

Global conference calls: a great opportunity or a necessary evil?

Top tips on how to make the most of
multi-cultural conference calls

We've all as employees – at one time or another – had to take part in a conference call. Which has subsequently been hampered by bad connections, background noise, cultural clashes and colleagues with different accents or varying levels of English. Not to mention the people who talk too much, too little, or never say a word!

Following a global call you may well end up thinking: “Well that went as well as can be expected.” However, is that really good enough for something so time-consuming? Especially when you take into consideration, not just the time spent on the call, but also preparing for it?

As someone who coaches employees on coping with cultural differences, I'm often asked how to make global conference calls more productive. So I've developed some top tips to not only enable businesses to see conference calls as an opportunity to build global leadership skills, but to also deliver them successfully.

The main thing to remember is that there are two main aspects of global conference calls. These often overlap but are both critical to the time being spent productively.

On the surface level, there are all the obvious complications such as people talking all at once and misunderstanding each other.

But on a deeper level, there are underlying reasons for misunderstandings – including the cultural differences in the way we listen, interact and communicate. Failing to understand or accommodate these differences can make a call very difficult indeed.

Just imagine a call between David and his team in the U.K., Masako and her team in Japan and Gianni in Italy.

Masako is finding it tough to keep up with the fast-paced English speakers, who all feel under pressure to contribute to the call (even, perhaps, when they don't have something important to add). Meanwhile Masako's colleagues are waiting for their turn to speak – cultural conditioning prevents them from interrupting – but it never arrives. Back in the U.K., David's team are wondering why Masako's team don't say anything. Do they even have an opinion?

Gianni, meanwhile, is talking lots – but isn't being understood. And, weighed down by British politeness and Japanese cultural reservation, nobody on the call is going to say so.

It's a mess, right? And research shows, too, that just having global exposure is not enough to increase your global skills.

So, here is a radical solution: look at a global conference call as an opportunity to build your global leadership skills.

Next time you have a call, choose a specific skill from one of the two main aspects, and create one action around it that you will carry out.



Here are a few suggestions:

1. Surface level: Mechanics and language

Turn taking and interrupting

If you are leading the call then perhaps set some rules for turn taking. Make a rule for yourself not to interrupt

Clarifying and confirming

Make a point of asking if you have heard correctly; urge people to repeat complicated ideas and phrases

Understanding

Did you understand everything that was said? If not, do something about it. Acknowledge others so they know they have been understood and don't repeat themselves

2. Deeper level: Culture

Use of humor

Find out how to use humor to bring people together. But be careful, British irony, word play and poking fun can be endearing, but can also be hard to understand and may even cause offense

Building relationships

Use the call to find out more about your colleagues and build relationships. Reveal something about yourself and ask people to introduce themselves

Building credibility across cultures

Share joint achievements and discuss how the previous call led to even small successes and improvements

Increasing your own cultural awareness

Ask how different cultures work and take learnings into the next call

To deliver these improvements successfully, here are some final tips:

1. Keep action steps small and specific.
2. Tell someone on the call ahead of time what you plan to do.
3. Debrief with someone or write down a few key thoughts afterwards.
4. Celebrate your successes – even if you just make it happen once on the call.
5. Succeeding is all about building momentum, so make sure you plan your next step!

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