

microskills™

**The microskills™ Guide to**

# **TELECONFERENCING**

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## The microskills™ Guide to: TELECONFERENCING

The best teleconferences combine your top meetings skills with your most effective telephone skills. This guide highlights the main points that will contribute to your success.

The most common forms of teleconference that you are involved in are:

**Teleconference service** when you rent a dedicated service from a Telecoms provider on a pay per call basis. Although the best system, it can take a bit of planning and time to set it all up.

**Speaker phone** when several people, at the same place, gather round the same 'phone to talk with someone who is at another location. Some systems only pick up the nearest or loudest sounds so there needs to be a discipline to ensure that people speaking don't get 'clipped' off by the next speaker.

**Individual telephone** when everyone speaks on their own 'phones using the conference feature on the telephone system. Unfortunately, most systems don't add amplification to conference calls, so that after a few people join it can become quite difficult to hear all that is being said.

**Data as well** all of these can be supported by sending simultaneous data or graphics by e-mail or fax.

**when to teleconference  
(and when not to!)**

Teleconferencing will never replace a good old face to face meeting.

The **main reasons** for teleconferencing are:

- to save costs of time, travel and accommodation
- to replace a repetitive call when you might have to discuss the same issues with several different people
- to enable people to hear each others' questions or comments
- to replace regular or routine meetings
- to distribute information fast when time is of the essence
- to get information fast
- to reduce time spent travelling and so improve people's quality of life
- to keep people in touch, if they are away a lot
- to maintain contact among colleagues who know each other well.

Teleconferencing is **not so good:**

- for discussing sensitive or delicate issues
- for detailed negotiations
- for developing team spirit
- for replacing all face to face meetings
- when people don't know each other well
- when you need to see people's reactions.

## in advance

As with most things, **preparation** is all important.

Ensure there is a **facilitator** or leader who will co-ordinate the preparation and the running of the teleconference. If it is to be you and you have never taken part in a teleconference before, invite yourself along to somebody else's so that you can see what is involved.

**Book the equipment** and times and advise all participants.

Send out an **agenda** of what is to be discussed and what is expected of the participants.

Distribute any **relevant materials** (charts, reports, spreadsheets) in advance to everybody who is to be connected.

Encourage people to prepare their **detailed questions and comments**.

If people do not know each other, circulate their **photographs**. It is easier to 'put a face to the name' if there is a photo.

Send out some brief **biographical details** of the participants, indicating what they have to offer and why they have been invited to attend.

**Get there early** to set up the logistics and to ensure that everything is in perfect working order.

Make sure everyone will have **paper and pens**.

## at the beginning

The teleconference will run better if all the participants **warm up**. Ask people to arrive a few minutes early so that they can settle themselves down and have some informal chat.

**Shut the door** of the room before you start.

Ensure there will be **no interruptions**.

The **tone of voice** of the facilitator at the very beginning will set the atmosphere for the whole teleconference. This is something that the facilitator might want to practise and rehearse.

Describe the **seating arrangements** so that people at other locations have some idea of what it looks like at your end. Spread out the photos in the seating positions.

Ask everyone to **introduce** themselves briefly.

Establish some **ground rules** for how you are going to operate. These might include:

- only one person speaking at a time
- identifying yourself before you contribute
- specifying any particular person who might be addressed
- no-one dominating the discussion.

The facilitator should suggest a **modus operandi**, how each item on the agenda is to be tackled, whether there will be a brief presentation first and then questions or whatever method seems most appropriate.

Summarise the **purpose** of the meeting and remind people of the agenda. If no agenda has previously been circulated, put one together quickly!

Check that everyone has received any **background information** that has already been sent.

**Switch on computers** and inform all parties who has access to what.

## during the teleconference

Try to **stick to the ground rules**. The facilitator might need to reinforce some of the disciplines of teleconferencing occasionally.

**Describe any changes that are taking place**, particularly if anyone joins or leaves the group.

**Explain any noises** or movements that happen during the teleconference.

**Use visuals**, as many as you can, through e-mail, fax, internet or intranet. The more that can be seen, the easier it is for everyone to have the same understanding of what is meant. If you would normally use a whiteboard during a face to face meeting, send the picture or sketch electronically.

The facilitator will need to **maintain the momentum** of the teleconference to avoid any embarrassing silences. If there are silences, the facilitator should be the first to fill them. A recap of progress so far might be appropriate.

The facilitator should **bring in people by name**. You will know why they are there and what they have to contribute.

Occasionally **ask the other participants for content feedback** on the topic being discussed.

Also **ask for process feedback** on how the teleconference is proceeding. As you can't see their facial expressions, listen carefully to their tones of voice, the music behind the words. If you have any doubts, ask for more reactions. "What do you think?" and "How do you feel about that?" are pretty good questions to start with.

**Give feedback** yourself on the content and also on the process and what might help the teleconference to run more easily.

Every ten minutes or so, **have some sort of change** or break - a new topic or a feedback review.

Ensure someone's **taking notes** or minutes of what's been discussed and agreed.

Do a **final recap** of who will do what and by when. Finish the teleconference with a short period of thanks and **team congratulations**. This will smooth the way for the next time.

## a few tips

Try to keep each teleconference down to an **absolute maximum of an hour**. It is very difficult to hold concentration beyond that - better to have two effective half hours.

For longer teleconferences, **headsets** with 'phones and a mouthpiece can take the strain off holding a handpiece. It also allows both hands to be free for taking notes or for operating a fax or keyboard.

The facilitator should **summarise each person's contribution** before the next major point is made.

**Avoid interrupting** as it might upset the telephone system and 'clip' the original speaker's point. Take notes and then contribute.

### **Avoid any loud noises!**

Feel free to **support ideas** and suggestions made by someone at the other location. It can be quite disconcerting to have your brainwave greeted by silence.

If there is the slightest possibility of a misunderstanding **ask for clarification** or **summarise** your interpretation.

Check any chance of **cultural differences in meaning**. Winston Churchill once described Britain and America as two countries separated by a common language.

**Have water available** for participants. Talking can be thirsty work. Best not have tea or coffee as it can be distracting serving it.

**Don't be too serious**. The best teleconferences are enjoyable as well as purposeful.

**after the teleconference**

**Evaluate** what went well, what was learned about teleconferencing and what could be improved next time.

**Calculate** how much each participant has saved in time and money.

**Shout** about your successes and encourage more people to teleconference.