

More effective conference calls

Imagine yourself participating on a conference call with colleagues in New York, Bangalore, and Prague. Prague asks a question. New York launches into an answer that uncoils in looping sentences. Your eyes slowly close as you attempt to focus on the unfurling words. Without non-verbal feedback, New York pours out unhelpful information. Instead of imagining it, many of us are living this scenario daily. As standard work practices change from face-to-face meetings to teleconferencing, we can use Precision Q+A to overcome some of the central challenges to effective conference calls.

Business travel is a major expense and in lean times travel is often frozen. For many of us, more of our work takes place via conference calls than it does through face-to-face interactions. We are adapting to this relatively new world of conference call conversations in many ways. Precision Q+A can be extremely helpful on conference calls because it keeps the conversation both concise and targeted. On the other hand, conference calls may present awkward moments since we cannot rely on the non-verbal cues important in smoothing out concise communication. With a little practice, however, we can use Precision Q+A to remedy some typical challenges to effective conference calls.

REMEDIES FOR THE LACK OF NON-VERBAL CUES

In face-to-face communication, the non-verbal channels carry a large amount of information. We don't realize how much we rely on puzzled looks or understanding nods to direct our conversations. When we don't receive visual feedback about overload, for instance, we don't realize that the questioner's eyes are glazing over and we should stop talking. Similarly, when we don't see brows furrowed in concentration, we don't know that we need to slow down and allow time to think.

Conference call interactions exaggerate the need to pay attention to tone and pace in lieu of visual feedback:

- Notice that you cannot see whether someone is smiling or frowning. Use verbal descriptions as preambles to questions. For instance: "I'm smiling as I ask this...", or "If you could see me, you'd see a look of curiosity on my face, so I need to ask..."
- Use Go/NoGo questions about the pace of the conversation to keep participation high. For instance, "Did everyone have a chance to add important information?" or "Have we spent enough time on this topic to cover everyone's concerns?"
- When answering questions via conference calls, it can feel as if we are talking into a void. Most people's response to this feeling is to talk more. Catch that impulse! Don't lecture; don't repeat yourself. Give the concise answer and, if you can't interpret the situation, offer to add more detail.

- Slow down the pace deliberately through pauses. Give up assumptions about silences as negative. Use phrases that make the pauses understandable and desirable, such as: "Take a few moments to think about this question...", or "Let me pause for a moment to construct my answer..."

REMEDIES FOR THE LACK OF A PHYSICAL "FRONT OF THE ROOM"

When we attend a meeting in a physical room, the front of the room creates a visual field that directs attention. We automatically focus on the presenter at the front of the room. People know that questions are directed to the presenter. On a conference call, the lack of a "front of the room" means that we often can't hear questions, don't know who should answer, or don't ask because of outside distractions. The lack of the physical front of the room exacerbates problems of sustaining and maintaining focus on the purpose of the meeting.

Precision Q+A offers a suite of Go/NoGo questions that are tremendously helpful in addressing problems of purpose, direction, and alignment in meetings:

- Meeting basics are always necessary, but are crucial for conference call interactions. Use Go/NoGo questions to make the agenda, timeframe, and participation expectations clear to all who are on the phone.
- Participation is difficult on multi-party calls, because questions and answers tend to become inaudible. Don't answer a question you did not hear clearly! Ask for repetition.
- Do not multi-task on conference calls where you are expected to participate. Multi-tasking decreases our capacity to listen. Be 100% present to hear the interactions.
- Help facilitate the call, whether or not it is your official role, by using Go/NoGo questions like the following: "Is everyone in agreement?" "Several people were speaking at once; who else has something to add?" "Does anyone from the Asia/Pacific region have something to offer before we move on?"

This Month's Practice

Putting Precision Q+A to use on conference calls takes practice. This month's strategies focus on developing verbal substitutes for the front of the room and for the non-verbal cues we rely upon in face-to-face meetings. Use the strategies below with diligence, and your conference calls will become more efficient and effective.

PRACTICE 1

SUBSTITUTES FOR FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

This month, give special attention to the facial expressions you make on conference calls. Set up a small mirror next to your telephone. When you want to ask a question, construct a preamble that captures your facial expression in words. Give others tips about what is happening—tips listeners would pick up if they were watching your face. For example, you might say: "You may hear the frown in my voice as I ask this, but..."

PRACTICE 2

SUBSTITUTES FOR THE PHYSICAL FRONT OF THE ROOM

For the next month, give particular attention to the need for substitutes to the physical room on conference calls. When people are talking over one another, ask for one and then another to speak. Think of them as hands raised in the physical room—don't allow anyone to be left with their 'hand up' because of verbal crowding. Use Go/NoGo questions to prompt participation and to control focus. Set a goal of asking at least three different precise Go/NoGo questions per conference call.

PRACTICE 3

LIMIT MULTI-TASKING

Choose three to five important upcoming conference calls, and make a commitment to being 100% focused on the content of the call. Don't answer email or look at the computer while listening. Turn off instant messaging, text, and other potential interruptions. After each of the calls, evaluate how limiting multi-tasking affected your ability to listen, to participate in the meeting, and to influence the outcome of the conference call.

We're here to help.
If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at LinkedIn.