Simpler ways to improve partner on-time meeting attendance and time entry

By Keith Cameron

Why Does On-time Attendance Matter?

How would you describe your partners’ on-time arrival for major meetings, such as meetings of all partners or management committees? If your response is, “It’s fine. All partners are punctual and the management meetings tend to begin on time,” then you have a rare situation and should congratulate your partners. What if, though, your response is, “it’s fine,” because it’s become standard for your firm to routinely start meetings 10-15 minutes late while the majority wait for the last few partners to arrive? Or perhaps worse, you begin the meeting as scheduled but have to restart several times as the late attendees continue to file in. By the time the meeting actually begins, how’s the room’s morale? How are the attitudes of the partners who arrived on time? For many, they are annoyed at their time being wasted – even if they don’t comment – which is a less than ideal mindset for focusing on the meeting topics. At what point do these usually punctual partners begin to arrive late simply to not have their time wasted, figuring there’s no point in arriving on time? And to think… this goes on meeting after meeting after meeting.

How Can You Improve it? Reward the Preferred Behavior

There is likely more than one method to reliably establish the type of workplace described in the previous paragraph; however, I can’t remember a single article addressing it in over 25 years of faithfully reading law firm management articles. Law firms’ first choice to control behavior is usually a “stick” approach, like imposing penalties for failing to meet the preferred behavior. I am suggesting a method which leans more toward the “carrot,” which would reward the preferred behavior. To paraphrase an insightful comment from a partner who always arrived at major meetings a few minutes before the scheduled start time:

Why are the partners who respectfully arrive on time punished while we wait for the late arrivers? We should be rewarded for arriving on time.

Therein lies the magic! Provide a meaningful reward to recognize the partners who arrive on time and soon all partners will arrive on time. An elusive behavior change can be that simple to achieve if you apply an effective method. Sound simple? It really is.

So, what is a “meaningful” reward? You likely have ideas which would fit your firm’s culture, but here is a suggestion: How about handing a $100 (or $50) bill to every partner who arrives on time for every major meeting? There is some unexplainable magic in receiving an actual $100 bill, no matter what your income level. Too expensive, you say? This is not a firm expense; it is an early share of firm net income distributed evenly to all partners who arrive on time. Try it. You’ll know after 3-5 meetings whether it is having the intended effect. In fact, I think you will be surprised at how easily past obstacles will dissipate in favor of arriving on time for meetings. One-second late, no $100 bill. Remember to appoint someone to watch the clock.

Another Possible Improvement – Time Entry

If the on-time meeting method works for your firm, consider applying a similar method to reward partners and associates
who complete their time entries by your deadlines. For this reward, if you also pay cash it could additionally provide significant returns on your investment. (See my previous article in a recent issue of the Lawyers Journal for the financial value of contemporaneous time entry.)

Although immediate gratification provided by the $100 bill works well for the major partners meetings, it would be too cumbersome as a reward for following the rules for on-time time entry. One suggestion would be to offer a reward ($100?) for every month in which an attorney enters her or his time entries by the deadlines. This would accumulate for a payout every six months, IF the attorney is still employed at the firm. So, it could double as a small retention incentive. This would not be an all-or-nothing incentive, so even if attorneys miss one month, they would still be motivated to meet the deadlines in the subsequent months.

With more attorneys entering their time by the deadlines, imagine all of the positive change to come: the time you would save by not having to hound those who entered time late; the disciplined time entry habits many attorneys would develop in short order; and the financial results of more time being captured. There would be almost no downside. If those entering time late continue, it would cost you nothing new; you would be paying a reward only to your attorneys who deserve it, especially as they are capturing more billable time for the firm. Consider starting this initiative as a six-month pilot, which makes it easier to terminate if there are no positive results.

These two behavior changes are a lot for a firm to work on, especially at one time, but the potential results make it all very much worth it. A note of caution; however, don’t offer such rewards to try to improve additional types of behaviors, or you may dilute the method’s effectiveness. Start small. Decide what needs to change most and focus these methods there first!