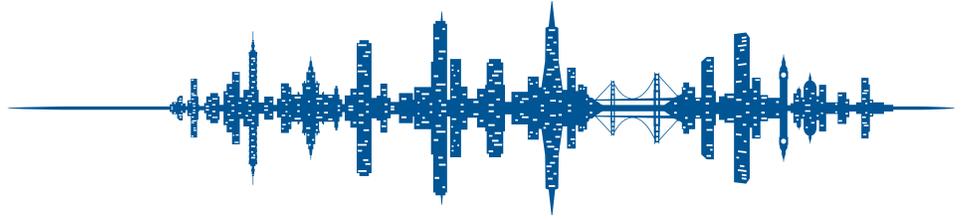


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Guidelines for Leaders  
and Attendees

10 Ways to Make Conference  
Calls and Online Meetings  
More Productive



## SUMMARY

Do you want to make your conference calls and online meetings more interactive and productive?

### When you're leading an online meeting, do you:

- Wish that more people participated actively?
- Wonder why there is so much silence?
- Feel that the meeting should accomplish more?

### When you're attending a conference call, do you:

- Hesitate to speak?
- Remain silent because you are unsure of the "rules" for participating?
- Wonder about your value and role in the meeting?

What makes some meetings more productive, interesting and engaging than others? How can you develop meeting skills and overcome barriers to communicating online and over the phone, so that you can do your job better?

This paper outlines the increasingly important role of conference calls and online meetings in doing business, and describes ways of making these meetings more productive. Whether you frequently lead online meetings or attend by invitation, you'll find guidelines and etiquette for participating in and getting the most out of them.

## Main Messages

- Online meetings and conference calls have become vital tools for working out complex issues.
- Voice-based business communication skills for leaders and attendees result in more effective meetings.
- Simple meeting guidelines and etiquette go a long way toward more productive conference calls and online meetings.

## BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: VOICE REMAINS THE KEY

Around the world, advances in technology have changed business communication as we know it. Greater workforce mobility, relatively inexpensive bandwidth and ever-evolving tools for sharing work are erasing the barriers that time and location used to impose on us.

Smart businesses can conduct business anytime and anyplace using communication technologies that support and reinforce greater mobility. Work is changing from being a place to being a mind set, and the traditional concept of a workforce has changed as well. More companies are rethinking their assumptions about employees and the role of communication tools.

Forward-thinking companies are adopting communication technologies like online meetings and conference calls for greater productivity and competitive advantage inside and outside the organization.



"You hear that voice is dead, and that people are using only email and instant messaging. When we did the research, we found that 75% of you consider voice calls to be crucial. It's not surprising. How can you have an intimate relationship with customers if you're not talking to them live?... Voice is required, but it's not always easy."

**Ken Kannappan**  
CEO, Plantronics, Inc.

## Tools and technologies for global communication

Voice-based global communication is at the heart of business, in a variety of forms that make it appealing and affordable for almost any company:

- Phone-based conference calls – Improvements in conference room hardware and the rise of private communication operators have made high-quality calls accessible to most businesses.
- Internet Protocol (IP) telephony – Companies are willing to move business communication over the Internet to save money and integrate it with their existing IT investment.
- Unified communications (UC) – Tools like Microsoft Lync and Avaya One-X allow workers to escalate conversations to voice for collaborating in real time and solving complex issues.
- Webinars – These platforms take advantage of the Internet for a new broadcasting model of selling, marketing and training to both internal and external audiences.
- Video calling and chat (FaceTime, Skype) – IP telephony has brought inexpensive, high-quality global communication to devices familiar to most consumers, such as mobile phones, PCs and tablets.
- Video conferences, Web conferences, online meetings – The powerful combination of video, audio and collaboration tools gives even the smallest companies global reach.

For example, as many as 37 million people are now connected over Skype at any one time. About half of the 300+ billion minutes they spend on Skype each year are in video calls.<sup>1</sup>

**Conference calls and online meetings are cornerstone technologies in global communication, and smart managers and their employees are embracing them.**

Over the last ten years, companies large and small have adopted long-distance, voice-based communication and found new ways to improve their competitive edge with it. Email, instant messaging and text messages continue to play a role in simple tasks, like reminders, updates and file delivery. But they cannot replace the real-time value of voice in global communication. When there is a complex problem to solve or objective to achieve, voice and meetings are the most effective tools.

Different regions use conference calls and online meetings differently, but two things remain constant:

1. The future of global trade lies in meeting with more people more often in more remote locations; and
2. People and organizations who adopt technologies for their online meetings can resolve issues faster and get more things accomplished.

So, online meetings and calls will be here for a long time to come. How can you get the most out of them?

<sup>1</sup>"37.5 Million Concurrent Skype Users Today, Up 1.5 From Yesterday," Phil Wolff, Independent Skype Journal, March 12, 2012



### Making conference calls and online meetings more productive

While tools and technology can connect people all over the world as if they were in the same room, they do not guarantee that the meeting will be productive. To maximize the value of the meeting – whether face-to-face or online – attendees need to be in active mode, not passive mode. They must also realize that every meeting costs the organization the time and effort for all attendees.

Smart organizations maintain guidelines and etiquette for the dozens of meetings they conduct every workday of the year, including training their employees on conducting effective meetings<sup>3</sup>. They know that attendees who apply online meeting tools and who understand basic meeting guidelines can participate in more productive meetings that help them get more done.

### Common obstacles to effective meetings

Both leaders and attendees face obstacles to participating actively in meetings, and these obstacles become more pronounced in online meetings and conference calls. Have you ever heard complaints like these?

- “I’m not sure of the objective of this meeting.”
- “I don’t want to interrupt or stand out in the meeting.”
- “I don’t know the rules for participating more actively in our meetings.”
- “I’m tired of carrying the meeting along all by myself.”
- “I don’t want to slow the meeting down by asking questions.”
- “I have trouble expressing myself.”
- “I have trouble expressing myself in another language.”

Other factors vary by culture and region: deference to seniority, deference to conversation leader, perceived value of silence. When teams from multiple cultures are all participating on a conference call, these differences become extremely important.

The more willing you are to participate and encourage participation, the more productive your conference calls and online meetings will be.

<sup>3</sup> A notable example is Intel, where CEO Andy Grove himself is said to have taught the company’s homegrown course for several years. (“[The Seven Sins of Deadly Meetings](#),” Eric Matson, Fast Company.)

## Popular Meeting Types

### New client call

Presenting capabilities or discussing contracts.

### Decision meeting

Making a case, voting, and deciding.

### Project status meeting

Review of work to date, schedules, team needs and next steps.

### Kick-off meeting

Team introductions, establishing roles and responsibilities, setting expectations and schedule.

## MEETING GUIDELINES AND ETIQUETTE

Most of the work lies in proper organization and meeting preparation. When people know what to expect, they perform better. Given different meeting types (see “Popular Meeting Types” in the sidebar at left), planning and expectations vary.

### Guidelines for leaders

Leaders who follow a few strategic guidelines will enjoy much more productive meetings and calls.

#### 1. Inviting the right people to the meeting

This depends on the meeting type. Knowing your key players is important for any meeting. Calling on the right people who can make decisions, take responsibility for deliverables and add value to the discussion will improve your meetings every time.

#### 2. Creating and publishing a clear agenda

The agenda helps keep attendees focused and reminds them of how much work they must accomplish before the meeting ends. The most important topics – and the ones to schedule first – engage the greatest number of people. Lower priorities follow, but the meeting always comes back to topics on the agenda.

Smart leaders publish the agenda in advance of conference calls and online meetings. This gives invitees the chance to suggest additional topics. It also allows them to decide in advance whether to accept or decline the invitation.

#### 3. Assigning roles to your participants

When participants have and understand the role they play in the meeting – taking minutes, keeping the discussion on topic, giving everybody a chance to participate, ensuring that the meeting fulfills its goals, giving the status from a particular department – they are more engaged and more productive.

When you rely on attendees to play those specific roles, you help them take credit for the progress of the meeting. This is also a good way for you to avoid the “everything depends on me” feeling that comes from fruitlessly trying to engage attendees.

#### 4. Sticking to the goals and deadlines of your call

Goals vary widely from one type of meeting to another. Clearly stating the goal is as important as publishing an agenda. In fact, the agenda should include the goal, such as arriving at a decision, generating three new ideas, synchronizing the efforts of different teams, etc.

Keeping the conversation focused on the stated goal is an important role to assign to one or more attendees. It is also important to be respectful of other people’s time, so starting and ending your meeting punctually is critical.

#### 5. Setting rules for attending the call

You may feel awkward establishing rules for a conference call or online meeting, but rules help all attendees feel that they have been treated fairly. For instance, if everybody on a Web conference knows that speakerphones should not be used because of background noise and echo, then all attendees feel on par with one another.



"We talk a lot about meeting discipline. It isn't complicated. It's doing the basics well: structured agendas, clear goals, paths that you're going to follow. These things make a huge difference."

**Michael Fors**

Former Corporate Training  
Manager, Intel University

## Guidelines for attendees

Similarly, attendees can answer several questions for themselves and enjoy much more productive meetings.

### 1. Understanding your role on the call

Every attendee should have a clear role and a stake in the effectiveness of the call. If you are going to dedicate a portion of your workday to a conference call, you are entitled to know what role and what level of active participation the leader has in mind for you. It can range from taking notes and reporting on your team's progress to offering your perspective and voting on a job candidate. If you are unsure of your role on the call or whether it will be a good use of your time, contact the leader for clarification prior to the meeting.

### 2. Using meetings to do your job better

Online meetings and conference calls are activities required to get work done, not activities that interrupt work. The idea behind getting several people together in a room is to multiply productivity and increase efficiency.

When you use meetings to do your job better, several questions arise: Is there somebody in the meeting with whom you want to work in the future? Are attendees going to discuss useful data, and will they let you use it also? Can you ask the leader to move your project up in the agenda so that you can get valuable input from executives before they leave the call? If you look at meetings and calls as opportunities and take full advantage of them, you can do your job much better.

### 3. Preparing (or practicing) before the meeting

Many passive attendees are quiet because they are unprepared to participate in the meeting. If your role is to report your team's status, it is worthwhile to spend time before the call preparing at least a brief summary to present.

In global calls, some attendees are reluctant to participate because of their foreign language skills. This is understandable when speaking in spontaneous conversation, but if your role is, for example, to report testing results, you can practice your delivery ahead of time.

### 4. Expressing disagreement

Smart leaders value alternative opinions in meetings. Nobody has all the information, and it is everybody's job to give different perspectives for the greater good of the organization. During an audio conference call, however, there are no visual cues or body language. And even though most attendees can see one another in a video conference call or online meeting, a sense of geographic separation still prevails. The only way to express disagreement is with your voice, so politeness is important. A sentence like, "I have different information," backed up with facts and data, is effective in this environment.

### 5. Helping the leader accomplish his/her goals for the meeting

If the leader has stated the goals of the meeting, either in the agenda or at the start of the meeting, smart attendees can ask questions, make suggestions and guide discussion toward those goals. If the goals are not clear, attendees perform a valuable service by pointing that out to the leader ahead of time.



### Meeting etiquette

Much of the etiquette for online meetings and conference calls is similar to that of face-to-face meetings. Leaders can emphasize these points for attendees:

- If you need to leave the call early, let everyone know in advance.
- Do not dominate the conversation. It deprives other attendees of the opportunity to participate.
- You may bring up topics that are not on the agenda. If they are not urgent, the group will discuss them at the end of the call or schedule them for a later call.

The technology and tools behind these meetings introduce new elements of etiquette, which may not be apparent to you, but are obvious to other attendees:

- Do not put the call on speakerphone, unless it is a purpose-built conference phone. The microphones in most standard telephones and mobile devices are not optimized for group calls, so other attendees hear echo and background noise. Also, typing on a laptop computer during an online meeting can result in broadcasting the sound of keystrokes to attendees. Using a hands-free device that places the microphone close to your mouth is much better etiquette.
- On conference calls with many attendees who are not well acquainted, it is good etiquette to precede your comments by giving your name again so that attendees know who is speaking.
- In Web conferencing and webinars, leaders can mute all attendees to eliminate chatter and background noise. In smaller meetings, it is good etiquette to mute your microphone when you are listening, then unmute it when you speak. This is especially important when calling in from a noisy location, like a shop floor or airport, or from a location where background noise is unpredictable, like a home office.

As devices have become smaller and more powerful, the temptation to multitask between attending the meeting and working on other projects – reading email, browsing the Web, texting/chatting with colleagues – has become powerful as well.

- Leaders may permit multitasking, provided that the attendee's absorption in the outside work does not impair the group's progress on the call.
- Attendees who choose to multitask lose the opportunity to use the meeting to do their job better. Whether multitasking in a physical or virtual conference room, they should plan to keep their involvement in outside work as inconspicuous as possible. They should also be prepared to play their assigned role on the call at a moment's notice.
- The best way to eliminate multitasking altogether, of course, is to ensure that the meeting engages and interests all attendees. When the right attendees are in the right meeting and the topics are of importance to them, they are not so tempted to work on outside projects.



### Speech impact – Tone of voice matters

Given the importance of voice-based global communication, how much of an advantage can you give your business by improving your speech performance?

Without the visual cues and geographic proximity of face-to-face meetings, online communication depends heavily on tone of voice. Meeting leaders and attendees who use tone of voice effectively can increase not only productivity, but also customer engagement and loyalty.

Consider these four methods of stimulating people through tone of voice:

#### **Power**

Vary the power, or loudness of your voice. Speaking softly can add emphasis and authority when giving instructions. Suddenly switching to a louder voice for one or two words can grab attention. Constant variation will be a distraction for everyone, so use changes in power sparingly – low volume for instructions, and one or two louder words at the beginning of sentences to ensure you have attention.

#### **Pitch**

Change the pitch of your voice for emphasis. By adding subtle variations to the pitch, such as raising the pitch at the end of a sentence, you indicate that you're posing a question and expecting an answer. Lowering the pitch adds a level of seriousness to your voice.

#### **Pace**

Slow down! If you think you are speaking too slowly, then you are probably speaking at about the right pace.

#### **Pause**

Nothing gets people's attention more than a break in the conversation. If they are used to hearing you speak, then the break captures their attention and lets you emphasize what follows. Don't, pause, after, every, word; this sounds scripted and false. Insert a pause just before you want to ensure you have attention, or just before you summarize.

## 10 Ways to Make Conference Calls and Online Meetings More Productive



### CONCLUSION

Online meetings and conference calls represent the present and future of business communications. They excel as tools for resolving complex issues, winning new business and collaborating, whereas static media like email, chat and text messaging suffice for simple issues and updates.

These new means of communication, combined with changes in the workplace mind set, are at the heart of increased productivity in smart organizations. Employees who follow guidelines for leading and participating in online meetings and conference calls help their companies maintain a valuable competitive advantage.

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