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Smart Marketing for the Forward Thinking Law Firm

LEADING PRODUCTIVE MEETINGS

Five Practical Tips for Lawyers and Law Firm Administrators

by Sally Williamson

Meetings are one of the most universal parts of business life, but one of the least effective communication tools. Why? Managers don't take the time to consider what should happen before, during and after each meeting.

And, many managers don't appreciate how expensive meetings really are. Companies waste millions of dollars each year in employee time and productivity by leading ineffective meetings. (See box below.)

A survey of 950 professionals produced the top five reasons that people find meetings ineffective:

- Getting Off Subject
- No Goals or Agenda
- Too Lengthy
- Poor or Inadequate Preparation
- No Decisions or Action Items

Consider the following ideas to make your meetings more effective.

Stay on Subject

Meetings get off course when participants don't understand the objective of the meeting or their role in being a part of it. You can help participants get focused by sending out an advance agenda that states an objective for the meeting and key points for discussion. During the meeting, make a note of issues that are off topic and commit to address them later. Then, pull the group back to the topic at hand.

Follow an Agenda

Managers fail to prepare an agenda for two reasons. They think they're saving time and they don't know what to put in it. Agendas are a necessary part of getting buy-in to the meeting. If participants don't understand what you're trying to accomplish and how you plan to accomplish it, they will disengage from the process.

At Intel, the semiconductor manufacturer, every conference room has a poster that asks three questions: Do you know the purpose of this meeting? Do you have an agenda? Do you know your role?

Manage Time

Most consultants agree that meetings should stay within 90 minutes. Beyond that time, people begin to arrive late or leave early. And, meetings become less effective when key players are missing. Be realistic about time allotments for agenda items and avoid overloading the agenda

with more than you can accomplish in 90 minutes. Remember that some discussion points are better addressed in a retreat or off-site meeting environment which is not as pressed for time and allows for brainstorming, discussion and debate.

Plan Ahead

The most effective meetings are those that include a role for everyone in attendance. But, most attendees spend no time preparing for meetings in advance. Send the discussion topic with the agenda and ask attendees to give thought to the topic ahead of time. This shifts discussion from sheer opinion and quick reactions to a more thought-out discussion with insight and pros and cons.

Charles Schwab, a financial services company, offers managers feedback on meetings. An observer attends meetings, observes what went right and what went wrong and writes feedback into a meeting summary for all participants. Schwab says this has raised expectations and set the stage for significant change in the quality of meetings.

Lead to Action

Actions and follow-up are often overlooked from meetings for many reasons. In some cases, managers don't take the time to summarize meetings or define next steps. In other cases, managers may not feel that the group reached consensus on next steps. In either case, a written summary is a great way to help attendees with clarity and direction. Meetings with a lot of discussion can raise emotions and even hard feelings. A summary helps everyone move beyond the meeting and focus on the next steps.

Many companies have begun to use technology in meetings to capture ideas and share data. Technology can be especially effective for brainstorming exercises or soliciting objective feedback.

Leading effective meetings is not a new topic, but it's a communication challenge that many attendees feel just doesn't seem to get better. Maybe because it takes practice and an honest assessment of what's working and what isn't. Effective meetings take time to consider what should happen before, during and after each meeting. Take time to calculate your meeting costs below. You may decide it's a communication challenge that you can't afford to ignore.

How Much Do Your Meetings Costs?

- Determine the amount of hours per week that individuals spend in meetings.
- Divide the number of meeting hours by the hours the individual works each week.
(Example: 25 hours/40 hours=.625)
- Multiply this number by the individual's salary. This is the cost of this individual's time in meetings.
- Add together the totals for each individual in your group.



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