

Surviving a Conference Call

How to Stop the Rambling, Multitasking and Zoning Out



By Sue Shellenbarger

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It's one of the most familiar and hated rituals of office life – the conference call. Work & Family columnist Sue Shellenbarger and productivity expert Laura Stack join Lunch Break with techniques for becoming a hero of the call. Photo: Getty

The conference call is one of the most familiar rituals of office life—and one of the most hated.

Abuses are rife. People on the line interrupt others, zone out or multitask, forgetting to hit "mute" while talking to kids or slurping drinks.

Sales executive Erica Pearce has seen teleconferences interrupted by home FedEx deliveries, crying children and the sound of a co-worker vacuuming his house. "Nobody could hear," she says of the cleaning. As leader of the meeting, she said into the phone, "If you're vacuuming, I appreciate that, and you're welcome to come to my house afterward. But you need to be on mute."

Another conference call ended when a participant put his line on hold, starting a stream of elevator music, says Ms. Pearce of Scottsdale, Ariz., a global account executive for a software company. Conference-call complaints are so widespread that a recent comedy video showing how ridiculous conference-call behavior such as secretly playing solitaire would look "in real life" has drawn more than 6 million views.

But conference calls aren't going anywhere; they are too useful for businesses dealing with far-flung workplaces, flexible schedules and a clampdown on business-travel expenses. Time spent in audio conferences in the U.S. is expected to grow 9.6% a year through 2017, according to Wainhouse Research, a Boston market-research firm; about 65% of all conferencing is still done by audio calls.

There are ways to fix the problems. For instance, meeting leaders must set firmer ground rules than they do for face-to-face meetings and tighter, more explicit agendas. Leaders also have to work harder to get participants talking, both by asking more questions and by listening more.



Robert Neubecker

Many conference calls are split between people in a conference room and others on a muddy-sounding call-in line. This often makes remote participants "feel like second-class citizens, like, 'The cool kids are here,'" says Laura Stack, author of "Execution Is the Strategy."

She advises leaders to have all participants say their names when they speak so remote callers know what's going on. If someone cracks a joke and the room bursts into laughter, the leader should "let the others know who said what and repeat the joke," says Ms. Stack, a Denver productivity consultant and trainer.

One of the biggest problems with virtual meetings is that it is hard for participants to build rapport with each other, a hurdle cited by 75% of 3,301 businesspeople surveyed in 2012 by RW3, a New York culture and leadership training company. The absence of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions makes many people hesitant to speak up and makes it harder to pay attention. In the survey, 71% of participants cited a lack of participation by others as a problem with virtual meetings.

To build relationships, Ms. Pearce takes time during the teleconferences she leads to have participants who don't know each other introduce themselves, explain their roles in the project at hand and tell what they want out of the meeting, she says.

For teleconferences, agendas and goals should be clearer and more explicit than for face-to-face meetings. "You need to script them more tightly" to keep people's attention from wandering, says Daniel Mittleman, an associate professor in computing and digital media at DePaul University, Chicago. Teleconferences requiring interaction should be no larger than seven to nine people, experts say.

Meeting leaders should talk less than in face-to-face meetings and listen more, says Paul Donehue, president of Paul Charles & Associates, a Londonderry, N.H., sales-management consulting firm. For a problem-solving teleconference, for example, a leader might talk 40% of the time and listen 60%, compared with a 55%-to-45% ratio when meeting face-to-face for the same purpose, Mr. Donehue says.

Leaders should spend as much time on preparing questions to ask participants as on writing the agenda, Mr. Donehue says. He advises leaders to use a form with spaces to note comments by individual participants during the meeting. This helps leaders listen closely and hold participants' attention by citing their earlier input.

Managing conflicts is harder in teleconferences. Not everyone can sense when a silent participant is frustrated or angry. "There's sometimes a little passive-aggressiveness in that silence," Ms. Stack says. "Some people just check out, thinking, 'OK, you dummies, go ahead and do that. I'm going to sit here on mute.'" She suggests posing a question: " 'Jane, you're kind of quiet. What are your thoughts?' You sometimes get an explosion," but this can get important issues out in the open, Ms. Stack says.

Participants can help meetings run more smoothly by volunteering to serve as moderator, keeping people on-topic and sticking to time limits. Divvying up moderating and note-taking duties can free meeting leaders to participate and keep people engaged, Ms. Stack says. Some managers encourage any participant to moderate, breaking in if a speaker wanders off-topic and asking that everyone stick to the agenda, says Steven M. Smith, senior consultant in Seattle for SolutionsIQ, a management consulting and training firm.

Time-zone differences can irritate people who have to rise at midnight to meet with colleagues in the U.S., says Michael Schell, chief executive officer of RW3. "It's important to move the meeting times around" to be fair, he says. Also, meetings should start promptly; taking 10 minutes to get coffee might seem normal at 9 a.m. in New York, but it can seem disrespectful to a colleague in Australia who got out of bed to join the call, Mr. Schell says.

Videoconferencing can solve some of the problems. The technology is increasingly inexpensive and easy to use, and a growing number of applications, such as Vidyo and Blue Jeans Network, can connect users on a variety of devices, including webcams, laptops, tablets or smartphones, says David Coleman, founder and managing director of Collaborative Strategies Inc., San Mateo, Calif.

The technology can create other challenges, though. Mr. Smith says participants who aren't tech-savvy often consume valuable meeting time getting used to unfamiliar systems.

Videoconferencing also can make people self-conscious. Many people avoid video, Ms. Stack says, because they don't want to put on makeup or change their workout clothes. "I cannot tell you how many times I've heard people say, 'I don't know what's wrong with my webcam. I can't get it to work, so I'm just going to be here in voice,'" she says.

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