PROVEN, PRACTICAL TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE CONFERENCE CALLS

1. INTRODUCTION

Many people look forward to a conference call with the same enthusiasm as a trip to the dentist. That's because most people have had mediocre or downright terrible experiences with most conference calls - and that isn't surprising because there ARE so many mediocre or downright terrible conference calls that go on every day.

That's a shame, because audio conference calls are the most underused but highest value tool for helping a distributed team work together. While we are continuing to see many advances in desktop videoconferencing and Web-based conferencing, the fact is that audio conference calls are the simplest, least expensive, and most accessible way to bring a group together.

The purpose of this conference call guide is to help you understand what accounts for good and bad conference calls, and to give you specific tips for how to make your conference calls effective and a good use of your time.

2. BASIC DO'S AND DON'TS

A. Keep Things Quiet - Conference calls can be noisy enough without having lots of distracting background noises. Close your door, use a phone in a quiet area, hide under your jacket, or do something to keep out the noise. Also, avoid rustling papers, chewing your lunch noisily, slurping coffee, snoring, typing, or creating other sound effects. If possible, turn off notifications, call-waiting or paging so these tones won't interrupt.

B. Put Someone in Charge - All meetings need a leader, and meetings on the phone are no exception. One person should manage the call, though this need not be the boss. This "control" person controls who has the floor and otherwise tries to keep chaos from coming in.

C. No Guessing Games - You may think that everyone knows what your voice sounds like, but don't flatter yourself. Even those on the call who know you might have a hard time recognizing your voice if there is any distortion on the speaker phone or conference bridge. Therefore, get in the habit of identifying yourself every time you speak - or at least until people tell you they can recognize your voice.
D. Use Your Voice, Not Your Eyes - If you're in a meeting in person, it's easy to look at the person whom you want to respond to your comment or question. This cues that person to respond. On a conference call, you have to specifically ask that person - such as, "Paula, what do you think of that plan?"

E. Remember What Mommy Taught You - Even though you're dying to say something, you have to wait your turn and avoid the temptation to start talking. There are two reasons for this: first, it's a simple matter of politeness and decorum in a meeting. Second, some conference bridges or speaker phones will only allow one person to talk - if you jump in to start talking while someone else has the floor, you may unknowingly cut him or her off in mid-sentence.

F. Stick to the Agenda - You DO have an agenda for all your conference calls, don't you? Good! Be sure to stick to the item under discussion. And remember to send out the agenda before the meeting. A last-minute agenda is better than none.

G. Don't Leave the Door Wide Open - If you want a response to the last thing you have said, try not to say, "Any comments?" Better to ask for people to respond in sequence, e.g., "Can I hear first from Bill, then from Elaine and Joe?"

3. KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

A. Conference calls are generally an underused tool for remote work and workers - but, they have high value, low cost, and are quick and easy to set up.

B. Avoid boring conference calls - instead, you can e-mail to send out an agenda, handouts, or other visuals in advance. These are useful to illustrate and explain what’s being discussed, especially if most of the people in the meeting are attending in person in a conference room where those visuals are being used. In that case, the remote meeting attendees can feel very left out if they aren't able to see the same visuals at the same time.

C. A group of three to six people is the optimal size for conference calls where you are trying to make a decision or solve a problem - larger groups are harder to manage, but are workable if they are planned and moderated VERY well.

D. Consider audiotaping the call for people who can't participate in real time.

E. Consider using a conference call for role plays, brainstorming sessions, training or other applications - with proper and inventive planning, you can do these almost as well as if everyone is in the same place.

F. If you're in the main meeting and having trouble remembering to include your remote callers in the discussion, try this: put their picture(s), or just a big sign with their name(s) on it, on the speakerphone. It sounds corny but it really works.
G. Most important - think of a conference call as a meeting that just happens to be occurring over the phone, NOT as a phone call that just happens to be a meeting. This means the conference call will be as good -or as bad - as any other meeting. It also means that you can control the quality of the conference call simply by doing all those things you already know should be done for a good meeting, e.g., set an agenda, have a moderator, stick to the subject, and so on.

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