our unique Closework® approach, but it's extremely challenging out here. You push for it as much as you can and if, after 5 weeks, up to 50% of what you've designed is still working, you've done well. The key is keeping things simple and avoiding the trap of over architecting. Many consultants create complex things because they think it justifies them being there. Our strong belief is that keeping it simple is the best way to guarantee sustainability.

Simplicity doesn't mean easy. Simplicity has nothing to do with implementation. If you make it simple you increase the chances of it being sustainable. The tough part remains working on the behaviours, working on the conditions

people have, developing their technical skills and making sure that performance is rewarded. These things are definitely not easy, but they're not complex.

You will not be able to impact all the people. The rule of thumb is that 60% of the people will be completely indifferent to what you are doing, and 20% will be pulling in the wrong direction and will need to be neutralised. That leaves 20% that you need to radically work on because they're the people who have the potential and the desire to change and will be able to do so - and they'll continue making an impact after you've gone.

**Paradise down on the coast**

This amazing road is a key project for Oman. The whole area is directly on the Indian Ocean and it's extremely beautiful, so when it's finished there's massive potential for tourism. It will be directly accessible from a regional airport and it's a paradise. White sandy beaches and blue ocean. We can see all this from up here in the mountains. We're up here, working in some of the toughest conditions on earth and every day we can see paradise down there on the coast. ■

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