
MARKETING THE LAW FIRM

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Time Well Spent: Make Meetings Valuable

By Sharon Meit Abrahams

"Ugh, not another meeting!" Do you hear this from your colleagues and direct reports? If so, you should turn your meetings from a waste of time to a value-added use of time. We know meetings are important. They increase collaboration, set accountability, and create a shared sense of purpose and progress — all important elements of a happy, successful workplace.

As the leader you set the meeting tone, therefore be organized and ready to run the meeting efficiently and effectively. To increase the success of your meetings, follow these tips.

Decide Whether to Have a Meeting

Some law firms have too many meetings while others don't have enough. To determine if you need a meeting consider your desired outcome. Are you are trying to solve a specific problem, strategizing for a client, looking to make team or workplace improvements, or another business reason? If you are sharing information, could that be achieved with an email or video message?

Schedule the Best Time for the Meeting

It is easy to schedule meetings inside your firm by looking at the attendee's calendars. But there are still bad times for meetings, like Friday afternoons, even if everyone's calendar is clear! If you have people outside your organization, be sure to offer a few possibilities so they can communicate their best options. There are free online tools available for this as well.

Set an Agenda

When you send out the meeting announcement include an agenda, so everyone knows the meeting objectives. The agenda should clearly state if the meeting will be for discussion, decision making, and/or action planning. This gives the attendees time to gather data, collect their thoughts, and be prepared to address the topics. By setting an agenda you also have the ability to stifle tangential discussions by noting it is not on the agenda and will be addressed at a different time.

Accountability

Perhaps the main reason meetings feel like a waste of time is because no one follows up. Consider your intended outcomes and engage your team in planning and achieving those. Assign attendees a role or task before the meeting so they can be prepared for the meeting. Make the meeting meaningful for the attendees by making them responsible for a portion of the agenda. If there is a business need for a meeting, then there should be a business result or accomplishment achieved by the meeting.

Select the Right Attendees

Decide who needs to attend the meeting by reviewing the agenda items. If someone will be affected by decisions made at the meeting they should attend – especially if they will need to execute some tasks afterwards. If there are individuals with special knowledge or specific opinions about the agenda items, they should also be included.

Facilitate the Meeting

Poor meeting facilitation is one reason meetings are deemed a waste of time. When the leader loses control or never takes control conversations wander and decisions are not forthcoming. Effective facilitators focus on asking questions and guiding the conversation so that everyone has the ability to give input. When someone dominates the discussion or pulls the conversation off target, your job as the facilitator is to redirect them and succinctly restate the meeting goals to the whole group.

Set Time Frames

Time is money in the legal environment, so meetings should have time frames and begin and end on time. The agenda should show the designated time allotted to each item. Facilitate the meeting to stay within the set guidelines. By waiting 5 minutes or so to start or by running over the leader has impacted the participants. Once you set the precedent that your meetings start on time people will make the effort to show up on time. Even if people show up late, keep moving forward and avoid offering a recap — that's a waste of the others' time.

Appoint a Scribe

As the meeting leader you are unable to record the conversation or make notes about ideas or commitments made during the meeting. You can ask a staff person to sit in the meeting or you can ask someone in attendance to do it. However, be sure the person you have asked will take notes that are meaningful and add value to the attendees afterwards. Notes should be a summary of what was said, an outline of the pertinent points, a list of action steps, and a synopsis of any decisions. The notes should be distributed after the meeting to attendees.

Leave Time for Next Steps

Before the meeting concludes take time to review what, if any, next steps are to be taken and by who. Be sure to decide the time frame and outcome of the next step(s). This is critical for accountability.

Ask for Feedback

Successful meetings result from quality communication. Communicate before (agenda), during and after the meeting to determine what is working and what needs to change. Ask your attendees for feedback and be open to their suggestions. If the attendees feel engaged and effective, then you are running a high value meeting.

As the meeting leader it is a best practice to set an agenda, effectively run the meeting and then hold people accountable. By consistently practicing these tips you will be known for running meetings that are a good use of everybody's time.

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