

CREATING EFFECTIVE CONFERENCE CALLS

When you are face-to-face with someone, your *communications impact* is based primarily on visual, secondly vocal and lastly content ... even those you know well. Content becomes more important for longer communication, but is seldom reaches half of the overall impact.

No wonder remote communications is so difficult to do well. Phone conversations immediately eliminate the visual and email eliminates both the visual and vocal elements of communications.

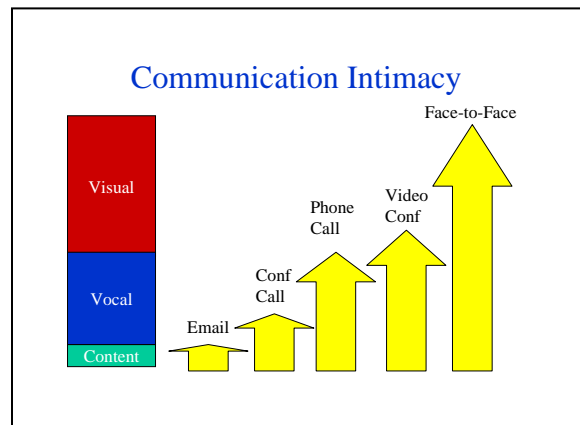
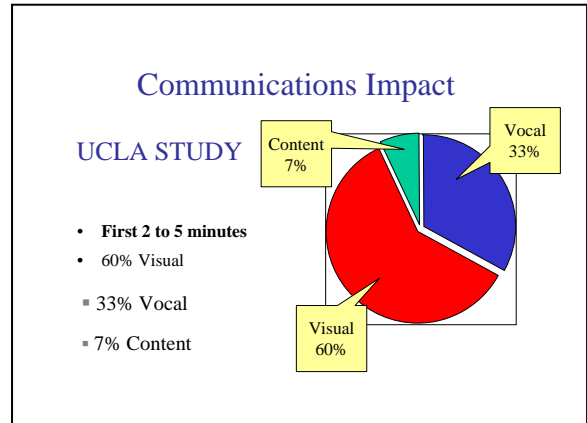
Conference calls consume many people's business lives and most people are frustrated with how they function. We will look at conference calls in the overall remote communications.

The chart on *communications intimacy* shows the comparison of different communications approaches. Email is all content. There is some opportunity for an exchange of meaning with questions and clarifications, but it is very limited.

Voice creates a huge impact. With phone conversations, vocal tone is 84% initially and content is 16%. Compared to email, a conference call adds some vocal tone elements of the speaker. It does not create a lot of intimacy from the listeners' perspective unless the group is small and participants have a chance to actively partake in the conversation.

One-on-one calls increase communication intimacy. Video conferencing adds some visual communication intimacy. The face-to-face in small groups or one-on-one provides the opportunity for the highest communication intimacy and impact.

When we look at the trade-offs of audio and written communications, there are some clear advantages to both depending on the purpose and the balance.



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Audio	Written
Easier on sender Slower to create Difficult to remember Faster answers to questions Vocal tone is very important Needs simple, declarative sentences Not always clear who is talking Able to create more energy and excitement with vocal tone.	Harder on receiver Faster to consume File copy for reference Slow answers Vocal tone not a factor Can have more complex sentences and able to re-read if not clear. Clear about the source More challenging to create excitement with content.

Conference calls have a number of advantages, but most people dread many of the conference calls in which they participate. What if your conference call numbers were cut in half, calls you were on were twice as effective and lasted half as long. That would be a 75% reduction in time and better results.

Conference calls are cost effective, they are efficient and they are sometimes the only way that people can possibly communicate. With up to four people on the call, you can have a conversation. With five or more participants, those that run the conference calls or provide content to the calls need to view them like an important presentation where there is preparation, a clear and concise message and practiced delivery of the message.

If the call is not engaging and significant, people are easily distracted by checking their email or doing other work. I can be painful as a participant. We hear of groups from 10 to 50 people where most participants consider the 90 minute conference call a total waste of time, but participation is expected. How much of a waste of time is that approach?

Part of the problem is that people typically don't use the conference call format for what it does best – allowing multiple people to get ideas or input from each other and synergistically grow the approaches they have and give them insights on what they may be missing. Most people have never received any training on how to best maximize the impact of conference call technology. We have so many electronic communication options to help us be more effective, yet most people have no idea how to use them effectively.

Here are some tips on the strategic management of conference calls:

- ❑ **Is a conference call the best way?**
Too many times a conference call is setup when it is not the right approach. Should someone just make a decision and move on? Can the

information be communicated another way? Does everyone need to participate in the entire conference call? Is this a routine meeting that has a life of its own? Can the call be done in half the time?

- ❑ **Have a clear structure**
Begin the conference call with a clear agenda relevant to the participants. Make it obvious as you are making progress. Require presenters to send visuals and outlines in advance. Use online meeting tools if possible such as Go-To-Meeting. The impression you make in the first 30 or 60 seconds of a conference call will determine how attentive your audience will be – just like in a presentation.
- ❑ **Meeting basics that make a difference**
Use the “Meeting Basics that Make a Difference” from Chapter 7 of the book “Seeing Yourself as Others Do”.
- ❑ **Build Relationship by being engaging**
Have a strong moderator whose role is to act like a gracious host, to create a clear direction and focus *while helping keep people engaged*. Try throwing in occasional trivia questions, have people tell success stories or use a joke of the day to change the flow of the meeting, which will help everyone pay more attention. There are many people that rely on giving and receiving visual cues to engage the audience. But when you are not able to see the body language and nonverbal clues of the participants, you have to compensate by communicating very clearly, with lots of energy and relevance. If others cannot tell you are excited about the topic, why should they be excited? If you are not excited, leave it off the agenda.
- ❑ **Manage the time for each participant with clear ground rules**
Usually there are people who talk too much and those that need to speak up more. Let people know if you want everyone to speak at some point or only the people on the agenda. Hold people to the allocated time on the agenda. The moderator should interrupt rambling comments and redirect the discussion to someone else or to a different topic.
- ❑ **Know who is talking and on the call**
Make sure everyone knows who is on the call and enforce the discipline of having the speakers identify themselves each time they speak. Not all callers will be able to identify others by the sound of their voices, especially if they use a cell or speakerphone.
- ❑ **Compensate for the gramophone affect**
The average telephone system has the transmission capability of a gramophone. They cut off the high and low end frequencies making people sound more monotone. Increase the energy in your voice tone.

Enunciate clearly. Control your speech rate. This makes even the gramophone understandable. If you are delivering positive news, the message needs to be really emphasized to deliver the message so the it sound positive in a conference call.

- ❑ **Smile more on the conference call**
Studies have shown that people can tell with 80% accuracy whether or not the person on the other side of the phone is smiling or not. That's because when you smile, you change the shape of your face. People will be more engaged if you are smiling more. Some clients have found having a mirror on their desk to talk to makes it easier to smile on the phone.
- ❑ **Have a little more fun**
It is OK to make calls tastefully entertaining. Occasional insertion of a computer sound file with applause when there is good news, for example, can perk up the attention of the participants.
- ❑ **Use parallel communications**
For large conference calls, send out advanced questions via email for opinions and questions about the agenda items to help focus the conversation. During the conference calls, use email or text mail to send questions or comments to gather feedback and questions. Have someone assigned to bring the most important messages to the forefront.
- ❑ **Make conclusions and assignments clear**
Recap the conclusions from the conference calls and check for agreement. List the assignments and next steps resulting from the call. This will be one of the most memorable parts of the conference call. Finish strong. Commit to send out minutes of the meeting and send them within 24 hours. (If it is not worth time to send the minutes, look a point one and ask if the call is necessary.)