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Snippet #161 Conference Call Rules

Most people have a love/hate relationship with conference calls, and there's a good reason for that. We love the convenience, but we hate the unproductivity. Here are a few things that might help make the next conference call a better experience for everyone.

- 1. *Make the conference call the top priority.***
It's frustrating to take time to be on a call and know that others aren't giving the same attention. We've even been on calls when someone came into one of the participant's offices and carried on a conversation that drowned out the conference call!
- 2. *Eliminate background noises.***
Speaking of drowning out conference calls, be sensitive to what your barking dog or whining child or television program sounds like to someone listening over a cheap conference call service or speakerphone when certain sounds are accented. Make sure everyone knows how to mute their phones - just about every phone or conference call system has some type of mute function.
- 3. *Use reliable equipment and services.***
Speaking of cheap services and equipment, if you are going to try to make important decisions, make sure the sound quality is up to the task. Good speakerphone equipment isn't nearly as expensive as two dozen plane tickets. The better the equipment, the less likely there will be extraneous line noises, and less ambient noise will be carried over the line.
- 5. *Don't place equipment where it picks up ambient noise.***
Speaking of ambient noise, two sounds that are ever-present on conference calls and drive people on the phone crazy are keyboard and paper shuffling noises. The former is very distracting to someone speaking; it makes them paranoid about what is being written down. The latter can be worse because it has no discernable pattern – it just drowns out everything so no one else can hear. These sounds are seldom noticed by those in the room where the noise is generated.
- 6. *Make sure you know who's on the phone.***
Speaking of those in the room, always know who is on the call. Make sure you are using some type of software interface that gives you the names and numbers of who is on the line. See if you can find a computer interface that keeps a log of everyone who has joined, and gives an audible tone when people enter or leave. Make sure you can restrict the call to those who belong there.
- 7. *Use roll call votes.***
Speaking of the people who belong there, start the call with a roll call. When you need to take votes, use a roll call as well. That way you'll know that people are participating all the way to the end of the call.
- 8. *NEVER extend the general call for private purposes.***
Speaking of the end of a call, don't ask anyone to "stay on for a few extra minutes." Break the call and call them back. You don't know who is listening in, who might repeat (or transcribe) the conversation, or what mischief might result from this one bit of carelessness.
- 9. *Keep the agenda tight and focused.***
Speaking of a "few extra minutes," don't try to do too much on each call, and don't schedule calls you don't need. It's easier to cancel a call than to schedule one so, if you set a schedule of calls for the year, remember that you can cancel one if you don't really need it. And every once in a while, get together in person and put the phones away.