

Don't Make the Mistake of Stopping Your Practice Group Meetings Now – Best Practices for Running Them Virtually

By [Susan Raridon Lambreth](#) on April 7, 2020

As everyone is adjusting to working more virtually for a few months or more as COVID-19 bans or lockdowns are in place, it is more important than ever for Practice Group Leaders (PGLs) to continue to hold regular practice group meetings.

While it was a “best practice” in the most successful groups to have monthly meetings before, now it is even better to have weekly or, at a minimum, bi-weekly meetings. People yearn for connection and information at times of uncertainty. This is the time for PGLs to ensure meetings happen and to over-communicate, work on connections among group members and try to bring as much structure and routine to the group members as possible.

VUCA – Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity & Ambiguity – has become a common acronym in the business world in recent years. And while it has been discussed in many law firm meetings before, the COVID-19 pandemic brings these concerns to the forefront of our national and global discourse. Practice group leaders can play a key role in assuring and calming their members’ concerns as the group communicates, works on projects, and plans for changes in its markets that may be impacted by the outbreak.

These meetings are critically important for several reasons:

1. **To provide a sense of security and stability** – Even in the midst of many unknowns about how COVID-19 will affect work environments, client needs and the economy, it is important for Practice Group Leaders (PGLs) to communicate what they know, what they don't and any information about how the firm is preparing for or dealing with the situation. These meetings are critical to bring comfort to all members of the group, but especially to the more junior members of the group and to those already suffering with depression or other mental health issues.
2. **To maintain a sense of connection among the group members** – Connection is more critical than ever when there is such uncertainty in the world and one of the most important ways to deal with uncertainty is through sharing with colleagues. There is actually no better time to build cohesion in a group than when it is facing a common “enemy” in the virus and its effect on the economy. With regular meetings and sharing, many practice groups can actually become much stronger than they were before this forced physical isolation.
3. **To continue to work on projects that can contribute to the group's success** – Meetings can be used to lay the groundwork for solid practice group performance and give members something positive to focus on where they can feel their contributions (and they) matter. Every group should be talking about what their clients are experiencing during this time, how their business is being affected and how the PG and firm can help.
4. **To allow group members a chance to share their concerns, issues, and questions** – This sharing about their work, client matters, working from home, or any other topics they may want to discuss during this stressful time can create lifelong bonds.

Without these meetings, the isolation of working from home, while initially seen by some as a bonus (*i.e.*, no commute time and costs, greater flexibility, etc.) can have many negative effects on those who are used to an office environment full of colleagues with whom to share ideas, have live discussions, and generally socialize. All of this interplay creates what is called the *happiness hormone*, oxytocin, that results in higher levels of positivity and better mood. Without that, many are at risk of low morale, depression or worse. Thankfully, some firms have found creative ways to meet and

actually created better social connection than the group had before. These include virtual “happy hours”, sharing what each person’s home “office” looks like, making introductions to their family members and pets and more.

Remember Why You’re Meeting

When we are not in the midst of a crisis, the key objectives of practice group meetings include:

- creating a sense of shared destiny and group cohesion;
- keeping the group thinking strategically about where clients and the group’s business is trending; and
- sharing information that each member needs to know to feel connected, perform their work, or otherwise participate as a group member.

Even though some of these can seem a bit surreal in the midst of a situation unlike any of us have experienced in the past, focus on these same issues actually helps provide certainty and structure at a time when your group members desperately need it. We are hearing from PGLs that some of their members who hated participating in meetings before are now looking forward to the sharing and connection and it is bringing new energy to the group. There is no shortage of issues for practice groups to discuss now and that can be used to generate new ideas for how the group functions, how it serves clients, how members can be positive and productive and much more.

Even in more stable times, practice group meetings are one of the key foundations of building a high-performing practice group. Indeed, some of the keys to building these groups include establishing shared goals, communicating clear roles and responsibilities, and providing face-time for interaction (even if that is virtual). One of the important items for every practice group meeting agenda should be discussing group goals and the progress made toward them. This gives group members a sense of stability right now, as well as overcomes cynicism that the goals discussed during the annual practice group planning process are actually meaningful and not just something the group puts in a plan in order to obtain its marketing budget from the firm.

This is even more important right now, at a time of great uncertainty, because developing goals and actions together makes group members feel more empowered and less victims of circumstances that are just waiting for the next bit of negative news. While we cannot predict how long the current crisis will last or what the total and ongoing affect will be, we can take steps forward to plan for our role in the changing market and where we want to land when the pandemic ends. Talking about specific, measurable and especially short-term goals (2 to 6 months) that the group members can help work towards can provide a sense of progress and accomplishment that is much needed today.

In our research across 20-plus years working with practice groups and practice group leaders, effective meetings are a core to success. We have seen observed that the most success practice groups are the ones that not only show positive economic performance, but also form a truly cohesive team. The least successful, we’ve noted, is a group of “solos” functioning under the banner of a practice group.

Change Up the Meetings and Involve the Members

As we function in more virtual workgroups now, some important ways that PGLs and their meetings can continue to reach these objectives and engage group members, include:

- Share group successes, such as helping a client navigate the current uncertainty, participating in a pro bono

project, handling a new matter, landing new work, etc.

- Communicate how the firm is handling the impact of the pandemic on clients or the firm so that members feel less worried about the future.
- Brainstorm about how clients are being affected and how the group could be helping them with its existing services and approaches or entirely new ones.
- Bring humor into the meetings – laughter is a great stress reducer so think of ways to engage the members with that. Some firms have shared photos of their pets or something they baked at home this week, or the most creative ways they entertained their children without technology so they could work.
- Use polling software so you can get members to participate actively even though they are not in meeting rooms together. The many inexpensive polling software tools available can allow you to have anonymous participation in surveys. Engaging the team in this way could cover everything from how they are feeling about remote working or lockdowns, to how their clients are being affected by COVID-19 and impact on the economy.
- Ask various group members to prepare short (like, 5 minutes) presentations or reports on topics that are important to other group members, such as a recent client meeting, a trade association event that occurred in last 6 months (many of which are being rescheduled as virtual events), a RFP process the group won or lost, an element of the group plan that has been implemented, or a current matter of significance.
- Ensure people representing different office locations, practices within the group, levels of experience, etc. are encouraged to speak during the meeting and if this doesn't normally happen, facilitate it through polling or "virtual break out rooms".

Continuing these approaches and regular meetings will be very beneficial to your practice group during this time of virtual working. It will also lay a foundation for better cohesion after the pandemic subsides and business starts to get back to "normal" – whatever that will look like then.