EFFECTIVE TELEPHONE CONFERENCES

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How many times have you participated in a telephone conference call which was unproductive at best, and left you wishing you had arranged for a face-to-face meeting instead? It happens more often than you'd think. And the more people who participate in the call, the less productive it can become. Here are some simple strategies to improve the effectiveness of your future telephone conferences.

PLAN AHEAD. Before your call begins, distribute an agenda to all the call participants. If appropriate, allow sufficient time for them to provide feedback on the agenda items, and issue a revised agenda. Make sure that you distribute any written materials to be discussed early enough for all the participants to have a chance to review them. If they have to review the documents during the call they will be distracted and not as productive.

STARTING PROTOCOL. There are two choices for how the call will be made. Either using a conference bridge, commonly referred to as a conference calling service, or by utilizing the capabilities of the phone system of one of the participants. Nowadays the cost of using an outside conference service has fallen dramatically, and the sound quality of the bridge is normally higher than that of most telephone systems. The more participants on a private telephone system, particularly when they are geographically wide-spread, the harder it will be for the participants to hear one another. This is rarely a problem when using a conference bridge. For that reason, I normally recommend a conference calling service when more than two or three locations will participate in the call. Regardless of which method is used, every call should have one person serve as the moderator.

Call in or initiate the call on time. Late arrivals are disruptive. If you are initiating the call on your system, do not join in a new line until you've confirmed you have the actual participant, and not his/her voicemail. Identify yourself when calling in, unless the conference has already begun. Then wait for a pause in conversation, or for the moderator to ask who has joined the call. Most conference bridges provide a tone alarm when a new caller enters the conference, so an experienced moderator will take the first opportunity to ask who has joined. It is also a good idea for the moderator to take roll at the beginning.

If you must leave the call early, announce this at the very beginning of the call.

DURING THE CALL. Always introduce yourself by name before speaking. Not everyone will remember whose voice is whose. ("This is Ellen. I think it would be a good idea to . . .") If you are asking someone a question, state that person's name at the beginning of the question so the participants know who the question is for, and to ensure you have that participant's attention. ("Don, this is Ellen. Have we ever considered . . .?")

If you are leaving the call momentarily, use your mute button (not hold), and return as soon as possible. If you are leaving the call for a longer period of time, let others know when you leave and when you return, and use your mute button while away.

Some people believe that if you've announced at the very beginning that you must leave the call early, you should just hang up without interrupting the conversation when it's time to leave. My experience is that this is still a disruption, as the tone of the dropped call causes everyone to pause and figure out what happened. Plus if a participant has been waiting for an opportunity to ask you a question, they will not have the ability to do so. Instead, I recommend you wait for a break in the conversation, announce you're departing, and provide participants an opportunity to ask you any last questions or make any last comments for your benefit. ("This is Ellen.   Sorry I have to leave now. Any last second comments or questions before I go? Don will bring me up to speed on anything important I miss during the balance of the call at a later time.") Obviously if you wait for the last second you have to leave this will not be possible, so look for the opportunity to announce your early departure a good five minutes or more before you really have to leave.

It's easy to become distracted on your end of the call. After all, no one knows if you're playing free cell, opening mail, reading email, and so forth. Multi-tasking has become a way of life, and it's easy to lose focus. Fight the inclination, as the call is a one-dimensional activity which requires a higher degree of concentration to be successful.

As with email, sometimes the lack of visual cues such as facial expression and physical posture can lead to misunderstandings, or just a lack of effective communication. It's important to compensate with words when necessary. ("This is Ellen. I can't see you, and so I don't know how you're reacting to what I've proposed. What did you think of the idea?")

TECHNOLOGY CONSIDERATIONS. Cell phones and portable phones are ok in a pinch when there is no other way to participate in a call. But use land lines whenever possible for the best sound quality. Typically, cell and portable phones have a higher level of ambient background noise which will be evident to all participants. Computer-based internet conference calls (voice over IP or VOIP) get mixed reviews. Some feel the quality is acceptable. Others complain that they sound like they're holding the call in a submarine. I think a lot depends on the quality of your internet line, e.g. whether fractional T-1 or DSL, as well as other factors such as the quality of your microphone and headset, and even your computer's sound card.

I always get a good laugh when someone temporarily leaves a conference call in progress and puts the call on hold on their phone, forgetting their telephone system plays

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music on hold. Not only does this make it impossible for the other participants to continue the call, but after a typically brief period of time the participant's hold "time out" feature will automatically transfer the call to the operator. This is a safety feature built into modern phone systems. It ensures you don't put a call on hold, forget about it, and leave them hanging on there after you've left your office, turned out the lights, and gone home. (That actually happened to me once, a few decades ago, before the hold time out feature was built in.) Trust me when I tell you that it is a major disruption when someone's operator all of a sudden "answers" a conference call in progress. So, if you must leave the call for ANY length of time, always use your mute button. Mute, by the way, does not have a time out safety feature.

It is also good practice to keep your mute button engaged during the call, and turn it off only when you wish to speak. That will ensure that any ambient noise from your location, such as people talking or phones ringing in the background, do not make their way into the conference call. If your phone allows barge-in or hands free call announcement, you should also put your phone on Do Not Disturb before participating, to ensure these interruptions do not make their way into the conference call. If you have call waiting, remember to begin dialing into the call with *70, which turns off the call waiting feature for the length of just that one call. And finally, if you have other lines in your office which can ring when you are on the phone, you should consider turning off the ringer temporarily, or again, putting those lines on Do Not Disturb. That can and should include turning off pagers and cell phones during the call.

Nowadays, business is often conducted on a global basis. And the business of law is no exception. We can cost-effectively work with attorneys and clients on other continents or other cities just as easily as if they were down the street. The telephone is still an essential tool in this process. With a few simple adjustments in how we conduct the call, we can improve its efficiency significantly.

A version of this article originally appeared in the Winter 2005 edition of the Pennsylvania Bar Association Solo and Small Firm Section Newsletter

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