



That's the Plan

BY NANCY SETTLE-MURPHY

Remote Meeting Participation

It's 8:30 a.m., and the meeting is about to begin. More than 30 people have flown in, and no expense has been spared. The last few people are filing in to sit at the expansive U-shaped table, where attendees enthusiastically greet each other as they eagerly await for the start.

As the moderator greets attendees she makes a time-out sign, gesturing to the speaker phone.

"I need to ask you all for silence. A few people weren't able to join us in person," she explains as she dials in the number. Several beeps announce the presence of remote participants, who all start speaking at once, the voices barely audible.

Using her palm to quiet the crowd in the room, the moderator cautions, "We'll have to speak one at a time. We need to make sure that everyone can hear the folks on the phone, and that they can hear each of us."

The energy in the room quickly dissipates. Early momentum is lost as participants strain to hear the voices on the phone and struggle to position themselves close to the microphone every time they speak. By mid-morning, it becomes clear that the participation of remote attendees is significantly limiting conversations and activities in the room.

Meanwhile, remote attendees become quiet, frustrated that they can't follow the thread of conversations or see the visuals. Most eventually

mute their phones and attend to e-mail and other tasks as the discussion drones on.

Despite the carefully-orchestrated plans to produce a successful conference, the three-day event is regarded by most to be a bust—all because the meeting sponsor had failed to

involve remote participants in ways that could add to—rather than detract from—the overall experience.

Consider the following ways to prevent your meeting from going south.

Be prepared to say no to remote participation. Many times, meeting activities require visual stimulation, face-to-face discussion and spirited debate. By modifying the group activities to accommodate remote participation, you may dilute the quality of the activity, and it may take much longer to achieve the desired result. If you must include remote attendees, try involving them in other ways. For example, solicit input in advance, and make sure their perspectives are represented. If your meeting spans multiple days, send relevant meeting output at the end of each day and ask for comments via e-mail before you begin the next day.

Don't keep participants on the line any longer than you have to.

Adjust the agenda to minimize the amount of time people need to participate remotely. For example, set aside a concentrated block of time where remote participants can share ideas, review meeting decisions or raise issues. Don't keep remote participants on the line any longer than you have to. Make sure that the time you set aside is reasonable for remote attendees—especially those from far-flung locations. Be prepared to alter the agenda if needed to accommodate different time zones.

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Involve remote attendees in activities where a physical presence is not really required. Make sure that they can be engaged via phone, coupled with video or webconferencing if needed. Avoid having remote attendees join in situations where remote participants really need to be present for activities such as mapping exercises, wall-charting activities or small-group brainstorming discussions.

Communicate and enforce ground rules. For example, ask in-person attendees to announce their names before they speak, and ask phone participants to do the same. Request that conference room attendees refrain from side conversations, paper rustling or eating if they are seated near the microphones, and ask remote participants to put themselves on mute unless speaking.

Create a sense of inclusion for remote attendees. When you're soliciting ideas or input, make sure to call on phone participants as well. Try tying a balloon to the phone to remind everyone that others are present. Take time to describe non-verbal communications that may be important to remote participants. Be sure to let remote attendees know when you are on break.

Check quality control. Check frequently for clarity, tone and audio signal, for both sets of participants.

Make a special effort to check in with remote participants. You can ask how they're doing, or try a more specific question such as, "Sue, does this all ring true from your perspective?" or "Max, would you care to weigh in on this point?" Or simply ask, "Do you feel you're getting enough out of participating here to warrant the time you're spending?" Depending on the circumstances, you can ask the latter question offline, or send a message if you have access to e-mail or instant messaging.

On the Opposite End

Don't invite remote participants to attend several hours (or multiple days) of a working session. They will likely find it tedious and will probably end up only half-listening, and those in the room will become quickly drained trying to accommodate phone attendees for any length of time.

Don't slow down the proceedings in the room significantly to accommodate remote participants. Instead, focus on making sure that conversations are clear, succinct and audible for those on the phone.

Don't assume that those who speak another native language will be able to easily follow the conversation as remote participants. Make an effort to provide non-native speakers with

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additional written material so they have another vehicle by which they can derive meaning, especially if the pace is rapid and conversations are peppered with idioms, acronyms or jargon.

Don't focus inordinately on those on the phone. Those who made it to the meeting may feel that they are getting short shrift in favor of those who did not. Include those on the phone, by all means, but not at the expense of others in the room who are eager to speak.

NANCY SETTLE-MURPHY, president of Boxborough, Mass.-based Chrysalis International Inc., is a seasoned facilitator of face-to-face meetings. Many of these tips are taken from her new booklet, *Getting the Most Out of Remote Meetings*. Contact her at nancy@chrysalisinternational.com.