



Long live the telephone, the modern saviour

The GPB team

How to communicate effectively on telephone and video conference calls.

The telephone gives us the happiness of being together yet safely apart.” Mason Cooley. How apt just now...

But what really makes the difference is HOW the phone is used for group conversations. There is a metaphorical ‘microphone’ being passed around, grabbed by some, shared too often, and not given to others. A protocol is needed, especially where you don’t know all the other voices well. Even with only one or two ‘new’ voices, we can all get confused about who is talking. Add to that the habit we have of talking over each other and you get the gist of the problem. So here’s our suggested protocol for group phone calls:

We’re not sure about all of you, but within two weeks we have entirely switched from face-to-face to communicating by phone and video conference. Emails of course continue, but there seems to be a sense of boredom with emails, with messaging apps like WhatsApp and Slack taking up the - err - slack.

We want to help our clients to cope well with this very difficult coronavirus pandemic by sharing some ideas on how best to use this newly reinvigorated phone and video conference technology, whose use is now booming to the point where it is even showing signs of feeling the strain – Microsoft Teams crashed briefly in mid-March.

Let’s do this in two parts, the good ol’ telephone, and then the video conference. The phone provides what we describe as ‘1.9’ channel communication. The visual channel is of course absent, but that should leave 2.0 channels - the words and the voice. However, on land lines (remember those?) the voice component is reduced by being transmitted through very old copper cable technology that reduces the data in the signal to about 1/10th of what’s generally available via the modern microphone. To the naked ear it sounds ok, but the reduced data cuts out a lot of the nuances and subtleties in the spoken word. Mobiles bypass the copper bits, but the signal is often pretty awful too, so a lot is lost in processing and transmission.



It is important not to talk over each other (Image source: Unsplash.com)

1. Have/appoint a call host. Their job is to take the call through the list of topics, and to manage who is speaking when. It is a job for a diplomat, and not someone who speaks first and thinks second.
2. The host needs a list of who is on the call, should check this one at a time by name, and then should use simple techniques such as using someone’s name before passing the ‘microphone’ on. This call management is the most important element of a good group call. It does not matter who does it, but the person in role should not be vague about it; It’s a job that someone has to do.
3. If the above is being done well, keep

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Breaking down the breakdown of communication
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Richard looks at the illusion of transparency and the need for clear and impactful communication techniques.

Striking the balance
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Lynda considers some aspects of effective communication which need care and preparation.

And now for something completely different
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They that have the voice of lions’... and of lionesses
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quiet until called to speak by the host. Before (or when) you start, think hard about how best to say what you want to contribute.

4. Mute your phone to cut out noises off, until just before speaking. Put it back on mute afterwards.
5. It's vital to be clear, concise and complete. Don't mumble, instead '*make your consonants sound out like pistol shots*'.²
6. The absence of a visual channel means your vocal cues must be very clear, and if you want to continue speaking after a pause, that pause will have to be a little shorter than in video calls.
7. Get the microphone in the right place; too loud is just as bad as too quiet. If asked to speak up, move the mic closer, and/or speak louder.
8. We don't need lots of 'yeahs', 'umms', or 'great' from random voices, although positive and humorous comments are to be welcomed generally, and particularly just now.
9. When you speak, say your name first, unless specifically given the 'mic' by the host.
10. Finish your comments definitively with a vocal or verbal signal, don't tail off, fade out or restart after people think you have finished.

Second, video conferencing, '*The day will come when the man at the telephone will be able to see the distant person to whom he is speaking*.'³
Alexander Graham Bell.

In a similar way to phone calls, video calls do not quite have the full three channels. Yes you can see the person/people you are talking to, and there is little loss of signal on the video, but again you do have to be watching closely to pick up the nuances and subtle cues and tells given by the others on the video call.

There are lots of alternatives out there – WhatsApp, Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams, StarLeaf, and GoToMeeting to name just a few. They are all a bit different, but the first two seem to cover all bases pretty well, at either no or low cost.

Let's just briefly mention that you do have to be pointing the camera in the right direction and on the right zoom setting, which can easily be done by buying a decent smartphone tripod.

Here are our protocols then for video conferencing calls:

1. Most of the group phone call protocols above still apply.
2. The chair can now be seen, so ensure that the visual cues are clear, and try to give everyone a similar opportunity with the microphone. Try to control 'mic hogging'.
3. As chair, pointing at the image of a person on your screen is unlikely to be in the direction of that person!
4. When speaking, look at the camera lens (not your main screen) the majority of the time, say 60-80%, unless you move to voiceover on screen images such as slides, in which case refer to the protocol on phone calls above. It's OK to look away more if it's clear that you are using more than one screen, but do try to keep the eye contact % up all the same.
5. When not speaking, remember you are still visible, so don't do anything you don't want seen!
6. If you want to speak, signal this visually and clearly. It's great to have this facet, which is so difficult to deploy on phone calls.

There, some ideas that we hope will help make your calls more effective in these troubling times. Happy social distancing....

By the GPB Team (working from homes in and around London).

1. <https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/telephones.html>. Mason Cooley, an American aphorist. He was Professor Emeritus of French, speech and world literature at the College of Staten Island.
2. Often recited over several decades by Harry Pearson, the 101 year old father of one of the co-founders of GPB.
3. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/687083?ref=telephones>. Attributed to Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone.

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