

### 3.3.9: Group Audio Calls

#### Learning Objectives

- Identify strategies to increase comprehension and reduce misunderstanding in group telephone / VOIP communications

Group audio calls, or conference calls, are like one-on-one calls on steroids. All the rules apply, and they are even more important. Again, because phone calls—even group calls—feel so familiar, you might be inclined to skip some of the five steps of a phone call. However, doing this decreases the effectiveness of the call and can lead to people feeling frustrated or unheard.

#### Leading a Call

To start with, be sure you invite the right people to participate. The more people who are on a call, the more chaotic it can become. Make sure you invite only those who are crucial to the conversation, rather than simply inviting anyone who might be interested. Remember, you can always send a call summary afterward via email to those who are not essential to the call. Some apps also allow you to record calls and share them later.

#### REMEMBER

If you will be recording a call, everyone participating should be aware of the recording in advance. In some states, it's illegal to record calls without permission from the other participants.

As possible, schedule the call in advance and give participants the necessary information about the technology, including call-in numbers or applications you will be using. You should at least have a basic agenda. Even if it's a recurring weekly call, make sure you've thought about how time will be spent and what the priorities are for this week. Go through all of the five stages of a call. Setting next steps is especially important in a group setting so people feel their time has been well spent and know what's expected of them going forward.

In addition, there are some best practices that make conference calls easier for everyone to follow:

- Energy—or the lack of it—can be a big problem for audio-only conversations. Since you can't see the responses or sense the energy from other participants, you may feel like you're speaking into a void, especially if you have a large chunk of information to present. Believe it or not, your physicality—even when you're alone in your office—can help a lot with how energetic and engaged you feel and sound.
  - If you have a headset that allows you to leave your chair, stand up or even walk around while you speak. If you pretend you're presenting in person, the energy of that type of presentation will emerge.
  - If you can't leave your chair, sit up straight and act as though your colleagues are really there in front of you.
- As was mentioned in the section on the Five Stages of a Call, let people know how the baton will be passed from one speaker to the next. If there are specific people who will be leading parts of the conversation, make that clear.
  - If you have fewer than five people and/or an established team, conversation should flow pretty naturally without you needing to formalize a process.
  - If you have five or more people, or if you're afraid of the call descending into chaos, specify upfront that you will take Q & A at the end of the call or at the end of each of the sections or speakers. If you choose this last option, you or the most recent speaker should be the one to ask, "Is this clear? Are there any questions specific to what Ellie said?"
- Do time checks. Since people won't be able to read each other's cues, those who are speaking won't be able to see the urgency in the faces of those who want to join the discussion. By mentioning how much time is left in the call, you are gently reminding people not to monologue or take over the conversation. Generally, checking in at the halfway point, with fifteen minutes left, and then with five minutes left is a good plan. You can say something like, "I want to do a quick time check. We have fifteen minutes left and two agenda items yet to discuss."

Technology actually lets you mitigate some of the challenges presented by having a whole bunch of people on one phone call.

- As long as it fits with the purpose and objectives of your call, you can ask people who are not actively taking part in the conversation to mute their lines. Office phones and smart phones have mute buttons that are pretty easy to find, as do most

VOIP apps that you would use on your laptop. If several lines are muted, the amount of static and extraneous noise on the call is reduced significantly.

- Ask people to mute the other alerts on their computers or smartphones. You can do this in your pre-call email. This way, you won't hear a duck quack or a submarine ping sound every time someone on the call gets a text or an email.

## Participating in a Call

So far, we've mostly talked about conference calls assuming that you are the leader or planner. But there are ways to be a good participant on calls that other people are leading.

- Call in a couple of minutes early so that people are not waiting on you. With most third-party call-in apps, you will get hold music or silence. You can keep doing your work while you're waiting, but you'll be ready to go as soon as the host dials in.
- Plan to stay in one place just as you would for an in-person meeting. Sometimes, you have to get ready to leave or the call starts while you're on your way back from another meeting, but to the extent that you can, stay put.
- Mute your line if . . .
  - You don't expect to be doing much talking.
  - You are in a noisy place like a coffee shop or airport lounge.
  - You have to eat during the call. Chewing sounds drowning out the speaker is really pretty tacky.
  - You have a cold or allergies that make your bodily functions especially audible.
- Let the host or planner know in advance if you will need to join the call late or leave it early. That way, when people hear the notification sound, they won't wonder who's hung up and waste time asking.

Resist the temptation to check emails or surf online. If it's worth your time to be present at this meeting, you should really be present in body and mind. If you find it difficult to stay focused, take notes. Even if you don't need them later, taking notes with pen and paper will help you stay focused on the call.

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