WE CAN'T GO ON MEETING LIKE THIS...HOW TO HOLD PRODUCTIVE MEETINGS

By Irwin D. Karp

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Have you ever attended a meeting and wondered why you were there or why it was happening at all? While lawyers are generally not subject to the ongoing, excessive meeting culture found in many businesses and government agencies, meetings play an important role in our professional life. We meet with clients, colleagues, opposing counsel, partners, associates, paralegals and secretaries for a variety of reasons. As busy as we all are, we need to learn how to conduct these meetings as efficiently as possible.

Lack of focus, late arrivals, side conversations, and re-hashing of issues are common complaints about meetings. Billable hours can be lost at inefficient, unproductive meetings. Even if you determine that you can legitimately bill for the time spent on behalf of a client in such a meeting, the rest of your work is piling up causing you to work longer hours for the same result. Meetings are about effective communication, which requires articulating clear objectives, managing the meeting to achieve those goals, raising and discussing issues, reaching a decision or assignments for further action, and recording what is expected of whom by when.

Here are some tips for running productive meetings:

1. Be clear about the purpose and objectives

Decide why you are holding a meeting. Is it to provide information, gather information, brainstorm, make a decision, get a group together in the same room to build camaraderie, share updates, resolve a problem, secure a new client or buy a new computer system?

Once you know your intent, see if there is another alternative. While pressing the flesh is important at times, recognize that there may be other communication vehicles available which could be more productive and less time consuming than a face-to-face or group meeting. Sometimes, clients just want to meet to feel comfortable about the status of their matter. Consider e-mail, phone calls and memos as meeting substitutes when appropriate.

2. Prepare an agenda

Once the purpose and objectives are clear, and announced to all who will attend, the person who called the meeting should prepare an agenda. It's preferable to circulate a draft agenda to attendees in advance of the meeting so they can provide feedback on the agenda items. Once the final agenda has been prepared, let the attendees know what you expect of them so they can arrive prepared for the meeting. Do they need to make a presentation? Are you looking for specific feedback? Better communication before the meeting results in better communication at the meeting.

Assign approximate time limits to each agenda item. It's wise to put the most important matters on the agenda early.

3. Meetings should start on time and end on time

What a concept! Have you ever been cooling your heels at a meeting waiting for everyone to arrive? One of the responsibilities of people attending meetings is to arrive on time, particularly when you work in the same office. Many times late arrival at a meeting is the result of the "just one more thing syndrome." Try not to just squeeze one more thing in before leaving for the meeting. Arriving late to a meeting is discourteous to your colleagues who were able to get there on time. Everyone is very busy.

I read a story about a company that was so frustrated at people holding overly long meetings that they put in a "totalizer" board in the conference room—just like the board that you see in a telethon or a public TV fund drive. As each participant entered the room, they swiped a card into the machine that recorded their hourly rate and allocated overhead. The machine ran a tally of the actual cost of the meeting—and participants could see the dollars run up before their eyes. As the story goes, meetings were thereafter a lot shorter.

In addition to starting on time, meetings should end on time. Any agenda item that was not completed, or unresolved issues that came up in the meeting, should be scheduled for a later meeting.

4. Conduct of the meeting

Have you ever attended a meeting that rambles around without ever reaching a decision because it never had any structure to begin with? It's the job of the meeting leader to manage the meeting, encouraging participation while maintaining control of the proceedings.

Sometimes, even in meetings with a written agenda, participants start straying from the topics at the outset. The meeting leader should follow time limits allocated to each agenda item fairly closely. I've attended meetings where we never got to the most important items on the agenda because the leader let it get bogged down on less important matters.

The leader should keep participants on point and try to limit sidebar conversations. If the meeting gets out of hand, it can quickly become unproductive. (I saw a cartoon recently, of a group of people seated around a conference table. The caption: "Whew! That was close! We almost decided something!")

Issues that were not on the agenda but were raised during discussion at the meeting should be put over to another meeting.

5. Consider frequent, short status meetings

Often status meetings amount to nothing more than show and tell. If you are working on a major case, with many members on your team (e.g., partner, associate, paralegal, investigator or secretary), consider short, stand-up status meetings. Here you want to know what problems arise as the matter progresses. You don't necessarily need the full status report from each participant at this type of meeting. As the lead attorney (project manager), you want to know that delegated assignments are on target and you want to be made aware of problems. Any problems surfaced at the short meeting may require a longer meeting that could follow the steps outlined for running effective meetings.

6. Summarize outcome of meeting

Make sure that the meeting is not "unfinished." Did you ever walk out of a meeting and turn to a colleague and ask who is supposed to do what? Every meeting should have a designated scribe who will record decisions, memorialize them after the meeting, and communicate the notes to all attendees. The following information should be provided to all attendees very soon after the meeting:

- Decisions reached at the meeting
- Action items: to whom assigned with the due date
- Items that were not resolved and need to be carried over

Even the most informal of meetings should summarize the decisions, action items, due dates, and the person accountable for the task. If meetings at your office are not productive or go on too long, you might even consider holding a meeting to discuss how to improve your meetings.

Follow some of these procedures for conducting productive meetings and you will enhance your ability to stay on top of your case-load.

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