

Assessment 2: Reflection

Introduction

The concept of chairing meetings has been a new experience for me. I have seen meetings chaired in my workplace, both successfully and unsuccessfully, although most of these have been general fortnightly team meetings without any specific agenda. There have a small number of more structured chaired meetings that I have taken part in, for example a small number of bi-annual whole team meetings and I also attended a stakeholder meeting at the start of the creation of a Conservation Management Plan (Johns *et al.*, 2020).

Chairing a meeting

In the meeting of the 20th of March (Locock, 2024b), I volunteered to be the chair of the roleplay scenario. This particular meeting was discussing a hypothetical scenario in which a development proposal was affecting seven archaeological sites. The aim of the task was to identify the best course of action to take with each of the seven sites (Locock, 2024c). There were three or four suggested approaches for each site, typically one of the following:

- Preserve within the development/exclude from development to preserve.
- Initial evaluation with excavation if needed.
- Photographic survey.
- Survey before demolition/demolition without survey.
- Sample column/multiple samples.
- Full survey and/or excavation/strip entire area and excavate.

With the first few sites, as the meeting had just started, I called upon members of the group to voice their opinions on what should be done with each site. Once a few people had voiced their opinions this brought out other members of the group to also comment on the options, voicing either their disagreement or their agreement with the options proposed by other members of the group. Once a general consensus had been reached on how to approach a site, I briefly confirmed the approach that we would be taking, based on the consensus, and moved on with the meeting. After a few of the sites had been considered, the number of people volunteering their opinions dwindled and so I opted to change approach. Instead of asking people to speak up, I requested a show of hands via the Microsoft Teams interface. This allowed me to quickly count how many people supported each of the suggested options. In some cases, there was an even split between two approaches, in which case I asked a member from the groups that voted each option to speak up and explain their thinking. This allowed for further conversation to take place and a consensus could be reached. In the cases where there was a general consensus but one or two who were in disagreement, I gave them the opportunity to have their opinion heard. Whilst chairing the meeting I tried to keep note of who had spoken and who had not, and then made sure to prompt anyone who had been quiet, so that everyone had spoken at least once.

I think that this was an effective and fair method of chairing, as it allowed for everyone to speak at least once and enabled the group to reach a consensus. Of my chairing style, Nigel Nayling said:

Well done, Connor. I thought you ... wrestled your ... cats well. It's when you've got a room with ten people in it, then trying to get through that kind of a quite lengthy agenda, you did well to move on with things quickly where ... there was a clear consensus while still giving a voice to the ... dissenting voice. You know, so that we could give everybody the opportunity

to think twice. So I ... think you did a good way of balancing that so well done (Locock 2024b).

During my chairing session the views were, for the most part in agreement with what I would have done for the site. There was one site, however where this was not the case. The penultimate site was a Second World War pillbox which was overgrown and vandalised. The options were to exclude it from development and preserve it, survey it before demolition, or demolish it without survey. The consensus of the group was that the site should be surveyed and demolished, however there were two people in the group who suggested that the pillbox should be retained and preserved within the development. My personal opinion was also that the site should be preserved. This is because Second World War structures such as this are often undesigned and so opportunities to preserve them should be seized, when possible, as they can all too easily be lost. Because the overwhelming opinion was that the site should be demolished and recorded, this is the option we went for, and as the chair I accepted this decision and went with it, despite disagreeing with the group's decision.

I think that allowing the opposing opinions of others to be heard after the votes had been cast, had an impact on the outcome of the decisions. In one case there was a very even split in the opinions of the group about whether to choose one option or another. The voicing of the opinions allowed for people to reconsider the options and a decision was made, with a majority vote. I did however feel that there was further discussion that could be had around this subject, along with some of the other sites that were considered. Time constraints meant that the decisions needed to be efficient and there was not necessarily time for in depth discussions of every topic.

My role

A key challenge to project delivery can be when there are multiple experts with the same expertise on a given project, and when their opinions differ it can be up to the chair – who may have no knowledge of the subject – to make a decision about which approach to use. As I am the only person in the group with a specialism in historic buildings, I felt comfortable giving my points of view on the subject during the roleplay sessions. I did not however feel comfortable providing my opinion on subjects with which I did not have much knowledge and left this for my peers, who specialised in that particular subject, to discuss. Had I given an opinion that differed to one of those experts, I would have had less of a standing to argue my point with the limited knowledge I might have. It is more challenging in an online environment to ascertain the general reaction from the 'room' as everyone else is generally muted during a meeting. This to some extent inhibits the ability for any one person to understand how their opinion or advice was received. I feel that my role during the meetings was to provide opinions whenever the conversation took its course towards historic buildings. I think that I was able to clearly and accurately voice my opinion on the subject, although as mentioned this is difficult to measure with the group being online. The ability to which I could put my points across varied and was mainly impacted by the constraints of conducting the meeting over video call from long distance. I think that while my opinions were generally put across persuasively, the technology did hamper this, for example in one particular meeting (Locock, 2024a) my ability to put my points across was affected by the fact that I had an audio error during this session and was unable to be heard. Therefore, I had to speak via text chat only. This still allowed me to voice my opinion however it impacted my ability to integrate my opinion effectively into the flow of the conversation. I was also able to contribute my opinion during some of the roleplay sessions by 'raising my hand' – a virtual reaction that can be given in Microsoft Teams to get attention or vote on a topic. I tried to vote whenever there was a vote taken so that my opinion could be compiled with everyone else's and speak up whenever I felt I could contribute.

Chairing styles

I have seen several styles of chairing style both during the roleplay sessions and in my workplace. The Open University (2024) defines two specific styles of chairing: Traditional and Facilitative. The difference between these two styles is that Traditional chairing is more authoritative, whereas Facilitative chairing is more pragmatic. I think that the chairing style that I took in the meeting that I chaired was Facilitative, however I also saw a more Traditional style in play, where the chair only took votes for opinions and did not give much opportunity for the participants to speak.

I have seen both of these styles in use during team meetings in my workplace, to varying effect. Generally, the overarching manager chairs the team meetings (which take place via Microsoft Teams) and takes a Traditional style of chairing. They ensure that the business of the meeting gets done, and at the end of the meeting takes on the tasks that are delegated to them, then providing updates or resolutions in future meetings. At the beginning of this year, it was decided that an agenda would be put in place for these meetings, however the adoption of this was short lived and agendas are no longer used. The agendas had a positive impact on the meetings as it allowed them to be more structured, and to prevent certain members of the team from speaking for too long about subjects which are not worth spending time on in a whole team meeting and could be solved in an email. This problem is further exacerbated when the usual team leader is not present for the meeting and a different person takes on the role of chair. This usually leads to a more Facilitative chairing style, but without effective timekeeping. Such meetings often lead to long and rambling tirades, often derailing the topic of the meeting and sometimes causing tension between members of the team. This 'hands off' approach to running a meeting is ineffective and is poor management of professional discourse.

Personalities

One of the key challenges in delivering a project can be clashing personalities. In 2020 our organisation attempted to utilise personality types to improve team management, interactions and working methods, however the uptake on this has not been successful in the long term. The Insights Training method was used, which places any personality into four distinct coloured categories; blue, green, red or yellow. The insights method is based on the model developed by Carl Gustav Jung in 1921 (The Insights Group Ltd, 2020, p. 4). The model placed me into the blue category, however the report that was generated by the Insights Group gave no further meaning to these colours. At the time, we were encouraged to place graphs showing our colour personalities into our email signatures, however as there was no meaning to these colours explained, the information that these graphs were supposed to tell colleagues was lost. We were not informed on what to do with or how to act on the information that was provided. While placing personalities into categories can be a fun exercise, I do not believe that it is a particularly effective exercise as it does not change how one person might interact with another. The personality types have not been used in team meetings since and the exercise now seems to have been forgotten about.

The role of teams and meetings in delivering a project

Another experience I have had of meetings in delivering a project was at the beginning of a large building recording project at a National Trust property. The meeting involved a small number of stakeholders; myself and the project manager, the new house manager, the previous house manager, the estate manager and the Trust's own archaeologist. The meeting enabled us to lay out the work we needed to do and the accesses that would be required. The key challenges in this meeting were the attitudes of certain members of the meeting who did not see the purpose of the work or did not

agree with our appointment to undertake the work. The meeting chair (the National Trust archaeologist) did a good job of tempering the tensions of the meeting and took a more Traditional approach to their style of chairing, by ensuring that the work would get done, controlling interruptions, handling disagreements and deciding who would carry out what actions (OU, 2024). This method of chairing could also have been used in the roleplay scenarios if the conversation had become heated or major disagreements had happened. Generally, however, the decisions in the meetings were in agreement or were able to quickly reach an agreement to decide how best to deliver the hypothetical projects.

Bibliography

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