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To meet or not to meet

Good meetings take great effort



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The lawyer looked at the week's schedule. A meeting later that week. Was it truly something where the lawyer's involvement added value? The lawyer picked up the phone to call the meeting organizer and ask a few questions.

Finite resource

Time cannot be replenished. The three to five minutes you spend reading this piece are gone forever (so I'd better make it worth your time). The Stoics remind one to remember death, or *memento mori*. They are not a death cult but want to remember that a loved one, the world – you – could be gone tomorrow. With every second so precious, how do you want to spend some? Thinking about meetings?

A stitch in time

Meetings can be soul-crushing, meandering time sucks. Or they can be surgically productive collaborations. Both take up precious moments of one's life, but the latter tend to be shorter, with higher yields. The focused session requires that stitch in time, though. Proper planning provides that stitch. Substitute "new-case intake," "deposition," "mediation," or "trial" wherever we use "meeting," and you'll notice the pattern. A little prep work makes all the difference. Every meeting needs an owner. The default owner is whoever set a session. With that ownership come specific duties to ensure that valuable time is well used.

People, place, and agenda

The meeting owner evaluates who will attend. There's a tendency to kitchen-sink meetings, where the default becomes to invite everyone. The result is a torpid room with people wasting away. Many could have received a five-minute synopsis or email summary instead. If one receives a calendar invite to a session, the default evaluation is, "Will the meeting outcome benefit from my attendance?" At the same time, omitting a critical stakeholder – the President at the State of the Union, for example – can make the meeting itself problematic. A person should participate if a decision cannot be made without the person's participation, if a session is likely to get a 50% better deliberative outcome from participation, or if the information shared and resulting question-and-answer period significantly impacts the participant.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to video as default medium. Video and phone are efficient. In-person sessions, with their five-senses experiences, remain important for deeper connections. The meeting owner evaluates the best medium. Once determined, the medium needs to be communicated in a clear way, typically a calendar invite including the dial in, video link, or location.

A few days before the session, the meeting owner circulates a draft agenda for everyone attending. This serves many purposes. It helps everyone know what to expect, provides an opportunity

to chime in, and reminds folks that the meeting is happening. The final agenda is sent around the day before the meeting. If there are any out-of-office participants or critical participants, the meeting owner confirms they are aware and still planning on attending.

In session

"If I had an hour to chop down a tree, I'd spend the first forty-five minutes sharpening the ax," is a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln. One meeting owner's time, well-focused, saves many people hours. With all the groundwork, the meeting almost runs itself. The meeting owner sets the tone by starting on time. Consider deploying a late fee. This can be anything from having to sing a song to a late firm principal having to make a token contribution to everyone's IRA or 401k.

The meeting owner keeps the meeting focused. Consider requiring pad-and-paper (no device) meetings given the addictiveness devices present, even when consulted for legitimate purposes. The meeting owner further keeps it on topic. If tangents arise, the owner returns matters to the agenda. If someone talks over people or is inconsiderate, the owner redirects. If a quiet person looks to have good ideas, the owner draws that person in by asking, "Pat – it looks like you might have a thought. What do you think?" Throughout the session, the meeting owner keeps track of to-dos, along with who is responsible and by when. After the meeting is over, the meeting owner sends a detailed follow-up email so everyone knows their responsibilities.

One can always end early, but never late. It throws everyone's subsequent schedules into disarray. At ten minutes remaining, the meeting owner takes a temperature check. If the agenda won't be completed, the owner determines the solution, with the most common being a further session. If that's what's happening, authorize device use and have everyone work to select the next meeting. This takes a couple minutes – far easier than scheduling emails post-meeting. With that, and the follow-up communication with any to-dos, the meeting owner has notched another productive session.

Outro

Back to our lawyer and the meeting invite. After a short call with the meeting organizer, the lawyer recognized that a significant decision hinged on the meeting, and that the lawyer's involvement was important. The lawyer confirmed the meeting and forwarded a few thoughts on what to add to the agenda.

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