



With more SFP members connecting remotely – via group or conference ‘phone or video calls – it’s worth acknowledging that such calls don’t always go as smoothly or end up being as effective as we would hope. This short guide, gleaned from experience and a quick read of what others have suggested, offers some basic suggestions of do’s and don’ts for group calls – **Top Tips** to consider about how to run the calls and how to behave when you are participating in them.

1. Get the basics right

Make sure all group call (conference call) participants are clear about the **timing, call in procedure** and the **agenda** (with suggested timing for each item) for the call. Try to keep the call to a **maximum of 1½ hours**. Set some straightforward **ground rules** for participants to stick to – designed to make the call productive and participatory.

Ground rules

- Join the call 5 minutes before it is due to begin
- Eat before the call – not during
- Be considerate – listen to others and don’t dominate the call
- Remember – the call is a group conversation and is about sharing
- If you have nothing to add, add nothing
- If you need to leave early, say so at the start

2. Video group calls can be really effective

Being able to see each other will always enhance connection and communication more than can be achieved through just hearing each other. This may not always be possible (because of a lack of technology and facilities) and it may not be sensible or appropriate for larger groups (more than 6). However, it is worth considering for smaller groups and for teams who work together regularly.

Suggested video-conferencing platforms

- Skype – free, unlimited time, for up to 50 people
- Zoom – 40 mins for free, for up to 100 participants (unlimited time £11.99 per month)
- WhatsApp – free, maximum 3 people on a video chat (4 if just a voice group chat)

3. Make sure you have good sound quality

Encourage participants to use a land-line rather than a mobile ‘phone where possible as mobiles tend to have more issues with static and poorer sound quality. And if your sound, even at full volume, is quieter than other participants you will probably struggle to jump-in and contribute.

4. Ask someone to facilitate

If you want to make sure the call goes smoothly and is as productive as possible you should appoint a facilitator. For a small group call this could be one of the call participants. For larger groups you should consider appointing someone who is external to the group to facilitate and not participate at all (or as much) in the call discussions. In many ways conference call facilitation is the same as facilitation of an actual meeting – the focus of facilitation should be on an approach that is inclusive, non-judgemental and participatory. In addition, for a conference call the facilitator should aim to establish an environment where participants can connect and communicate easily with each other and where they can contribute as much or as little as they want to. Try it and see.

Facilitation tips

- Ask participants to **talk slowly and clearly**, using **short sentences** and **leaving pauses** in what they say to allow others to add comments and contribute – leave space for others to ‘jump in’
- In larger groups ask everyone to **introduce themselves** at the start and say their name each time they speak (in smaller groups where people recognise each other’s voices this will not be necessary)
- If you hear someone miss a ‘jump-in’ (e.g. they try to say something and get talked over), **go back** to them at the next opportunity to allow their contribution to be heard and included
- In larger groups establish a **speaking order** for the group allowing you to **go-round** the group asking for individual contributions, one-by-one, on issues. Use the same order each time and allow participants to speak or ‘pass’ when it’s their turn (they don’t have to contribute but everyone has the same opportunity). You don’t need to use the go-round throughout the call – just occasionally use it to check everyone is included. Try it out.
- **Summarise and check** key outputs or agreements after discussion on each issue before moving to the next
- Give a **5-minute warning** before the call ends to allow any last issues or points to be raised
- **Summarise and check** the call’s key outputs before ending the call

5. Don’t be afraid to use the mute

If you are calling in from a noisy environment, say so at the start of the call, and use your ‘phone’s mute (if it has one) to cut out external noise until you have something to contribute. But then remember to turn it back on (easily forgotten). For larger group calls it may be sensible to have 2 types of participants: **speaking participants**; and **muted listeners**. Some webinar and meeting platforms (‘Any meeting’ for example) allow muted listeners to contribute comments or ask questions by text through a moderated on-screen ‘chat’ function.

...and remember, group calls may feel a bit clunky at first but the more you do the more you will get used to the way they work and how to participate effectively.

Below is a **Top Tips** checklist suggesting key things to remember. It might help to print this out and pin it up above your work desk or the place where you are likely to take your group calls.

Group calls – Top Tips

Get comfy

Get comfortable, fed and refreshed before you begin the call to avoid making noise, being distracted, distracting others or having to take a break

Share

It's a group call so focus on the group, be considerate and be prepared to share ideas and thoughts rather than dominate or grandstand

Listen

Try to focus on the group discussion by listening carefully, avoiding distraction at your end – and don't be tempted to do other work during the call

Slow down

You're not in the room together so talk slowly and clearly making it easier for others to hear you and understand what you are saying

Keep it short

Imagine you are talking in bullet-points rather than long, wordy sentences. Try to avoid talking too much – on group calls, less is more

Leave pauses

Leave gaps between spoken sentences and paragraphs and the issues or points you are sharing to make it easier for others to jump-in with a comment or question

Use your mute

Think of the group and try to block out excessive distracting external noise at your end by using the mute when you're not talking

**and... if you have nothing to add
then add nothing**