

Critically reflect on your experience of the role-play scenarios to identify the key challenges in successful project delivery when working as a team

Introduction

When working as a team to plan and complete a project many contributing factors ensure it is delivered successfully. One of the most important factors is communication between the team to ensure tasks are completed efficiently and to a high standard (Smith, 2002, p.41). Often project teams are made up of people who perhaps wouldn't usually work together in their normal roles, perhaps with specialists from different teams or with external interfaces. It may also be the case that one team is split between different locations or offices meaning in-person meetings and interactions are less likely to occur, with the ever-increasing reliance on online meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams. In my personal experience working for Historic England in the Aerial Investigation and Mapping team, we always conduct meetings online as the majority of the team works hybrid from home and the team itself is split between two office locations (York and Swindon). Whilst completing my degree alongside my regular job role, we have been prompted to take part in situational scenarios to discuss and debate what the ideal outcomes should be for various topics. This gave us a chance to contribute to discussions and chair meetings, mirroring 'real' workplace situations. I will discuss some of the observations about these scenarios and how the discussions were delivered, exploring what worked well and what didn't, and mirror this with my own experiences of real meetings I have been involved with at work.

Assessing the structure of the scenario meetings

The scenario meetings we took part in within our university lectures were delivered following a similar structure. The person appointed as chair would first recap the topic, decide on a method of seeking opinions from different people, organise discussions, and then summarise the final verdict for each agenda, this follows a simplified version of the structure proposed by Scholtes, Joiner, & Streibel in 1996 (Smith, 2002, p. 152). The different methods of managing and summarising discussions were explored through different scenarios allowing us to practice and observe what worked well and what didn't. One thing I noticed throughout a few of the scenarios is that there could often be times when nobody would have anything to say and this would require the chair to further prompt discussions, this was usually

done by the chair offering their own opinion to get things started. At other times there would be a lot of people wanting to get their points across and this would then require the chair to find a way of organising the discussion; a useful feature of Microsoft Teams allows people to 'raise their hands', which shows the order of who put their hands up and allows the chair to make their way through each person and hear their views. This is one of the benefits of online meetings as it removes the ability to talk over each other and requires those involved to speak sequentially, giving people time to speak and forcing others to listen (Redlbacher and Hattke, 2024, p.19). Depending on the size of the team or the agenda, ensuring everyone is heard could result in a time-consuming meeting if not managed by the chair properly. It is also the chair's responsibility to assess the purpose of each meeting and decide on the most appropriate method to ensure it will be successful and effective in its purpose.

One of the methods that worked quite well for tackling a long agenda in a short space of time, was asking everyone in the team to vote for a solution on each topic. This method required each topic to have a selection of outcomes from which to vote. One of the scenarios asked for contributions to a WSI (Written Scheme of Investigation) where we each had to vote for a range of approaches for each heritage asset. This allowed each approach to be voted for and the number of votes to be counted. If there were any situations where the amount of votes were close in number, the chair would allow one person who voted for each approach to explain why they voted the way they did and then a revote would confirm the final decision. Limiting the number of approaches to choose from makes the decision process much quicker, however, one drawback of this method is that it negates the capacity of individual members of the team to come up with their own approaches and does not allow for alternate suggestions to be made as freely. This method may not be suitable for every meeting as some require more in-depth and free-flowing discussions to come up with an agreed approach.

Another style of meeting was explored in different scenario where we were given a project brief and asked to come up with a project proposal to provide advice on a proposed area of development. We were asked to tackle questions such as how best to assess the heritage issues, what methods of work to propose and any extra information to gather about the site to inform decisions. The scenarios gave

everyone a chance to read the brief and do a small amount of background research before the meeting commenced. The meeting structure introduced the brief and then introduced the first question which was left open to suggestions from everyone in the meeting. This gave the discussion a high level of freedom and everyone a chance to input. It also gave those with specialist knowledge or experience the chance to provide their input. I have very little experience with commercial archaeology processes and felt unable to input too much in this scenario, for me this methodology worked well as the knowledge and experience of others in the meeting helped inform my decisions better. The chair directed the topics well by focusing on one question at a time and then allowing people to use the 'raise their hands' function. The chair also kept an eye on the 'chat' feature which was useful for those who wanted to input into the conversation but perhaps did not want to interrupt the person speaking. The chat feature is also useful to give those not comfortable speaking, the chance to contribute, something that may not have been the case in a traditional face-to-face meeting, this ensures that a wider group of less outgoing team members can contribute ideas just as much as those who are more confident (Allison et al, 2015, p. 27).

How do different personalities impact team meeting styles?

With the creation of any team, an appreciation of the different personalities of each individual is important to ensure that they are considered equally especially during team meetings. It is also important to be aware of these different personalities during team meetings to consider the best ways to communicate with the team and ensure all views are considered. Often those who are extraverted will be much more likely to contribute openly to group discussions whereas those who are more introverted may be more difficult to engage with (Bradley and Herbert, 1997, p. 5). During the scenario meetings, the chairs had different ways of engaging with all members of the team, whether it be directly through the meeting or the side chat feature on Microsoft Teams, ensuring to read out any comments made in the chat that contributed to the agenda. Coming from outside of the commercial archaeology sector, a lot of the topics discussed in the scenarios felt a little alien to me; I would normally consider myself as a more extraverted personality type but when faced with a scenario that I was unfamiliar with I found myself feeling more introverted and for me, the chat option was my preferred method of contributing.

In my role at Historic England, we have a support system for early careers employees which is mostly made up of apprentices and those just starting out at Historic England. As an apprentice myself, when I first started, meetings felt a little daunting, and expressing my own opinions as someone with less experience than others often meant I contributed less than others. As part of the support system, they hold regular bi-monthly meetings to discuss how everyone is progressing and discuss any interesting experiences; the premise of the meetings is to help build confidence in virtual meetings and encourage everyone to share willingly. Many of the meetings involve different people from different sectors within Historic England who normally would not interact. Meetings with a group of people who do not know each other can be more difficult to get levels of engagement, especially with individuals who may feel inexperienced within their role. The style of meetings used involves splitting off the online session into smaller breakout rooms with around 4/5 individuals, which seems less intimidating and encourages input. One thing I observed within the breakout rooms, where there would often be a mix of introverts and extroverts, was that the introverts were more likely to contribute to the smaller sessions and engage in discussions when prompted by the more extroverted individuals. This meeting method is a way of creating a more informal setting and encouraging confidence in speaking with different people, however, by splitting the rooms off into smaller groups without a chair to focus the conversations I did also notice that the topics of discussion would often waver from the agenda initially given, perhaps making this method not so suitable for project meetings where time is limited. I also noticed that if most of the participants were more introvertedly inclined the discussion would be extremely difficult and very little would be achieved from the sessions, an issue also noted within a study conducted on students using the breakout rooms feature in Microsoft Teams (Kurnia and Ahmed, 2021, p.255). This style of meeting would be a good way of breaking the ice when working with a new team, as a way of fostering better relationships between team members and higher levels of contribution in future meetings.

How do the scenario meetings compare to my experiences of meetings at work?

Different organisations use different management styles which often impacts the approach to meetings. At Historic England in the Aerial Investigation and Mapping team, we use the PRINCE2 methodology which means our projects are run

by a team with defined roles and responsibilities following a structured project with different stages and review points, which means we have a lot of regular meetings, chaired by those managing the project. The style of meetings tends to be more focused on progress reviews for each member of the team and feedback on any issues that they have faced, this conforms with the PRINCE2 management style ensuring progress is checked against the project plan (Turley, n.d). During the meeting scenarios we took part in as part of the university course, we often had a decision process where the team would try to come up with suitable decisions as part of the project. This however does not reflect the type of meetings I have encountered at work where the big decisions have already been made by those managing the project and the team, this most likely reflects my current role and will be something I get to experience as I progress. We often start the meetings by hearing an update on decisions that have been made by those leading the team which can then be discussed as a team, any comments we have are then considered by the project manager. The project manager then gives everyone a chance to speak and provide an update on their progress and the work that they have completed since the last meeting. Often when discussing each individual's experiences, topics or issues are brought forward that others may want to contribute towards. When I first started in my role at Historic England, this style of meeting was new to me and a little intimidating as we were always encouraged to talk in every session, however, this has made me more confident speaking to the team and I believe it has fostered a strong level of communication between the team more generally. The meetings are held every two weeks and usually only last about half an hour, sometimes even shorter if there are fewer team members involved, this has been seen as an effective way to sort issues out efficiently and keep communication lines open especially with our team being split between different locations (Buruuru, 2014, p.136).

The main difference I found between the scenario meetings and the meetings I have been involved with at work was my prior knowledge of the agendas. The lack of information we received for each scenario was meant to mirror 'real' workplace scenarios but I did not feel that this accurately mirrored what I have experienced at work. It is accurate to say that when starting a new project everyone has limited information about the specific geographical area we are researching but on a

personal level, my lack of knowledge about the commercial archaeology sector, left me feeling like I wasn't qualified enough to make a decision and very tentative to input in the scenario sessions, probably more so than I would usually be at work. I think this was probably one of the main things that differed between the scenarios and the actual experiences I have had at work. Nevertheless, the scenarios gave me a chance to experience different meeting styles and have shown me the benefits of using certain meeting styles for different types of agendas and meeting purposes. As I progress in my career and take on more managerial tasks and responsibilities, the scenario sessions have given me a good understanding of how to conduct a successful meeting. The scenarios have shown that having a good understanding of the purpose of each meeting and choosing the most appropriate method to tackle an agenda is the best way to ensure the success of a meeting. It is also worth considering the different personalities of each individual within a team, not only when choosing project roles but also when initiating group discussions and exploring the best ways to encourage all team members to be heard.

Sources

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