

Anyone who has sat in enough teleconferences has experienced a special kind of meeting hell. The discussion drifts and sags until, to try to get things back on track, the facilitator says, "John, what do you think about the proposed initiative?" Then, after an awkwardly long pause, John responds with: "Oh, sorry, what was the question again?"

Teleconferences can be a huge waste of time. But, when conducted properly, they can be both efficient and effective, even more so than face-to-face meetings. That's right: virtual meetings can be superior to traditional physical ones. The obvious advantage of teleconferences is that they are a quick, easy, and relatively cheap means of getting people together, but there are also other unique benefits that aren't so widely known, including the following:

- Teleconferences easily lend themselves to being recorded. Many applications like WebEx have a "record" function that will capture not just the conversation but also documents and other materials being presented. So when people miss an important meeting, they can easily catch up by playing the recording. Moreover, some advanced tools enable people to navigate through the recording so that, if they're interested in just a particular section — for example, a discussion

about the annual budgeting process — they can skip the rest of the meeting and replay just that portion.

- People can be patched in instantaneously to answer a question or offer their expertise on a particular topic. They don't have to waste their time sitting through the entire meeting; they can participate exactly when they're needed no matter where they're located. All this can be done electronically at the blink of an eye, which sure beats the old way of running down the hall to find someone while everyone else sits and waits.

- Participants can easily break off into smaller groups for a quick discussion about a particular topic. This can also be done in the blink of an eye, thanks to the magic of digital communications. No more wasting time as people wander off looking for another location to chat and then slowly reconvene in the main meeting room.

But make no mistake: virtual meetings are tricky to conduct. The primary challenge is keeping everyone engaged. Cisco, which sells networking and other equipment that enable virtual communications, has studied that issue extensively. My team at Ferrazzi Greenlight helped them come up with the following guidelines:

Use video: This is perhaps the most important rule. Not only does the use of video enable people to read each other's reactions and moods, it also encourages them to pay attention and resist doing their e-mail or otherwise multitasking. Of course, many people will resist video and say, "We've always done our meetings by phone and it's worked before. Why change?" But now that the cost of videoconferencing is minimal thanks to technologies like Skype, there's no excuse. Video will result in better teleconferences, period.

Do a "Take 5": For the first five minutes of a virtual meeting, everyone should take turns and talk a little about what's going on in their lives, either personally or professionally. This will help "break the ice" and set the right mood for people to listen and connect with one another.

Assign different tasks: To help keep people engaged, different individuals could be assigned various tasks, such as white board manager, minutes recorder, Q&A manager, and so on. These functions could be rotated for every meeting.

Forbid the use of the "mute" function: A surefire way to kill the mood of any virtual meeting is with the dead silence that follows a joke because people have their audio on mute. Perhaps more important, mute discourages spontaneous discussion. Of course, if someone is in a noisy environment like an airport terminal, the mute function can help prevent disruptions to the meeting, but those instances should be more the exception than the rule.

Penalize multitaskers: Many managers tolerate people who multitask during meetings. After all, aren't those individuals making the most effective use of their time? But the simple truth is that nothing drains the energy from a meeting like multitasking. To discourage it, managers should implement a penalty for offenders, but in doing so they should remember that a touch of humor can go a long way in setting the right mood. At one company, a spinning wheel determines a person's punishment, with the needle ending up on anything from small monetary fines to a chore like cleaning the office coffee pot for a week.

As companies become increasingly global and workers telecommute more and more, teleconferences have become a daily fact of corporate life. Given that, it's mind-boggling that many organizations do such a poor job of conducting virtual meetings. Just a handful of simple guidelines can change them from awkward and dull to effective and energizing.

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