

Meetings Your Colleagues Will Want to Attend

A meeting is called for all lawyers in your group or your firm for, say, 4:30 on any given Tuesday. If there are administrative people involved (CFO or COO) they'll show up on time. You enter the room. The practice group leader who called the meeting is not there. Indeed there are no other lawyers there and it is 4:33. You can fit in another phone call so off you go to make the call and return. When a critical mass forms the meeting does get underway (by 5 if you're lucky) and some lawyers have a file with them and some are reading e-mail on their PDA. If this sounds familiar read on.

My colleague Gerry Riskin has asked our clients to rank the meeting experience in their firm from 1 to 10. 1 indicates that you attend meetings only out of a sense of obligation, if at all. You usually sneak in a file, check your e-mail and put your cell on vibrate so you won't miss a call. 10 means "I love meetings in my firm. They are inspirational personally and professionally – wouldn't miss one – arrive early – leave late." If we observe the profession as a whole, the experience with meetings is somewhere between 1 and 3. How could it be different?



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Setting the Stage

If you want meetings that people want to attend what can you do to make them more valuable and meaningful to each of the individuals who spend their valuable non-billable time attending them. We suggest the following:

Get the group together and ask *"Are there any specific benefits that we should be able to achieve, from working together, as a group of like minded individuals, pursuing a common purpose that you couldn't achieve on your own?"*

If the answer is yes, and in my experience it will be, then allow your group to identify the priorities. Allow them to identify what is worthy of a meeting and what is not.

1. What specific activities and agenda items are important?
2. What specific activities are necessarily discussed at a group meeting?
3. What specific activities or agenda items should we discard from the meeting format and reduce to email or some other form of communication?

Contracting with your Group

Whether you are the group leader, a committee chair or a lawyer who has agreed to handle the administrative function of arranging and chairing group meetings, your next challenge is to make a commitment to the group.

1. If I commit to you that I will keep us focused on what we have agreed is important as a group will you attend and participate in our meetings?

2. If I commit to you that I will begin meetings on time and finish meetings on time, will you attend and participate?
3. If I commit to you that I will review the relevance of our meetings with you on an ongoing basis, will you attend and participate?

Getting Feedback from your Group

As important as it is to gain agreement as to the focus of the group and your commitment to keeping the group's meetings on track, ongoing feedback is necessary to ensure that your meetings continue to provide benefit and value to the individuals who attend and participate in them.

Create a way to get that feedback.

Perhaps a quarterly e-mail with three simple questions:

1. What are we doing in our group meetings that are important and should continue?
2. What are we doing in our group meetings that are no longer relevant and should be discontinued?
3. What are we not doing that we should start doing in our group meetings?

With that feedback you can fine tune the meetings to keep them valuable to the individuals involved.

Rules of Engagement

Doesn't it make sense to have an agenda distributed ahead of time so that participants can prepare, at least in their minds, for the topics being discussed?

Doesn't it make sense to start meetings on time and end them on time - particularly in a timedriven business?

We have observed that meetings in law firms seldom start on time and that "*a phone call with a client*" or "*finishing something for a client*" is a legitimate excuse for being late to any meeting in any law firm. We suggest that you let the group set the ground rules and with some humour set the consequences for people who do not follow the rules that the group has agreed upon with respect to its meetings.

Creating an Action Orientation

Meetings fall into that vast abyss that consumes your precious non-billable time and are the cause of frustration with many lawyers in the firms we have served. In the book *First Among Equals* written by my friends and colleagues Patrick J. McKenna and David H. Maister, they cite a comment from a client: "Our meetings are like television soap operas. You can leave the group for three months and return to pick up exactly where you left off in the discussion, with no new progress ever having been made."

If you have any influence over the meetings in your firm make sure they have a purpose. Make sure that your



meetings are respectful of the highly talented individuals who attend them. And finally, make sure that they are a good use of your valuable non-billable time and that of your colleagues around the table. If not, send an email!

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