



Laserfiche
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Ah, the joys of the modern workplace. We're distributed. We're road warriors. We're teleworkers. We're flexible. The problem is, sometimes we actually have to talk to each other. And you know what that means: [Conference calls](#).

[Like any other meeting](#), audio and video conference calls must be orchestrated; throwing everyone into a room and winging it is rarely productive. You've got to set an agenda, assign a leader, and offer participants some idea of why they're there and what they're expected to contribute. With the [uptick in telecommuters](#), conference call etiquette and know-how takes on new importance.

Yet, even highly engineered calls can be a challenge due to a lack of visual cues. If people can't see each other, for example, they might not be cognizant of who's attending the meeting, which could make them more—or less—reticent about what they say. (Everyone has a "What do you mean the mute button wasn't working?" story, don't they?)

In addition, not being able to see the other participants makes it harder to "pass the conversation token," or know when the person speaking is finished and whose turn it is to speak next. Finally, if the leader and speakers can't see the other participants, they might not know how they're responding. Are they nodding in agreement? Rolling their eyes like an exasperated teenage girl? Or zoning out to a game of Candy Crush on their smartphones?

Here's how to make conference calls less awkward and [more productive](#).

- **Coordinating mixed remote and in-person meetings.** Participants in the room tend to forget the people on the line and act like they do in an in-person meeting. They talk over each other, interrupt, have side conversations, refer to things visible only to them—all things that make it pretty tough for the remote person plaintively squeaking out of the little box to be heard. To help the "voice crying out in the wilderness," make sure you pause to include people on the phone, repeat things you believe they might have missed, and make sure they have a pipeline, such as through IM, to the leader or other confederate in the meeting who can help relay information back and forth.
- **Know who the leader is.** A good leader can make [conference calls much less awkward](#). So it's important that everyone knows (and agrees) who the leader is. For a productive virtual meeting, the person running the show should identify all the participants, including the ones who are remote (and whoever might be silently listening in the room with them), decide upon and identify the person who's speaking next, occasionally call on the long-silent to make sure their opinions are taken into account, and generally prompt the people who aren't paying attention. "This doesn't mean others can't weigh in, but a leader can direct the conversation or jump in where needed," writes Emma Siemasko, a Boston-based writer who works for a cloud-based virtual phone system company, in *The Muse*.
- **For video calls, check the environment.** Of course, video calls where the participants *can* see each other have their own set of complications. You need to worry about [what you're wearing](#)—not only to ensure that you're not still sporting pajamas, but to see that colors or patterns aren't doing weird things to the screen. You also need to check out the lighting and sound in the room where you'll be making the call. [Look at the camera while you're speaking, and don't fidget](#) while you're not. Finally, do a quick scan of what's behind you on camera so people aren't distracted by the gross coffee cups on the desk.
- **Do a tech rehearsal first.** Many conference call fails can be chalked up to technical issues, which is why it's a good idea to [get those worked out](#) ahead of time. "Your meeting shouldn't be the first time using the conference/webinar software," writes Lisa Quast, who covers career topics, in *Forbes*. "Set up a practice call and learn how to use all the features, including how to mute and unmute all callers. There's almost nothing worse than being on a conference call when the host doesn't know how to use the technology." That's particularly true if the conference call is with a customer or for public consumption, such as a podcast. Does everyone have all the software and plug-ins they will need to run the conferencing system? Are people going to need [mikes or headsets](#) so they don't



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sound like they're sitting in the men's room at Grand Central Station? Does everyone know the [basic audio or video commands they'll need](#), and [how to debug common problems](#)? Schedule a run-through before the meeting, and if it's an ongoing meeting, have a run-through with new people as they join the team.

This doesn't take care of all the issues—has anyone yet figured out an equitable way to schedule meetings among people who work in multiple time zones?—but perhaps it's a start.

