How Do You Lead a Conference Call the Right Way?

The Problem:
It seems that these days conference calls are more prevalent than face to face meetings. Unfortunately, the reality is that leading these calls effectively can prove to be a challenge. Without face to face contact, it’s difficult to effectively manage the conversation, navigate complex issues, or deal with difficult personalities in the group. The good news is that there are specific techniques that you can use to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your conference calls.

Consider these suggestions....

- Establish a ground rule that everyone should be dialed in at least 5 minutes prior to the start time. This practice helps avoid the phenomenon of latecomers chiming in sporadically during the first five minutes of the call. If participants get in the habit of dialing in a few minutes before the start time, the leader can actually start the call on time! (With my last group we actually established a slight punishment for anyone calling in late. If you hadn’t called in before “roll call”, you had to sing a stanza of “God Bless America” on the call. The technique worked like a charm with my tight knit group. I was actually late to a call once and had to sing. I was never late again 😊)
- Don’t backtrack for latecomers. Get participants used to the fact that if they call in late, they will have to catch up after the call. When you constantly review previous discussion for latecomers, it caters to that behavior and irritates the rest of the team. Try to build a norm of punctuality for your calls.
- List all invited participants on a sheet of paper and use that to “call roll” at the beginning of the call (placing a check mark by all attendees). Once the call has started, place a dot by each speaker’s name when they make a comment. Periodically, glance down at your list to see which names have no dots by them and sporadically pose questions to those individuals or ask them to comment.
- Establish a ground rule that anyone on the call should hit the # sign whenever they think the discussion has veered off topic or has gone on too long. This works WONDERFULLY because no one knows who hit the # sign but it serves as a great way to reign in the conversation and avoid rambling discussion.
- Take 5 minutes at the end of the call to debrief and ask participants to share some feedback on what worked well during the call and what could be improved in the future. This is a great way to highlight issues that might be holding the team back or even bring to light very minor points of concern (e.g. call times are too early for those on the West coast, spent too much time on a particular issue, etc.)
- Try to limit calls to one hour or definitely take a break after an hour if the call must be longer.
- Structure the call so that you’re engaging as many people as possible throughout the call. (This discourages multitasking.) Do this by sporadically calling on participants or conducting quick round robins where you ask each person to make a brief comment.
- If someone is only needed for a portion of the call, structure their issue near the beginning or end of the call and allow them to just call in for that portion.
- Consider using virtual meeting technologies that support polling, file sharing, instant chatting, etc. to increase participant engagement levels.

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