Moots

By Peter Fox

An essential 'back-channel' for remote workers to use in order not to clog the main mission-centred communications channel. (This is about mission-related discussions, another back-channel, *The Grumblee*, is provided for unhappiness.)

Pause for collecting thoughts

It is important to 'get on with the job' without constant diversions, suggestions, side issues and distractions. Part of getting on with the job is recognising problems and dealing with them. There are two sorts of 'dealing with' a problem: Firstly in the course of things and secondly where discussion is required to make adjustments to goals and priorities.

The purpose of a moot is to decide on goals, work allocation and priorities. The interaction of people at a moot is subtly different from their relationship when getting on with the job. Where people work remotely there is no distinction between a 'team progress updates' and a 'team policy meeting'. (Often in physical organisations these get conflated which can be very inefficient - not to mention extremely tedious.)

- A progress meeting is for reviewing progress and tweaking plans
- A moot is for discovering the issues, exploring the options, using expert knowledge or opinions and then deciding policy.

Although there is a grey area we should be separating policy meetings and progress meetings anyway, so when designing methods of remote working we need to take this into account.

Policy decisions

Many people will be familiar with the 'timeout' method of interrupting the flow of a meeting to deal with a particular issue. We can think of a moot like that. Where policy decisions are required we:
- collect the necessary players
- discuss then decide
and then get on with whatever it is we're supposed to be getting on with.

The origin of the term "that's a moot point" is "That's something we'll have to defer deciding on until we've had a moot". (Moot is old word for meeting.)[1] By deferring a complicated or contentious matter we can get on with the straightforward work for now.

Within a small team we can imagine the members all know what's going on, what the priorities are and each will be individually working towards the group's goal using the group's working norms or culture of shared responsibility and trust. People are flexible and may ask for guidance or suggestions. But at

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[1]   There are still 'Moot halls' surviving from the Middle ages in England.

some stage it will be necessary to change what the team is committed to. "Our suppliers have let us down so project X is delayed by a week. What shall we do?" or "Our 'Plan-A' is in trouble. We should review our options." The key to a moot is having a decision-making-agenda.

The moot culture

As above, the purpose of a moot is to separate decision making from steady progress. Particularly when people are easily distracted by 'issues' that are tricky to resolve by low-bandwidth means we want to shift the focus for a while onto the specific goal of making a decision.

We would not expect a moot to be called by a team member just for the purpose of reviewing their progress and getting reassurance, but we would if they are not receiving what they consider is proper cooperation from their colleagues when simple hints or requests have failed. In effect this is "The team has a problem. I can't get the cooperation I need. What are we going to do about it because we can't achieve our goals as things are?" So what happens then? Work stops while the team agree to cooperate or scale down their work or something else. During the discussion it is easy to imagine a standard pattern developing of 'Me also' and 'I can't do both A and B'. Traditionally dealing with group-wide matters and lack of resources issues like this is the role of the team-leader or manager. It should be obvious that this is a bit different: Instead of the manager telling people what to do, the team is deciding in an open forum for itself. In doing so it owns the problem and commits to the solution.

The team-leader may be ineffectual, or dictatorial in which case the same problem will soon be mooted again. For example "Agreed policy: This team can't proceed with project X until the problems with the specification as listed below are fixed by the design team. Action: Team-leader" In a hierarchical organisation this is now a cause for a moot between perhaps this team and the design team and the production manager. If the team's spokesman accepts an 'impossible' or 'it'll do - don't worry' then they are going to have to meet again with their team and either persuade them to accept some compromise or have the issue resolved at a large, higher moot. The basic principle here is that if people are going to be committed to their work they must believe in it. The ends of quality can easily become frayed at a distance so we need committed people. Consider the alternative: "We'll have to do it all over again when they finally realise it won't work as designed so we won't be taking much care over it." There is plenty of meat on this bone which is left as an exercise for the reader.

Calling moots

The first basic rule is: If you need a policy decision then call a moot.
- Anyone can do it.

The second is: Make sure you know about the issue from your point of view.
- This may involve a bottom-up process of collective understanding as described in the previous paragraph.

The third is: Policy need to be made by the people who (a) know the issues and (b) can do something about a solution.
- One way for this to happen is for issues to 'bubble-up' through the hierarchy. This may not be optimal as 'higher-ups' may be out of touch

with vital details.
- There needs to be ways for technical discussions to occur across 'departments'. That is the people on the front-line may need to negotiate directly. Each negotiator will also have full their team's goals.

Some protocols for calling moots will need to evolve. This will depend on each organisation.

Standing moots

Sometimes 'cross department standing policy committees' ie. recurring moots will be required.
- There is the danger that these become progress review meetings. While evolving issues do need to be considered against current information in general 'progress' is a matter for normal day to day management.
- Task-forces are not moots. (They are scratch teams in their own right.)

So a standing moot is more about regular contacts keeping informed ready to react with policy decisions that are likely to be well founded than a monthly committee meeting. For example the launch of a major project is likely to come across snags so a standing moot may be set-up with members drawn from the key departments. This moot should be in a position to decide on a provisional then final launch date, suggest the amount of troubleshooting resources to have on stand-by etc. and settle disputes between departments. It is not their job to manage the project as a project manager would. (Notice that a standing moot is a good way for channelling communications to create an informal network of people who know each other.)

Discussion

The value of moots is separating the 'what shall we do?' from the 'let's get on with it'. Particularly we don't want the former continually distracting the latter.

A lot of mooting will be within a group. This helps build the team and develops the 'we decided that' ownership mentality. Obviously this is bottom-up decision making which needs to be tempered with traditional top-down command and control. In an ideal world we trust the 'workers' to know what they're capable of and how to do the best job. (Note that trust and responsibility are two sides of the same coin.)

Moots could be used in a physical organisation but that requires people gathering in meeting rooms. An electronic conference is a lot easier to arrange and a lot less effort to 'attend'. For remote working where groups are more isolated and autonomous the ability to call for policy decisions internally and externally is very important.

In a remote environment groups would have regular, perhaps daily, progress reviews. A time for moot points might be added on to this, a bit like 'any other business' but policy oriented.

Exercises

1   What are the benefits of separating policy making from action?

2   What are the benefits of moots within a group? What's the psychology?

3   What are the dangers of bottom-up policy making? (How do these compare with the dangers of top-down policy making?)

4   Practical: Convene some experimental moots and with that experience
   a   develop a list of tips and traps.
   b   Are there issues that aren't suitable for mooting?
   c   Who should be in the chair?
   d   Try to develop a pro-forma moot request and record?

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Other subjects in this series :
• The Grumblee
• Champions and chiefs
• Left-Right-Centre

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Peter Fox is the sole originator of Treems and associated concepts as described in this series. He lives in Essex, England is pleased to correspond with people working in the same field.