

Meetings in flux: Adapting the leadership toolkit for a changing world

The case considers a non-exec Chair's insights into how the pandemic offered an opportunity for reflection on the status quo.

By Lucy Armstrong (The Alchemists) & Savvas Papagiannidis (Newcastle University, Business School)

How to cite: Armstrong, L. & Papagiannidis, S. (2023) *Meetings in flux: Adapting the leadership toolkit for a changing world*. In S. Papagiannidis (Ed), [Teaching Case Book](#). Available at <https://learning.ncl.ac.uk> / ISBN: 978-1-7396044-1-7

Teaching Case Factsheet

Discipline: Management and business studies

Introduction

Lucy Armstrong works with high growth mid-corporate businesses to accelerate their development and success by focusing on shareholder and management development and succession. Her experience ranges from funding start-ups and early-stage manufacturing businesses in the North East through to mergers and disposals of international operations. She has extensive experience in private equity, corporate development, and board leadership positions, working as their Chair.

In this case study, we consider Lucy's insights when it comes to leading companies as a non-exec Chair and how the pandemic offered an opportunity for reflection on the status quo. On one hand the case study highlights the importance of flexible leadership and the value of diverse perspectives in navigating crises. On the other it offers an opportunity to reflect on established business practices and it asks if there is a better way to undertake them, focusing on the value they create for the organisation and its stakeholders.

Adapting to Change and Learning from the Pandemic

During the pandemic, Lucy was asked to lead a forum of Chairs of national companies. This was an online forum for non-executive Chairs to share their experiences during a unique and challenging period. Unlike most Chairs, who had previously held executive roles, she had never been directly responsible for managing an organisation. Could this be a limitation or an opportunity to see things differently? In theory, non-executive roles typically have limited directorial power. They possess the authority to appoint and remove the chief executive, but beyond this, their influence relies on softer skills: guiding, motivating, inspiring, rather than controlling. Such skills became even more important

than usual during the Covid-19 pandemic, but even more difficult to practise given the lockdown restrictions.

The first challenge during the crisis was the piecemeal and ad hoc nature of collecting, analysing and communicating information by non-executive Chairs. Lucy was aware that chief executives and Chairs, despite their critical roles, often feel isolated within their own organisations. Typically, they are not members of working groups or functions, and they rely on others to bring important matters to the top. The pandemic further exacerbated such a feeling, by limiting physical interactions and external sources of information. Pieces of information come from various sources, making it challenging to grasp the full picture. How could they obtain the necessary information to run their organisations and maintain relationships with colleagues when they could not meet them in-person?

One option for the Chairs in the group was to double the frequency of formal board meetings and establish daily calls with their chief executives and for CEOs to do the same with the directors. This approach would have helped maintain regular contact and ensure that information would keep on flowing. Still, it also created significant overheads, with long meetings becoming tiring and unproductive, not to mention the preparation time and effort that went into them. Lucy was the exception in the group, in that she decided to halve her formal board meetings. Her rationale was to rely on the executive team and dip into the reservoir of trust she had built up with them. She felt that the crisis was not a time to tighten control over executives through a teleconference application. Instead, it was a time to empower and support the executives in making critical decisions. After all, under such challenging times one must work with the team one has, even if those individuals have their imperfections. Having knowledge of imperfect individuals and their capabilities, as well as the ability to adapt to them, is less risky than bringing in new and unknown individuals during a crisis.

Of course, digital technologies had a role to play and the transition to digital communication did not just pose challenges, but also led to new opportunities. Lucy recognised that digital natives use tools differently from those less familiar with technology. The way that communication was to be maintained and information kept flowing had to be a way that was appropriate for the organisation as a whole. This meant that this should not be driven by the preferences of the top management, who were not necessarily as digital savvy as the rest of their colleagues. While some Chairs attempted to replicate analogue experiences online, Lucy encouraged her peers to explore the unique capabilities of digital tools and adapt to a new way of working. As such, it was important for her to promote mutual decision-making with the chief executives, positioning herself as a secondary support rather than the primary decision-maker. Her focus was on enabling the executive team to manage the business effectively, especially in situations that demanded quick decisions.

The Evolving Nature of Board Meetings

Drawing from the insights above, as well as her interactions with both her own CEOs and fellow Chairs during the forum discussions, Lucy found herself contemplating not only the essence of meetings but also their fundamental role within contemporary business operations. After the pandemic many organisations asked staff to return to work, attempting to revert back to how things were before the lockdowns. They often referred to the serendipitous water cooler moments as an example of how staff interactions could lead to positive results for the company. However, the notion that chance encounters at the water cooler are an important way to foster innovation and trust within an organisation was rather problematic to her. Conscious leadership involves being intentional about creating opportunities for interaction and innovation within the organisation. Leaders should not leave these crucial aspects to chance. Instead, they should explore various facilitation techniques at different levels, from the organisational to the personal. Leaders should actively create opportunities for people to connect, engage in meaningful conversations, and

collaborate, rather than relying solely on serendipitous moments. So, the question arising was whether more structured interactions in the form of the usual meetings should continue in the way they did before the pandemic or whether they needed to be adapted, for instance taking into consideration the new capabilities that online technologies provided and the new levels of acceptance among staff.

Reflecting on the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on organisations, Lucy noted that each organisation she works with has adapted differently and adopted new practices. The pandemic forced organisations to break away from well-established rituals. In doing so, it offered a unique opportunity to reconfigure practices in a different way once things settled. Of course, an organisation does not need a crisis in order to reflect on its practices. Still, path dependency and more pressing priorities leave little room for experimentation. Managers may feel that they should not break something that works reasonably well and that everyone is familiar with. Human beings naturally gravitate toward routines because they provide comfort and a sense of importance. Yet how do managers know the current meeting arrangements are an effective way of interacting with their staff? Perhaps leaders, including Chairs, chief executives, and managers, should treat meetings like scientific experiments. They could need to define objectives, expectations, methodologies, and desired outcomes, which should guide the meeting's structure and content. Then they could benchmark the outcomes and the process by which these were obtained and adjust meetings accordingly. Deconstructing meetings into key ingredients such as content, scope of interaction, frequency, team dynamics and preferences could help with more critical reflection about their purpose.

For example, Lucy challenges the conventional practice of maintaining the same agenda for every board meeting. She advocates flexibility in forming the agenda, allowing it to evolve based on the organisation's needs and stage of development. Boards should focus on what is essential and be open to exploring new approaches to meetings. Having a rough structure for a board agenda that prioritises strategic discussions, operational reviews, governance decisions, and board reflection could be more effective than having the same repetitive list of items to discuss. This structured yet flexible approach aims to ensure that board meetings are effective, efficient, and aligned with the organisation's goals. While some routine meetings and activities are necessary, she emphasises that the Chair and the chief executive should be willing to adapt and modify the agenda based on circumstances and the evolving needs of the board.

Individual preferences and attributes can influence how effective and productive board members are during meetings. For example, some members may feel more comfortable and perform better if they have had social interactions before a formal meeting or hosting lunch sessions with department heads or inviting small groups of staff to interact with board members. Similarly, "away days" could be a powerful tool for building trust and fostering better relationships within the organisation. These activities provide unique insights into the organisation's culture and help uncover issues and solutions that might not surface through traditional and formal communication channels. The Chair should consider such preferences and attributes when selecting tools and techniques for board meetings, as long as they contribute positively to the organisation's goals. Great leaders not only understand individual team members, but also consider the connections and dynamics between team members. It is like an orchestras consisting of individuals with vastly different skill sets, playing a variety of instruments. The Chair's role, just as the conductor's role, is to guide and hold the team together, even though they may not possess expertise in all the instruments. Lucy sees this as a powerful analogy for effective leadership.

Such dynamics are often better managed by inviting external facilitators. These facilitators help create a safe space for open dialogue, allowing leaders to step out of their usual roles and become active participants. This can lead to more authentic conversations and outcomes. Lucy believes this

is important as there is often a tendency for individuals, including non-executive directors and Chairs, to seek comfort and familiarity by being "in" the organisation rather than "on" it. Being "in" implies getting immersed in daily operations, while being "on" implies taking a strategic and oversight role. Leaders should periodically step back and evaluate whether they are striking the right balance between these two approaches.

It is also important to tailor meeting frequency to the nature of the organisation or industry. Short-term retail businesses may require more frequent and real-time updates, while organisations with longer feedback loops, such as a port, may not benefit from such regular reporting. Leaders must recognise that not all organisations operate on the same schedule and adapt meeting frequencies accordingly.

In addition, it is important to differentiate between transactional and exploratory meetings. Their scope and the items discussed may offer a way to inform channel selection and a more effective and efficient way of interacting. For instance, information exchange and governance meetings could take place online, while more strategic and discursive meetings could take place in-person. This approach ensures that the board can efficiently handle transactional matters while reserving in-person meetings for more open-minded, innovative discussions.

Finally, it is important to ensure that participants enjoy meetings and even have fun during them. Individuals perform at their best and add the most value when they are enjoying themselves, feeling stimulated, and motivated. The word "fun" should not be associated with a lack of seriousness, as it can enhance engagement and productivity. Lucy wishes that more people in organisational settings would acknowledge and embrace the idea that enjoyment is a valid and powerful motivator for professional engagement.

Conclusion

Meetings, whether digital or analogue, are a valuable tool in a leader's kit, they are a means to an end—enabling human beings to coordinate effectively. As is the case with any other tool, organisational leaders need to select the most appropriate tool and configuration in order to help teams achieve their objectives and foster collaboration. Lucy's reflection on meetings as a leadership tool offers a compelling narrative of adaptability, innovation, and a profound understanding of human dynamics within organisations. Her insights challenge conventional meeting norms and invite leaders to take proactive steps in creating environments that are conducive to collaboration and growth. Effective leadership transcends the tools we use; it hinges on our ability to comprehend and shape the intricate human dynamics at play. Meetings, as a leadership tool, should evolve alongside our organisations. By redefining the purpose of meetings, being open to innovation, and supporting a value-driven approach, leaders can create meaningful interactions that drive success. In an ever-changing landscape, embracing change and regularly refreshing our leadership techniques are keys to staying relevant and impactful.

The insights gleaned from this case study extend beyond the realm of board meetings; they hold relevance for all meetings at various organisational levels. The fundamental principles of adaptability, digital integration, and the need for meaningful interactions are universally applicable. Whether it is a senior leadership meeting, departmental briefing, or team collaboration session, the key takeaways underscore the importance of tailoring meeting formats to meet specific objectives and adapting to changing circumstances.

Reading List

Ahern, S. & Loh, E. (2021). Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: building and sustaining trust in times of uncertainty. *BMJ Leader*, 5 (4), 266-269.

Bartsch, S., Weber, E., Büttgen, M. & Huber, A. (2020). Leadership matters in crisis-induced digital transformation: how to lead service employees effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Service Management*, 32 (1), 71-85.

Caligiuri, P., De Cieri, H., Minbaeva, D., Verbeke, A. & Zimmermann, A. (2020). International HRM insights for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for future research and practice. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 51 (5), 697-713.

Collings, D.G., Nyberg, A.J., Wright, P.M. & McMackin, J. (2021). Leading through paradox in a COVID-19 world: Human resources comes of age. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 31 (4), 819-833.

Daraba, D., Wirawan, H., Salam, R. & Faisal, M. (2021). Working from home during the corona pandemic: Investigating the role of authentic leadership, psychological capital, and gender on employee performance. *Cogent Business & Management*, 8 (1), .

Dirani, K.M., Abadi, M., Alizadeh, A., Barhate, B., Garza, R.C., Gunasekara, N., Ibrahim, G. & Majzun, Z. (2020). Leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis: a response to Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23 (4), 380-394.

Dwivedi, Y.K., Hughes, D.L., Coombs, C., Constantiou, I., Duan, Y., Edwards, J.S., Gupta, B., Lal, B., Misra, S., Prashant, P., Raman, R., Rana, N.P., Sharma, S.K. & Upadhyay, N. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on information management research and practice: Transforming education, work and life. *International Journal of Information Management*, 55, 102211.

Fletcher, G. & Griffiths, M. (2020). Digital transformation during a lockdown. *International Journal of Information Management*, 55, 102185.

Gonçalves, S.P., Santos, J.V.d., Silva, I.S., Veloso, A., Brandão, C. & Moura, R. (XXXX). COVID-19 and People Management: The View of Human Resource Managers. *Administrative Sciences*, 11 (3), 69.

Klein, V.B. & Todesco, J.L. (2021). COVID-19 crisis and SMEs responses: The role of digital transformation. *Knowledge and Process Management*, 28 (2), 117-133.

Mandviwalla, M. & Flanagan, R. (XXXX). Small business digital transformation in the context of the pandemic. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 1-17.

Margherita, A. & Heikkilä, M. (2021). Business continuity in the COVID-19 emergency: A framework of actions undertaken by world-leading companies. *Business Horizons*, 64 (5), 683-695.

Saura, J.R., Ribeiro-Soriano, D. & Zegarra Saldaña, P. (2022). Exploring the challenges of remote work on Twitter users\' sentiments: From digital technology development to a post-pandemic era. *Journal of Business Research*, 142, 242-254.

How to cite: Armstrong, L. & Papagiannidis, S. (2023) *Meetings in flux: Adapting the leadership toolkit for a changing world*. In S. Papagiannidis (Ed), [Teaching Case Book](#). Available at <https://learning.ncl.ac.uk> / ISBN: 978-1-7396044-1-7

Teaching Cases Book: Meetings in flux: Adapting the leadership toolkit for a changing world

Last updated: 2023-10-09 21:26:14 - Exported: 2024-03-15 02:35:51

ISBN: 978-1-7396044-1-7

Legal: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. The TheoryHub is an open access resource which means that all content is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution. Users are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without asking prior permission from the publisher or the author. For more information please visit: <https://goldman.ncl.ac.uk>.