

Tips for keeping business lunches on track

Jun 13, 2002 -- Dana Norton

Lunch meetings at your team's favorite restaurant usually go smoothly, but today was a disaster. The service was terrible. The network admin's food was cold. And the folks at the next table were loud. These distractions threw everyone off course and the meeting fell apart.

Business lunches happen on company time and on the company dime. You don't want to waste either one. "It's very expensive time, when people add it all up," said Denise O'Berry, the president of [The Small Business Edge Corporation](#), a business management consulting firm in Tampa, FL.

As an IT manager, you're often the leader of a business lunch and it's your job to plan a lunch meeting that is effective and successful. Here are some tips you can follow to ensure both.

Map it out

Planning can help you avoid those distractions that can derail a lunch meeting. For O'Berry, this means creating a plan of attack by asking yourself:

- Why am I calling the lunch meeting?
- What do I want to accomplish during the meeting?
- What is my goal for the lunch?
- What will be my team's goal?

When you've answered these questions, make an agenda like you would for any other meeting. "...Have some kind of framework to guide your actions during the lunch so that you can ultimately reach your goal," said O'Berry. "Even just a minimum framework can expand your chance for success."

Jim Bunte, the CEO of [Transistor 8](#), an IT and networking services provider in Santa Monica, CA, agreed that planning an agenda will prepare you for a business lunch.

"Determine the goal of the lunch meeting," he said. "If the goal cannot be determined prior to the lunch, come prepared to ask this as the first question of discussion."

Next, make a list of items that should be addressed. "...It's amazing how few people believe discussing issues 'off the top of their head' will suffice. Typically, it does not," said Bunte.

Also, keep your agenda simple. "Pack your agenda light and go deep on your subject so that you walk away with people feeling satisfied that they spent the last amount of time doing something productive," said O'Berry.

Allow for time

Keep your personal agenda free during the time close to and after your business lunch. "I generally won't 'tight schedule'," said Dane Madsen, the CEO of YellowPages.Com. For example, if you have a business lunch at noon, don't schedule an office meeting at 1 P.M.

Anticipate how long the meeting may take. For example, if the meeting has five people, assume each person will present their own perspective on an issue. If each person talks for only five minutes, you're already through 25 minutes of the meeting.

"So you have to be realistic on the expectations of participation on the part of people and the realities of how long it really takes to accomplish your objective in a group setting," said O'Berry.

Who to invite

Identify who should attend the lunch. "Have the right people. If those people aren't there, then you've achieved nothing," said O'Berry.

For example, if you only want to discuss network issues, don't treat the help desk team to a free lunch.

Make sure the right people are prepared. "You can send out a memo or an agenda or even just a short list

(in) an e-mail," said O'Berry. This will tell employees what to expect and help them come to the lunch with a work attitude instead of a play attitude, she said.

Find a quiet place

Stay away from trendy or expensive restaurants. "I don't care about shi-shi places and I don't want to spend \$300 on lunch," said Madsen. "Don't try to impress me with where you're taking me."

Although it may seem obvious, you should be careful to pick a restaurant that isn't noisy. A crowded, loud restaurant is not conducive to business conversation, he said.

Also consider the attention span of the meeting's members. For example, it's natural to people-watch, and a busy restaurant is a perfect place for that distraction to come into play, said Madsen.

Turn off the electronics and stick to business

When conducting business, nothing irks Madsen more than ringing cell phones or beeping pagers. "I turn mine off," he said, adding that meeting participants who don't turn off pagers and phones should at least inform the meeting organizer. "If you're expecting something to come in, tell me in advance so that I'm not (just) sitting there."

While Madsen understands that a business lunch must include social interaction between the meeting's

members, it's best to keep that interaction within a business context.

"My business is very important to me. If I take the time from my business day to have another conversation about my business and extending it, that's what is important to me. It's not about pictures of the kids and things like that," he said.

O'Berry added that there are times you should incorporate social time into a meeting. "If you've got a large group of people, you've got to give them time to socialize and connect," she said.

"You want to make sure and allocate time for that in the process of your meeting so it doesn't derail your meeting when you're trying to really get down to business," she said.

This social time is especially important if the meeting includes people who have never met. "Even if it's just introductions, you need to make that happen before people are going to be willing to open up and really talk to each other," she said.

The last tip

The bottom line is to treat a business lunch like any other meeting. If you don't, you run the risk of wasting everyone's time. "If they're paying, they'll remember you for a long time to come—for all the wrong reasons," said Bunte.

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