LANGUAGE MATTERS

KEY PHRASES FOR EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Conference calls: a different dimension

Leading a virtual meeting can be challenging for those who are not familiar with the virtual environment. If people are not using a camera, for example, there are no visual clues as to the real feelings of the participants, so when someone says "no", what do they really mean? After all, we are not all mind-readers!

It is also more difficult to manage the time, keep people focused (not multi-tasking while others speak), handle any misunderstandings caused by language and culture, whilst ensuring that there are no technical issues.
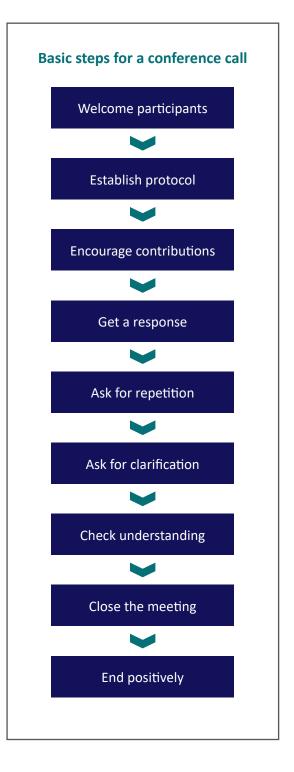
Ideally, if you meet regularly with the same group of people, you should establish a group charter: a set of communication guidelines which everyone agrees to follow when participating in virtual meetings.

The following tips could be adapted and incorporated into this charter.

Tips for managing virtual meetings

Preparation

- Notify all participants well ahead of the scheduled meeting of the time, date and call-in number and / or the log-in for the call.

- Make it clear from the start what you expect in terms of time-keeping. Should everyone be there before the call is scheduled to start or is there a margin of five or ten minutes?

- Select a suitable location where you will not be interrupted (if there is no designated conference room).

- Check the technology works (especially the microphone / headset) and that you know how to use the tools you need.

Basic steps for a conference call

Welcome participants

Establish protocol

Encourage contributions

Get a response

Ask for repetition

Ask for clarification

Check understanding

Close the meeting

End positively

During the call

- Be sure to welcome people as they log in and try to make time for 'small talk', especially if there are late-comers. It will allow people to get to know each other and stop them from checking their emails if there is a delay.
- Use a roll-call (names of participants out loud) to check who is present.
- Speak clearly and concisely – enunciate each word.
- Vary the tone and tempo of your voice.
- Always state your name before speaking to avoid confusion.
- Direct your questions to a named individual.
- Reply to all questions even if you do not have an immediate or satisfactory answer.
- Avoid long silences as these can be ambiguous – are you thinking, are you angry, do you disagree with what's been said?
- Do NOT interrupt unless absolutely necessary.
- Be explicit about your attitude – there are often no visual clues to your mood and feelings.
- Verbally express your agreement with ideas.
- Summarise key points and agree action plans before ending the call.

Welcoming participants

Thanks for logging in, X.

Are we waiting for anyone else? Let's make a start then.

Hi, I see Jayne has just joined us. How are you, Jayne?

Thanks for logging in, Ahmed. How are things?

While we're waiting for the latecomers, did everyone have a good weekend? How about you, Valerie, what did you get up to?

Establishing protocol

Can we all use our first names, please?

Could we go round the table and introduce ourselves?

Let's spend a few minutes introducing ourselves, shall we?

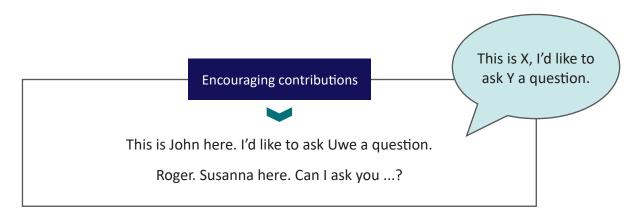Please make sure we do not interrupt each other.

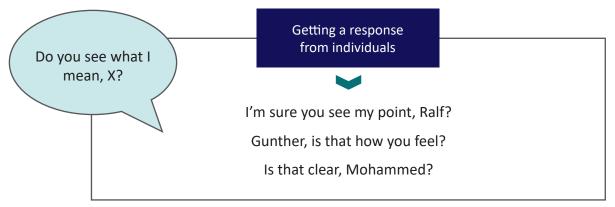Let's keep to one person speaking at a time, please.

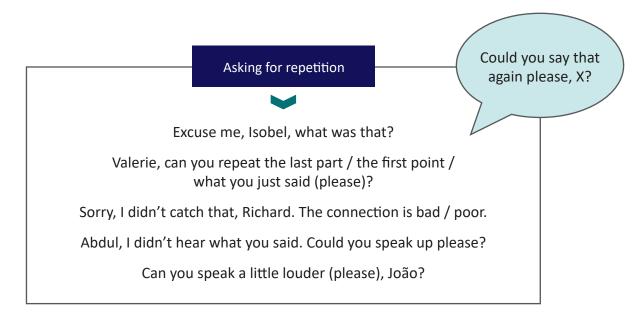Please allow others to finish what they're saying.

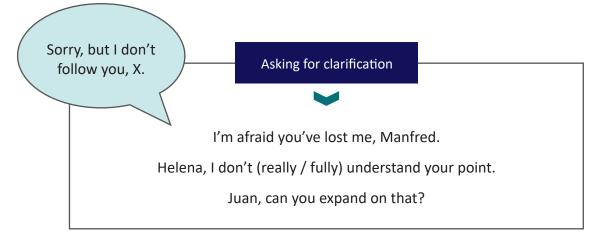Only use the mute button if ... (otherwise we won't know if you are still present).

Time is short and we have a lot to discuss, so I'd appreciate everyone's full attention.
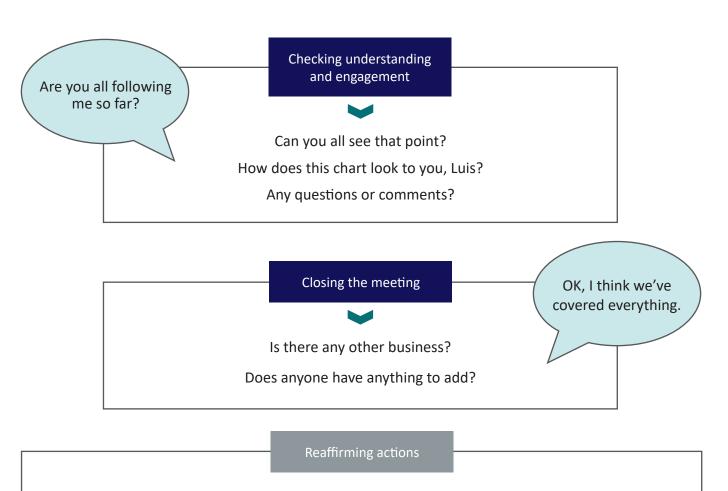
Please switch all mobile phones to vibrate / silent.

Encouraging contributions

> This is X, I'd like to ask Y a question.

This is John here. I'd like to ask Uwe a question.

Roger. Susanna here. Can I ask you …?

Getting a response from individuals

> Do you see what I mean, X?

I'm sure you see my point, Ralf?

Gunther, is that how you feel?

Is that clear, Mohammed?

Asking for repetition

> Could you say that again please, X?

Excuse me, Isobel, what was that?

Valerie, can you repeat the last part / the first point / what you just said (please)?

Sorry, I didn't catch that, Richard. The connection is bad / poor.

Abdul, I didn't hear what you said. Could you speak up please?

Can you speak a little louder (please), João?

Asking for clarification

> Sorry, but I don't follow you, X.

I'm afraid you've lost me, Manfred.

Helena, I don't (really / fully) understand your point.

Juan, can you expand on that?

Checking understanding and engagement

Are you all following me so far?

Can you all see that point?

How does this chart look to you, Luis?

Any questions or comments?

Closing the meeting

OK, I think we've covered everything.

Is there any other business?

Does anyone have anything to add?

Reaffirming actions

So, Isaac, you'll produce an interim report in time for the next meeting.

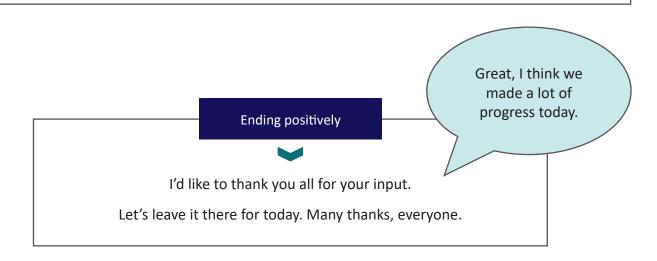OK, can I expect to see those figures by the end of the week then, Yann?

Dieter, you're going to call the suppliers and let me know what they say.

Scheduling the next meeting

Is everyone happy with the same time next week?

Can we fix a time for the next meeting?

OK, I'll send you all an invite to the next meeting.

Ending positively

Great, I think we made a lot of progress today.

I'd like to thank you all for your input.

Let's leave it there for today. Many thanks, everyone.

Using your voice

- **Remember:** you cannot always see the other people in the meeting, so you have no 'clues' to help you to work out their mood, attitude or behavior and vice versa. Therefore, it is critical that you use your voice effectively.

- Be clear and explicit about your feelings:

   "I'm happy / confused / worried / unsure about ..."

- Speak as clearly as you can – enunciate each word, practising words you personally find difficult to pronounce.

- Use intonation to make it clear when you are affirming or asking a question.

- Make sure the volume of your voice is high enough, but don't speak too close to the microphone!

- Vary the tone and tempo of your voice to add energy and dynamism.

- Explicitly ask for a response if you ask a question or make a comment which needs it.

Practice Exercises

1 ❱ **Vocabulary review**

Complete the following sentences with the appropriate words.

1. Can we all use _____ names, please?

2. Let's spend a few minutes _____ ourselves.

3. While we're waiting for the _____, did everyone have a good weekend?

4. I'd _____ everyone's full _____, please.

5. Could you say that again, please? The _____ is poor.

6. Can we _____ a time for the next meeting?

7. I'll send you all a(n) _____ for the same time next week, then.

8. Thanks everyone. I think we _____ a lot of progress today.

2 ❯ Stress patterns

Underline the stressed words in these phrases:

1. increase profit margins

2. create new opportunities

3. competitive performance records

4. annual sales figures

5. enter foreign markets

6. predict long-term growth

3 ❯ Emphasis

It's important when you are depending on key messages to say them with impact. You can create dramatically different effects by placing the emphasis on different words in a phrase.

Look at this example:

I don't agree with you. *(no emphasis)*

I **don't** agree with you.

I don't **agree** with you.

I don't agree with **you**.

Mark the words which you can emphasise in these phrases and then practise saying them.

1. What are you trying to say?

2. This doesn't make any sense!

3. I'm afraid you're completely wrong about this.

4. I'm sorry, but these figures are incomplete.

5. I totally agree with Berndt.

6. When will the report be ready?