Project Management

Ensuring Smooth Navigation

Implement "Start, Stop and Continue" Meetings to Improve Your Operations

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W hat should we start doing? What should we stop doing? What should we continue doing? If you and your team periodically answer these three questions, your firm could perform with the efficiency of a Silicon Valley software company.

Those of us in the software industry employ project management techniques to keep priorities straight and run a tight ship. Due to the unpredictable nature of a software project, change management is an important aspect of keeping that vessel afloat. We need to be able to adapt to a dynamic environment. We also need to be able to take a frank look at our processes and assess what works and what doesn't serve our interests.

The good news for those in the legal profession, who also deal with unpredictable matters and projects, is that change management techniques aren't software industry-specific. One such tool is Agile Project Management's "Retrospective," a.k.a. the "Start, Stop and Continue" meeting, which law firms can embrace to improve processes over time.

BASICS OF THE START, STOP AND CONTINUE MEETING

The first thing to keep in mind when incorporating a new process meeting is that it's not supposed to be a burden. Meetings should be short. A good Start, Stop and Continue meeting should be limited to 30 minutes.

Teams in the software business hold Retrospectives at the end of every work cycle, or "Sprint." Typically, a Sprint is anywhere from one week to one month in duration. In addition to being short meetings, Retrospectives should be held regularly.

Assemble a team that has a broad range of knowledge and responsibilities. This allows you to get multiple perspectives and will improve the support received from your organization because everyone has had a voice in the process.

A team lead conducts the meeting and records notes. Keeping track of what's said is important because if you don't capture the brainstorm, there's little chance of the organization implementing any generated nuggets of wisdom, and the meetings quickly become pointless.

In a Retrospective, the team answers three questions:

- **What should we start doing?**

- **What should we stop doing?**

- **What should we continue doing?**

The person running the meeting must pull the team up to a 10,000 foot view and survey the business from a good vista. What you want to focus on in a Start, Stop and Continue meeting is your business processes. You want to avoid including minutiae or specific to-do items.
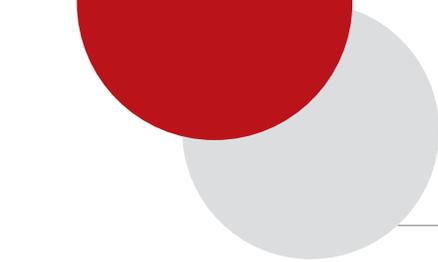
For example, a good suggestion might be "Start posting more regularly on the firm's blog." or "Stop using two different forms for client intake." These are items that refer to processes that can be used to streamline efficiency of the firm.

Nonproductive items for a Retrospective meeting are at street-level view: "Start writing that blog post on the recent court decision." or "Stop calling Mr. Laeddis about the overdraft." A good first item to put in the "Continue" column might be "Continue conducting regular Start, Stop and Continue meetings."

It's important to take notes and conduct regular meetings so you can look at what you added to the "Start" column and decide whether those initiatives worked or didn't work. If your new initiatives worked, put them in the "Continue" fold. If not, send them to the trash heap known as the "Stop" category. Keep "Continues" on your list until the next meeting and then remove them.

WHAT WORKS AND WHAT WON'T

Gregg Shavitz of Shavitz Law Group, P.A., a wage and overtime employee rights practice in south Florida, (http://www. shavitzlaw.com) has begun to incorporate Retrospectives in his 20-person practice. "What our firm has enjoyed about the Start, Stop and Continue exercise is that everyone actively participates and ideas get traction which affect our systems, efficiencies and cultures. Furthermore, there is more buy-in to our execution plan when everyone has a voice in shaping the next quarter."

It's important to note one of Mr. Shavitz's key observations: success, in part, results from the fact that "everyone has a voice." If a firm's culture doesn't permit frank exchange at every level, insights into critical components of business process, such as phone systems and intake, can be lost.

One thing you certainly want to avoid is a whining session complete with office politics and point-scoring. Retrospectives are not group therapy. They are about business process and reacting to changing environments. The session leader needs to make sure to drive the discussion, prevent it from taking a dark turn and conclude it when brainstorming ceases.

Also critical to the success of Start, Stop and Continue meetings is the repetitive nature of them. Conducting a single Retrospective isn't going to advance the firm's business processes. Holding regular meetings keeps everyone accountable and reminds them of what was discussed last time.

FROM "START" TO EXECUTION

Identifying change is one thing; implementing it is another. Start, Stop and Continue meetings can certainly help you identify your firm's shortcomings and areas for optimization.

However, if you don't translate talk into action, the only thing you can claim to accomplish is spending 30 minutes with the team on a regular basis.

As Mr. Shavitz points out, buy-in from the organization is enabled by everyone having a say. In addition, Start, Stop and Continue meetings are not only a great way to build cross-organizational process improvement, but they also serve as a team building exercise. Says Shavitz, "Not only is the exercise engaging, but it produces a lot of laughs as well." **ILTA**

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