

Reflections on the Role Play Scenarios

Over a series of role play scenarios related to archaeological projects several individuals, including myself, had the opportunity to act as meeting chair and as a participant within discussions with predetermined agendas. Such meetings constitute one of the most important mediums for organisational communication and occupy a relatively large proportion of time for many employees (Svennevig 2012). Meetings provide a means to disseminate information, make decisions, solve problems, and set tasks and goals (McComas *et al* 2007; Geimer *et al* 2015). As such, my personal experiences in the role-play scenarios, and the particular dynamics I observed, allude to potential issues that may be encountered during the wider delivery of a project when working within a team.

Team Dynamics and Challenges

The chair of a meeting has a number of roles – including opening and concluding meetings, assigning speakership, and moving discussion on within the agenda – which predominantly involves continuous negotiation between the chair and the other attendants (Svennevig 2012; Holmes and Stubble 2015; Chan 2017). The way in which the meeting chair approached the role developed throughout the consecutive scenarios. Initially, after relaying the objectives of the meeting, the meeting chairs sought the opinion of each individual participant sequentially despite a clear consensus within the group. While this method of allocating speakership is entirely inclusive, it results in excessive repetition and wastes considerable time. Indeed, wasted time in meetings has direct budgetary costs and is time lost within a project that could be better allocated elsewhere (Rogelberg *et al* 2007; Rogelberg *et al* 2012). Moreover, wasted time in meetings has been demonstrated to impact employee stress and fatigue, in addition to promoting job dissatisfaction, which can also affect project delivery (Luong and Rogelberg 2005; Rogelberg *et al* 2010; Rogelberg *et al* 2012).

Following observation of the early role-playing scenarios, the acting meeting chairs largely allocated speakership when a participant self-selected and signalled their desire to speak. The time in which it took to achieve a conclusion for each topic on the agenda was substantially decreased using this chairing style. This model for distributing speakership, as opposed to being mechanical and forced like the initial chairing method, also felt more open and fluid as a participant. Notwithstanding the positives, I observed inherent issues with this style of chairing. An important element of effective teamworking is the ability of team members to share their ideas and opinions openly and *actively* (Baiden and Price 2011). During some of the role-play scenarios it was evident that certain participants were not as forthcoming with their opinions as other members, and could arguably be described as introverted. There were occasions when those who were particularly qualified to provide insight on specific topics did not signal their desire to speak; the sharing of their specialist knowledge may have resulted in a more considered and ultimately more preferable route to project delivery. Ideally, the meeting chair or project manager should have a comprehensive familiarity with the specialisms and qualifications of the project members, and the ability to encourage or ensure that individuals contribute regardless of their introversion.

In contrast with the introverted participants of the role-playing scenarios, there were particular members who were forthcoming and sometimes dominated the discussion. These differences, in addition to highlighting behavioural characteristics, attest to the range of 'team roles' individuals fulfil within a group. Understanding such 'team roles' is exceedingly important as groups of very gifted professionals do not necessarily make a proficient team (Henry and Stevens 1999). Speculatively placing the role-play participants within team role taxonomies, such as that promoted by Belbin (1981; 1993; 2010), is beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, the categories of behavioural attributes allude to the potential issues that may be encountered in relation to team dynamics and management. Broadly, a 'team role' is defined as a pattern of behaviours that are characteristic of the way a member of a team interacts within a wider team in order to facilitate progress within a project (Belbin 1981; 1993; 2010). There are nine team roles, including those who are perceptive and diplomatic, but indecisive (i.e. Teamworker); those who are imaginative problem solvers, but may be poor at communicating effectively (i.e. Plant); and those who have thorough specialist knowledge, but may have a somewhat narrow outlook (i.e. Specialist). Within the role-play scenario group there were clearly a diverse mix of behaviours and approaches, all of which have their own strengths and weaknesses. Significantly, there is considerable empirical evidence that high-performing teams tend to display a wide range and balance of the team roles (Senior 1997; Prichard and Stanton 1999; Senior and Swailes 2004; Aritzeta *et al* 2007). As such, leaders using the 'team role' taxonomies and model may be able to select individuals to create high-performing teams. This utilisation, however, could be seen as somewhat idealistic in the context of a commercial archaeology project. Project teams – in my experience – are largely constructed with regards to individual archaeological specialisms, resourcing, and availability. Nevertheless, the model may be useful in gaining an understanding of existing teams, so that potential inter-personal or project delivery risks could be circumnavigated effectively. It must be noted however that rigidly adhering to the findings of, and stringently categorising individuals using, the team roles model and self-perception inventory is problematic – as there is considerable overlap between roles and they have been said to be defined by often inconsistent criteria (Furnham *et al* 1993; Broucek and Randell 1996).

There were a small number of occasions when there was no clear consensus between the diverse individuals in the role-play scenarios. There have been numerous efforts to measure team effectiveness, such as the metric specifically created for the construction industry by Constructing Excellence (2004a: 2004b), all of which highlight the importance of negotiation and the eventual resolution of issues and disagreements. During the scenarios, to the credit of the meeting chairs and participants, conflicting opinions were directly and openly confronted. Participants explained their underlying assumptions and reasonings, while also constructively addressing the points of those with opposing opinions. Through this process of negotiation, this often resulted in participants changing their viewpoint so that a consensus was eventually reached. Divergent opinions, within an effective team, should be welcomed as an impetus for problem-solving within a project. The use of a devil's advocate approach has been advocated for in the context of project management and decision making (MacDougall and Baum 1997; Kanter 2001; Ottaviani and Sorensen 2001; McAvoy and Butler

2008). Indeed, individuals occasionally prefaced contrarian points as ‘playing devil’s advocate’ during the role-playing scenarios. I found this frustrating on occasions, as it sometimes felt excessive when a general consensus was already attained, and that time was being wasted; however, although frustrating at times, it is clear that this reduces the likelihood of potential risks and issues being missed within a project. Despite open negotiation there were occasions when a consensus could not be attained the acting meeting chair held a vote. The need for, and results of, the vote was wholly accepted by the participants. Although this did not occur during the role-playing scenarios, I believe that there are occasions when a specific individual that has a pertinent specialism *explicitly* related to the topic of disagreement may be best placed to make the final decision. Whatever the approach taken, if conflicting viewpoints remain unresolved and avoided, and a decision is not achieved via negotiation or dictate, it is likely that a range of issues would arise within a project. For example, individuals might pursue objectives that are not aligned to the overall project objectives and the unresolved issues may result in interpersonal conflict.

During some of the role-play scenarios, the meeting participants lacked specific information to inform discussions and, to a much lesser extent, lacked clear objectives. Not only did this elongate the related discussions, but it also meant that it was more challenging to reach a well-informed and considered conclusion amongst the participants. From a personal perspective, it was indeed challenging within the scenarios to contribute to discussions when I was somewhat unclear of what was required. In a project delivery scenario, this may mean that certain unforeseen opportunities are missed, and unnecessary work performed. Although this was beyond the remit of the role-play scenarios, the perils of having unclear and unresolved issues with clients are likewise clear; indeed, imprecise specifications can directly lead to poor project performance and project creep which adversely impacts project cost, time, and quality (Atkinson *et al* 2006; Mizra *et al* 2013; Ajmal *et al* 2020). This highlights the necessity for leaders to set clear goals and establish the desired outcomes for meetings and projects – preparing and circulating clear agendas and project designs. The importance of establishing clarity in relation to aims and objectives throughout projects cannot be underemphasised. As such, if I personally arranged a meeting in the future, I would aim to send out minutes and specific tasks to be actioned shortly after the meeting. As noted by Cohen *et al* (2011: 9), this optimises post-meeting productivity and should be an integral part of ‘meeting design’.

While necessitated as part of the series of role-playing scenarios, arguably, there were meetings that could be deemed unnecessary within a real-world situation. On one occasion, namely the Historic Environment Record (HER) task scenario, a meeting with some seven participants to decide on the potential for certain heritage assets to affect a planning application seems excessive; such a task could be completed by a single qualified individual. This can certainly be seen as project inefficiency in relation to wages and expenses spent on unproductive or needless meetings, which also causes project team members to be taken away from productive tasks, and has been widely argued to reduce team morale (Luong and Rogelberg 2005; Rogelberg *et al* 2007; Rogelberg *et al* 2010; Rogelberg *et al* 2012; Geimer *et al* 2015). Therefore, in line with recommendations by Luong and Rogelberg (2005), I would

in future retrospectively attempt to examine the value and necessity of any meeting that I had organised.

A further issue I observed during the scenarios, perhaps made more widely apparent in light of Covid-19, is the potential for virtual communication to become a barrier or delay to project delivery. Not only does in-person collaboration and interaction mean that there is a faster development of a conceptual understanding of a problem (Kankanhalli *et al* 2006; Rice *et al* 2007; Ebrahim *et al* 2009), but virtual communication can also create challenges in relation to conflict management (Hinds and Mortensen 2005; Ocker and Fjermestad 2008; Ebrahim *et al* 2009). Problems related to 'virtual teams', however, beyond the occasional and swiftly resolved technical difficulty, did not occur during the scenarios. Indeed, the ability to use virtual communication software can mean that project delivery can continue – for particular archaeological practitioners and specialists – without cessation and with reduced delay in the context of, for example, a pandemic.

Conclusions: Introspection and Future Endeavours

The team dynamics and potential challenges described above are a useful means with which to consider my personal experience, and the way in which I would act as a chair or project leader, in the future. My opportunity to act as meeting chair occurred relatively late on within the series of scenarios, when a relatively standardised 'chair style' had been established amongst the group; I stated the pre-defined objectives of the meeting and assigned speakership once signalled by a participant, concluding discussions when I believed a consensus had been achieved. I felt relatively confident while chairing the meeting, though at times did find it somewhat challenging not to voice my opinion, and I remember on at least one occasion giving into this impulse. In this sense, I probably would not be categorised as a natural 'Co-ordinator' following Belbin's (2010) team roles. When chairing in the future I hope to suppress the impulse to influence and contribute, in order to more efficiently facilitate and coordinate.

Upon reflection, there were individuals within the meeting I chaired who, unlike myself, were not forthcoming in voicing their opinion. There were participants who did not speak during the entire session and the discussion was dominated by specific people. Although the reasons as to why people did not put forward their opinions are unclear, in the future, if acting as chair, I would attempt to ensure that participants feel comfortable and able to put forward their opinions and ideas. I would also make myself aware of the qualifications and specialities of team members, so that I could call attention to their opinions when the topic requires specific clarification related to their specialism.

Perhaps the most integral factor identified that contributes to successful project delivery is establishing clear and concise objectives for any task, including meetings. As a project leader, in the future, I would attempt to establish wholly unambiguous and comprehensive objectives with clear methodologies and designs. These established objectives should be widely distributed amongst all team members so that everyone is working towards the same goal. Indeed, when acting as a team member, or meeting attendee, I would ensure that I 'come

prepared' to ensure that established information is not rehashed, nor proceedings or projects delayed.

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