

Conference Call Etiquette – the do's and don't's of multi-way phone conversations

By Lyndsay Swinton

Conference calls - the curse of every hard working manager. Love or hate them, with today's geographically dispersed teams and travel restrictions, conference call etiquette is a key part of any manager's skill set.

Here are 3 of my favorite transgressions of conference call etiquette...

- a **barking dog** drowning out the key discussion point was bad enough, but then owner started shouting at his pet
- a thirsty caller uses the **hold button** whilst slipping out to get a drink, unaware that hold music starts playing to everyone on the call
- a talkative colleague uses the **mute button** to moan about the call, stopping anyone answering the question just asked by the remote senior manager

Obviously I would discourage all these career limiting behaviors, so what are the do's and don'ts of effective conference call etiquette?

14 (+1) Conference Call Tips

Do get comfortable with the fact you will be talking in front of a group and receiving no visual cues or feedback.

Do use the right phone in a quiet, undisturbed room.

Don't use cell phones or phones that pick up background noise. Calling from an open plan office is the equivalent of having a conversation in a nightclub. If you really can't find a quiet room, use the mute button until you are required to speak.

Do learn to use the mute button and other phone technology to avoid a Homer Simpson style “Doh” moment. Your intelligent contributions mean nothing if no one can hear them.

Do set up the meeting in advance and communicate the dial in number, passcodes and other information. “Spring forward, fall back” is something to keep in mind for your timezone crossing colleagues. Don’t work out time differences on your fingers – check on the internet or even phone a colleague in that country and ask what time it is!

Do start the meeting absolutely on time; don’t reward latecomers’ bad behaviour by waiting for them. Take a role call at the start of the meeting, highlighting the missing attendees. Go on, get tough, people will love you for it!

Do treat the conference call as if it were a meeting. You know the routine; prepare and circulate an agenda, take notes ya-de-ya-de-ya.

Do get each caller to say hello and introduce themselves. Even though you may never meet in person, it’s a good relationship builder and gets the shyest of people to at least say their name.

Don’t assume everyone recognises your voice. Unless you are dis-respecting the boss and want to stay incognito, say your name before you speak. This is particularly important for the poor soul taking meeting notes.

Do make use of guest speakers. Invite a special or important guest and get them to say a few words at the beginning of the meeting. No one will know they slipped out after five minutes and you’ll get the benefit of undivided attention and best behaviour.

Don’t allow the topic to wander. Be an iron fist in a velvet glove – polite but firm if people talk too long or over each other. If your callers are at home sitting in their pyjamas nursing a hot chocolate, be considerate that all they want is to go to bed.

Do ask for input by using a person’s name. People will pay more attention to avoid the embarrassment of needing the question repeated.

Don’t shuffle papers; scrape chairs, pencil tap, hum or other distracting, noisy activities. It.....drives.....people.....mad!

Do close the meeting formally, thanking everybody for their time. That little bit of recognition will make them feel good about talking to you again.

One final, essential, personal etiquette tip

And that's about it. Apart from one very personal tip.

Do not sit on a leather chair. Ever.

The problem is each time you move around, an embarrassing noise is emitted at just the right frequency to carry clearly over the phone.

Either you brazen it out and suffer the comments about your defective digestive system, or sit rigid until the call is over. If you only take one piece of advice make sure it's this - do use fabric covered seats!

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