

Career Path: Maybe Don’t Go to that Meeting

Career Development



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Nothing sends a signal that you carefully manage your time like declining a meeting invitation. Short of just saying no, which I understand will be a shock in many organizations, how about asking what you would be there for: “I see you invited me to meeting X. Based on the agenda, I am not sure I can add value. What specifically do you expect me to be able to contribute?”

> Only schedule meetings when necessary.

When we created a training program for middle management on personal and leader effectiveness, we asked what caused employees the most frustration and wasted time. The top two answers by a wide margin were too many emails and time-wasting meetings. Today, we’re going to discuss the secrets to holding effective meetings.

Master Skills to be Effective In-house Counsel

- Why It's So Hard Being a Good In-house Lawyer (the challenge);
- The Day You Became Smarter (writing plainly and clearly);

- Write Better Emails Today (taming the email monster);
- Avoiding time-wasting meetings (this article);
- Persuade Like Aristotle (influencing others); and
- Listen Up Already! (engaging with others).

It's likely you spend a significant part of your day attending meetings. Many of them will be unproductive. Although meetings do not have to be a burden, changing your company's culture will take time. Start by setting a good example with the meetings you hold. If you are lucky, others will be so impressed that they will adopt your good habits for their own meetings.

10 ways to improve your meetings

> Specify what you hope to achieve for each item on the agenda.

1. Have an objective.

Only schedule meetings when necessary. Don't have a meeting just because it's routine. Have a specific objective for every meeting. If you can't articulate a clear objective, you aren't ready for a meeting.

2. Use a goal-based agenda.

Stick to a goal-based agenda for all meetings. Specify what you hope to achieve for each item on the agenda. Make a note of off-topic items raised during the meeting but don't let them derail the agenda.

3. Distribute material in advance.

Meetings are more efficient if participants come prepared. Distribute the agenda and materials at least one day in advance and earlier if possible. Remember your colleagues all have other priorities.

> Start meetings on time and end on time. If you accomplish your objectives early, end early.

4. Invite only necessary participants.

Only invite participants who need to be there. And you may decline meeting invitations if you will not add value: Ask the organizer to clarify your role if unclear.

5. Use cost-effective locations.

Your meeting is not an excuse to travel to an exotic location. Unless the purpose of the meeting is pleasure, best to keep meetings and pleasure separate.

6. Use only time needed.

Don’t schedule 30- or 60-minute meetings just because that’s what your calendar defaults to. Try scheduling 15- or 20-minute meetings instead. Start meetings on time and end on time. If you accomplish your objectives early, end early.

7. Have proposals ready.

Have proposals ready for decisions that need to be made at the meeting. Use the meeting time to discuss the proposals rather than the background so you can take action following the meeting.

8. Eliminate distractions and focus.

Keep participants focused by asking them to put away phones and computers during the meeting — as needed, one person can take notes. Break every couple of hours to allow time for participants to respond to urgent calls.

> Have proposals ready for decisions that need to be made at the meeting.

9. Distribute notes and action items.

Send notes and action items that come from the meeting promptly following the meeting.

These tips are powerful because people can implement them easily. You just have to want to do it and then be mindful to what you are doing. Thus, I will end with my final tip for holding effective meetings:

10. Don’t send that invitation before reviewing your agenda and materials against this checklist.

> Send notes and action items that come from the meeting promptly following the meeting.

With practice you will become skilled at making the most effective use of your colleagues’ time.

If you follow this checklist, you are much more likely to hold effective meetings that do not waste time. But remember that the best meeting might be the one you never attended.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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