

Introduction

This paper focuses on three simulated meetings (from Meetings 4, 5 and 7), selected for their contrasting tones and styles. These reflections represent my subjective experience of each of these meetings in turn, considering how chairing style influenced meeting scope, participation and outcomes, and commenting on strengths and weaknesses of each approach. I will also consider my own contributions to these meetings, and where there may be themes to consider for future, real-world situations.

The reflections here are made after reviewing unpublished recordings of each meeting (Locock 2024a; 2024b; 2024c). Participants in these recorded meetings have not been named here, to avoid overly personal discussion, though it is acknowledged that true anonymity is impossible in this case given the small, familiar group involved. Instead, all participants will be referred to as “I”, “they”, “participant”, or “Chair”.

The meetings

Meeting 4: HER review (see Locock 2024a)

Meeting 4 participants were tasked to review HER records around a proposed area for development, and assess the likelihood that heritage assets present would impede planning permission or require evaluation.

Setting expectations

The chair’s immediate opening of the meeting briefly recapped the task and our overall objective for the meeting. Having only been briefed 30 minutes prior, this recap was hardly necessary, but inasmuch as the exercise simulates a real-world meeting (where participants may have arrived from diverse tasks or conversations) this is an extremely important step for equalising understanding and focusing discussion. The chair also explicitly checked whether anyone had had any issues with finding the necessary area of the map before launching into discussion, which gave everyone a chance to flag any barriers they were having to participation.

Defining participation

An open-ended, co-operative and welcoming tone to discussion was quickly established in this meeting, by the chair almost immediately opening questions to the floor for free contributions on any of the HER records. Participants electronically 'raised a hand' to be invited by the chair, one at a time, to offer their point of view; the chair acknowledged contributions with brief agreement and/or thanks, before immediately moving to the next participant. Inviting participants to speak based on hand-raising made space for perhaps more reticent, nervous participants to engage without being talked over. Indeed, the overall effect was extremely egalitarian, conducive to wide participation and creative suggestions: discussion from the beginning included many tangential, nuancing comments about alternative information-gathering approaches.

However, this approach also effectively structured discussion by individual comments, rather than by particular topic, and discussion tended to switch between different HER records in no particular order. The chair did not ask follow-up questions, or invite wider discussion of specific points raised. As such, there was relatively little direct, interactive discourse between participants on a topic. Where agreement or disagreement was indicated, each opinion was offered, with no particular encouragement to develop points further: for instance, a difference of opinion over the significance of an archaeological feature between myself and another participant was expressed, but neither we, the group, nor the chair acted to draw out a conclusive result from that disagreement. As a participant, this was frustrating not only because of the lack of a conclusion, but also because of the limited depth of engagement with the material.

Shaping outcomes

The task setter had suggested a five-point scale to judge the importance of each HER record, but since the discussion was generally unstructured, there was no conclusive group decision on each HER record. After a period of discussion, the chair did specifically re-focus discussion on an overall objective, establishing whether there was a likely need for archaeological evaluation at the site. However, many contributions from this point were again, indirect and qualitative rather than decisive, and went unchallenged. Opinions tended toward a feeling that there was likely to be some archaeology present that required a level of evaluation, but crucially, this was not decisively articulated at the end of discussion by the chair or by any formal vote.

Strengths and weaknesses

This meeting encouraged the widest participation of the three, with every single participant offering views. It also allowed participants agency and freedom to challenge or re-shape the parameters of

the question asked. However, the overall tone was more explorative than decisive, and resulted in ambiguity over the conclusions; given the task at hand this was sub-optimal. The approach is likely better adapted to situations with significant unknowns, where decisive action is less urgent and there is scope to develop creative solutions.

Meeting 5: Selecting a project management methodology (see Locock 2024b)

Meeting 5 participants were presented with a series of short, written 'project' scenarios, and asked to decide as a group on the most appropriate (of five possible) project management methodologies to apply.

Setting expectations

The chair opened the meeting by establishing the extent and scope of the agenda: by establishing that there were six scenarios to address, they set expectations and a natural pace for the discussion. The chair also established the context of the scenarios and established that they would recap scenarios as the meeting progressed.

Omitted here was a recap of the candidate project management methodologies, checks for understanding, and definition of terms - so everything that followed was heavily dependent on participants having done their 'homework'. Again, in the simulated scenario where we had just reviewed these methodologies, this presents little issue, but in the real world meeting, this would base the subsequent decision-making on untested, assumed understanding.

Defining participation

From the very beginning of this meeting, the chair (under some guidance from the task setters) defined the parameters of participation: decisions were to be called by an electronic show of hands constituting a vote, and where there was significant divergence of opinion, the chair would call on individuals for comment/discussion.

The effect was accelerated progress through the agenda, but in places this came at the expense of clarity. For instance, at one point a slide mix-up made it unclear to me which scenario we were addressing, and there was no time or obvious mechanism through which to ask for clarification without abruptly interrupting the chair; indeed, given that the use of the 'raised hand' was reserved for registering a vote, communication might have been aided by establishing an alternative method of raising questions or points of information.

My confusion was only addressed when the vote count made it clear someone had abstained, and an explanation was sought. There were, overall, two instances of abstention in the votes; in both, the participant was asked for explanation and subsequently encouraged to cast a vote. The clear implication was that active engagement was effectively mandatory. The tone this set for participation was extremely formal, with a compelling sense of top-down authority from the chair, despite the democratic format.

Shaping outcomes

In stark contrast to Meeting 4, this chairing style exclusively produced clear, discrete decisions. On occasions where the vote was split, the chair called for a modern form of monomachia – where a single representative from each voting ‘faction’ should volunteer (under threat of random selection) to articulate their reasoning. Despite the formal tone, this did allow for some dialectical directness on points of conflict. When arguments had been made, votes were re-cast and on several occasions, discourse had swayed opinion and materially changed the outcome. As a participant, this directness and opportunity to influence the group was gratifying. It should be noted, however, that no vote was ever re-cast twice, regardless of whether unanimity had been reached: in the final scenario, I was the single dissenter in the re-cast vote, and was pragmatically overruled.

Decisions reached were invariably within set parameters (i.e. one of the five listed options), since prior to the vote there was no space for nuancing or re-interpretation of the options. In the case of one participant’s abstention in the final scenario, where they were unconvinced by available options, the chair redoubled pressure to cast a positive vote. Later comment from the task-setter actually suggested that in this case, the premise that the situation necessitated a methodology at all was flawed – thus neatly demonstrating how this meeting’s decisions suffered due to the restrictive approach, lacking space for abstention or nuanced discussion.

Strengths and weaknesses

The clear strength of this approach was in efficient decision-making, and curtailment of extraneous discussion; it is clearly suited to decisions with limited complexity and few unknowns. The approach also provided a mechanism for addressing conflict, and made a limited allowance for persuasive argument. However, the overall rigidity significantly reduced the capacity of the team to deal with nuance or complexity. It also involved the least participation from the team, with roughly half the participants never speaking at all during the meeting, and by reducing team contributions to simple yes/no votes, risks potentially disenfranchising members.

Meeting 7: defining a WSI (see Locock 2024c)

Meeting 7 participants were presented with a list of seven potential heritage assets threatened by a proposed development, and tasked with agreeing appropriate approaches for mitigating threats to each through various forms of avoidance, excavation or survey, presented as pre-set options.

Setting expectations

The chair of this meeting did not recap the scenario or objectives, or set out the extent of the material to cover. As observed in discussion of meetings 4 and 5, in a real-world situation, this would assume a huge level of prior knowledge from participants, and could severely undermine the quality of discussion and reliability of decisions.

Defining participation

A hybrid approach to participation, integrating elements from the styles of both Chairs of Meetings 4 and 5, was adopted: baseline participation involved an electronic 'show of hands' to vote for an option, but the chair specified that any 'strong opinions' could be expressed *before* such a vote. Essentially, discussion was structured by taking each threatened asset in turn. This format allowed space for participants to make persuasive arguments and influence the group, as well as challenge and refine the options available, and request clarity on definitions etc. Crucially, though, the approach also underlined the need to express a specific preference through the vote, avoiding the pitfalls of free-flowing discussion encountered in Meeting 4.

Shaping outcomes

Offering a pre-set range of possible approaches for each item focused discussion and made it possible to approach some decisions with a swift vote, such as the initial decision on peat deposits. As in Meeting 5, upon a significantly split vote (or the volunteering of particularly strong opinions) the chair invited arguments from each side. These discussions were also open to wider participation than in Meeting 5.

In many cases, the structured discussion of a topic allowed participants to collectively redefine, combine, or altogether replace the suggested options. The redefinition of options made a 'show of hands' fairly unwieldy as a formal decision-making mechanism in these cases; however, this was pragmatically overcome by the chair explicitly summarising the broad consensus of opinions, and taking that as the decision. While this might appear an arbitrary privilege of the chair, these synoptic rulings were demonstrably informed by the prior discursive participation. The effect of this flexible approach was to allow for nuance and creative solutions, while still resulting in clear, unambiguous decisions.

Strengths and weaknesses

The strength of this approach is in its flexibility, allowing for both swift decisive conclusions and nuanced, creative solutions, depending on the team's reaction to each problem. However, this flexibility is likely heavily dependent on the listening skills, pragmatism and confidence of the chair; a similar approach by a less skilled chair might be perceived as arbitrary or inconsistent. The approach appears best suited to problems much like the task posed here, with significant unknowns, a scope for some creative solutions, but ultimately a need for decisive conclusions. Furthermore, this approach is resource-hungry: this meeting was by far the longest of the three discussed here.

Final thoughts

It is clear from the juxtaposition of these consecutive meetings that each chair learned from the successes and pitfalls of the preceding meetings, and iterated their approaches accordingly (albeit with guidance from the task-setters in some cases). However, the same is likely true of the participant group as a whole: personally, as a participant in Meeting 4, I had been frustrated by the lack of tangible progress, and so by Meeting 7 I had refined my communication style to adhere more closely to the task at hand.

An observation of the exercise design as a whole is that it, perhaps inevitably, lacks the in-built dynamism and inequality of real world meetings. I would suggest the primary reason for this is the artificial equality of participants: all have equal access to the same information, are pursuing the exact same interests and objectives, and offer contributions of exactly equal weight and importance to the proceedings - the only real variables are the nature of their experience and personality. In the real world, meetings are called specifically to include people with diverse responsibilities, access to information, and needs. As such, not every participant's contribution should be considered equal across all situations – specific participants will have more responsibilities at stake than others, more available resources to offer, more specialist insight, or simply more executive authority. If not all participants deserve equal consideration, then a simple vote, for example, is no longer an especially appropriate decision-making mechanism.

Indeed, the fiction of these scenarios removes all real stakes or consequences from participation, which in turn artificially inflates the relative importance of social outcomes for participants, over task objectives. To me, this effect is plain to see in the dispassionate and restrained attitude of participants throughout the exercise. For instance, as a participant, I frequently found myself holding

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HPAR7003 Assignment 2: Critical reflection on role play scenarios.

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back on points of disagreement to avoid social awkwardness, where in real world situations I am rarely known to shy away from confrontation where I consider it meaningful. This is likely an unavoidable reality of simulated scenarios, but worth consideration inasmuch as it informs the extent to which such exercises reflect real-world experiences.

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