

A Plan for Effective Meetings

By Phillip Long

Our volunteer young lawyer organizations rely on large numbers of engaged, active members. One of the most important parts of running our organizations is the most dreaded—meetings. The complaints about meetings are endless, and busy young attorneys frequently do not want to take time to attend. By carefully structuring meetings, however, and taking other steps to encourage attendance, your meetings can be much more productive and beneficial to your organization.

1. Have an Organized Plan and Stick to It

A meeting must start with a well-organized agenda. Consider several issues when organizing any agenda. First, **choose meeting topics carefully**. Include only items appropriate for group discussion. Avoid sensitive topics better left for one-on-one conversations, and avoid lengthy updates more effectively transmitted through e-mail or newsletters.

Appropriate topics for large group meetings should not involve minutia more appropriate for a smaller committee meeting. Alternatively, in large meetings, “breakout” sessions are useful for topics requiring detailed discussion. These breakout groups can later discuss the small-meeting results with the larger group. The key is to design an agenda with topics that are suited to discussion by the group at hand.

Place topics strategically on the agenda. Start with “easy,” noncontroversial items: passing minutes, honoring the service of an outstanding member, briefly relaying the results of a successful project, and other similar topics. Place difficult topics, needing more discussion or presenting dissenting views, towards the middle. Then, end with an easy topic that puts everyone on a “high note.”

Further, **stick to the agenda**. Inevitably, someone derails your perfect agenda with a topic for which he or she feels passionate. Consider submitting your agenda before the meeting for review—the “passionate” member may speak up early, so that you can either address the issue one-on-one or add the item to the agenda. When such surprises occur in the meeting, you can also ask that those topics be submitted for a future meeting.

2. Mandate RSVPs, Assign Seating, and Have Placards

Especially in large meetings, the meeting leader should take charge of where people sit. Often in meetings, certain people will repeatedly cluster together, carry on private discussions, and generally be disruptive. Having an RSVP list ahead of time allows you to know who is coming. Using that list to assign seats randomly and to prepare name cards (with the name on both sides) placed at chairs before the meeting dictates seating and stops the “cliques” who tend to be chatterboxes. Also, randomly assigned seating helps attendees mingle and get to know each other, which ultimately benefits the organization.

3. Create Incentives to Attend

Of course, conducting a meeting is not a problem if people do not attend. There are several ways to encourage attendance. People love to get free stuff, and “giveaways” can be a good enticement to attend. For example, during the 2008–2009 bar year, the North Carolina Young Lawyers Division sponsored the “Just One More” program. Under “Just One More,” any meeting attendee was automatically registered for a gift card. Further, anyone who “brought a young lawyer friend” received an additional entry. The drawing occurred at the end of the meeting.

Roberta King, current Chair-Elect of the NC YLD states, “Our 2008–2009 Chair, Patti Ramseur, developed this program. Members really enjoyed the chance at the drawing, and we did see some increase in members attending the meeting.”

Another incentive is to provide food or snacks, especially if the meeting will run long.

4. Solicit Feedback

You can always improve on a meeting, and a survey of your membership is an excellent way to find ways to improve. Often people grumble about the meeting but are simply too shy, or polite, to speak up. A general survey is an excellent way to find out what your members like and dislike about the meetings. Further, surveys can help your membership feel more engaged in your organization—they know they have a stake and a say in the organization.

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5. Appreciate How Busy Your Members Are!

Our volunteer organizations rely on engaged, busy young attorneys to attend and participate at meetings. Group leaders must maximize productivity at meetings given how difficult it is to convene young attorneys. By carefully structuring your agenda and sticking to it, using low-cost incentives, and soliciting feedback from members, you can maximize productivity during your meeting while encouraging busy members to attend. Members will know and appreciate the efficiency of meetings and become more engaged as a result.

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