Table of Contents

What Guidance Do You Have For Good Conference Calls?

Apart from the basics of running a good meeting, there are additional considerations when you are working with remote people on a conference call.

The most important thing to remember is the basic rule - "The remote person has right of way."

In addition to this try to keep in mind the following ideas.

Reduce environmental noise:

- Pick a quiet place to take your conference call.
- Be mindful of nearby babies, animals, lawnmowers, and swimming pools (yes, it really happened). Close the office door or window before taking the call.
- Don't join conference calls from public places, unless absolutely necessary.
- If you have to join a call from a car, use the mute feature.

Reduce personal noise:

- Don't play with the microphone or shuffle papers near it.
- Position the microphone correctly, close enough to pick up your voice but not your breathing. (Yes it's nice to know you are still alive, but how do we know you are not asleep.)
- Don't eat while on the phone!
- Don't hold other conversations. (Multitasking doesn't really work.)
- Use the mute button when you are only listening

Equipment matters:

- You must have a mute button and know how to use it quickly
- If you have a choice, use a land line over other connection forms (eg VOIP, wireless)
- Avoid additional wireless phones and cell phones during this conference call.
- If you are alone, do not use a speakerphone.
- Invest in a good wired headset with adjustable boom microphone.
- Never put a conference call on hold.

Mind your manners:

- Start on time – This is a good rule for all meetings.
- Introduce all call participants at the beginning of the call
- State your name before talking. Don't assume people will recognize your voice. (This works in reverse too, don't assume people won't recognize your voice, so think before speaking.)
- Avoid interrupting other speakers, especially if they are remote
- Be concise
- End the call properly – Wrap up the meeting, sign off and hang up. (I was once in a meeting where everyone in the room simply got up and left without saying goodbye or hanging up the phone.)

- Don't hog the call. Even if you have a lot of important things to say, stop occasionally to give people an opportunity to ask questions / say something.

For large groups (with concentration in one place):

- Always defer to someone who is remote (I know, I said it again)
- If using conferencing tool ensure all know the name of the person who is driving the conference call - the moderator
- Instead of arguing / discussing "live" try using the "chat" or "instant message" feature. Send the message to the moderator, and have that person read questions, responses etc.

For customers or other key stakeholders:

- Make sure that when a customer is asked for input, that no other conversation happens until they have responded or the moderator indicates that others can contribute (think the "talking stick").

For calls with international participants:

- Make clocks visible somewhere to all showing local times of those on the call. The problem is that we often forget that a call here means its 1AM for one of the participants.

For calls that have people whose first language is not English:

- Speak more slowly than you would normally
- Speak more clearly than you would normally
- Ask directly if the response, presentation, whatever was understood
- Take time to wait for foreign people to formulate a response or provide them with a way to respond to issues by some other means.

For Video Conferencing - all the above guidelines apply but also:

- Really make sure that everyone focuses on the person talking.
- Make sure that you and everyone on the video conference is close enough to the camera so that people can see facial expressions.

Consultant, Tools, ConferenceCalls, Remote, FAQ

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