Making the Most of Conference Calls

GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANTS

Most important—think of a conference call as a meeting that just happens to be occurring over the phone, NOT as a phone call that just happens to be a meeting.


CONFERENCE CALL TIPS

The steps you take to prepare for a telephone conference call are an important component of the success of this alternative meeting format. The idea of preparing for a meeting is certainly not new to you—but some of the elements of a conference call may be new. Remember that this is your opportunity to make your voice heard! The following guidelines can help you be prepared to take an active role in this meeting format.

Before the Conference Call

• Prior to the scheduled call, review the discussion points on the agenda and other written materials sent to you. It may be helpful to make notes for yourself about particular questions or comments relevant to the points outlined. Have your notes available during the call so you can help the group stay on task.

• Plan ahead to avoid outside interruptions while you are on the telephone. Let co-workers know you will be participating in the call and that you will be unavailable during this time. Put an “On Conference Call” note on your door that lists the time you will be finished—and shut your door, if possible. Turn off cell phones, radios, and other distractions as well. If you are still interrupted during the call, use the “mute” option on your phone so you can continue listening to the conversation and the group will not be interrupted by activity in your office.

• It is important to use good phone equipment for the call to avoid shoulder/neck strain and to minimize background noise. If you are in a very quiet work place, you may prefer using a speaker phone option to free your hands and allow you to change positions during the call. If you anticipate background noise, it is best to use a headset adapter and avoid the speaker phone option because it will pick up distracting noises.

During the Conference Call

• Each time you speak, identify yourself first (for example, “This is Sandra. I have some information about . . . ”)

• When you have something to add to the ongoing discussion, make certain that the previous speaker has finished talking before you begin—it is very difficult to make sense of overlapping conversations during a group telephone call. When participants follow this “courtesy” guideline, there will be periodic pauses in the conversation that will give you time to join in and offer your insights.

• Occasionally, the facilitator may call on you or other members of the group specifically to invite comment. This is done to identify a participant who may have expertise or a unique perspective on
the topic or to make sure each member has the opportunity to contribute. When you are called upon, you have the option of offering your questions or comments or “passing”.

- When you have a question or need clarification of something that was said, direct your comments to the individual directly by using his or her name.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Conference call discussions can be very productive, but they are of short duration and demand a high level of attention and concentration. For this reason, it is especially important to stay on task and to provide concise comments during the call. It can also be helpful to time yourself as you speak; one to two minutes is a good range for your comments followed by time for others to comment or ask questions for clarification. Continuously reflect on your participation during the conference call by asking yourself these questions:
  - Are my comments relevant to identified discussion points?
  - Am I providing clear information and key points without monopolizing the conversation?
  - Have I listened carefully to the contributions of others to effectively build on the flow of the conversation and to avoid repeating information that has been provided?
- If you have a lot of information to share about a particular issue, offer to e-mail that information to the facilitator to send to participants or consider making a note to that effect on the evaluation you may receive after the call.

Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.

~ Henry Ford