Holding Effective Virtual Team Teleconference Meetings

By: Carl Angotti

One of the latest "buzzwords" for the use of teams that are geographically dispersed is to call them a *Virtual Team*. Such teams can potentially consist of persons that are in the same general community, or spread across the globe. The team can be made up of persons from other companies, or even other countries that don't speak the same language. Each portion of the team has its own local sense of "Team Identity". This paper focuses on the highlights of how to make *Virtual Team* telephone conference meetings more effective.

One of the major problems with Virtual teams is keeping communications efficient. There can be too little, too much or no communication. It is much easier for information exchange to take place with a co-located team, in the same building, rather close together. Creating informal communications "at a distance" is very difficult. This creates a heavy dependence on formal, rather than informal, meetings. In addition, most of the time, large portions of the team are unable to come to large group meetings because of project budget limitations, so many of the team members attend by telephone conference. If such meetings are to be effective, some of the following ideas can significantly increase meeting efficiency for projects:

- *Have a consistent Meeting Facilitator* - Much of the effectiveness of Teleconference meetings is dependent on the facilitator guiding the conversation and keeping it on point, without being too intrusive. At the same time, they must reduce the time used by those that are "long winded" and allowing those not as dominant to put their ideas forward. This is best accomplished by using the same co-ordinator, experienced in meeting management, for each meeting in a series.

- *Start the Meeting on Time* – Meeting time is very valuable. Often 25% of a short meeting can be wasted waiting for critical persons to show up. Emphasize that meetings will start on time, make it a ground rule, and except for special circumstances, start them on time. This could be a critical ground rule.

- *Have Meeting Ground Rules* – These are developed by the team and enhanced by the meeting process. Examples are: Stick to the agenda, Respect the opinion of all team members, Announce your name when interrupting or injecting comments, etc.

- *Appoint a Ground Rules Keeper* – This should <u>not</u> be the meeting facilitator. This keeper task should rotate for each meeting. A good person to be the keeper is a person that frequently breaks the rules. This allows them to more effectively learn the rules, and to experience what happens when others break them.

- *Have an Agenda* - Send it out, along with critical reference material well before the meeting. This should include all material to be covered in the meeting. It can also be

very helpful to include estimates of times for each subject for a time critical meeting.

- *An Example of an Effective Agenda Outline*

    - Purpose of Meeting – What the meeting is about
    - What Meeting is <u>Not</u> About – Describe this in clear terms to prevent Agenda Drift
    - Agenda Review – Let the team review the agenda before the meeting starts to be sure it covers what is pertinent at this meeting.
    - The Body of the Meeting Agenda – Delineates the "nuts and bolts" of the team related Action Items and Issues covered in the meeting
    - Review the Action Items – Do this before ending the meeting
    - End with a Meeting Process Check – How are ground rules working? What worked and didn't work.

- *Create a Formal Action Items List* – Create the list, and update it with each meeting. Send the list quickly to all interested parties. It should describe, at a minimum, the action item, the person responsible, the due date, and the item priority.

- *Use High Tech, Specially designed, Speaker Phones* - These have the ability to cancel noise in the room, so they sound less "tubby" and allow distant speakers to "interrupt" a local speaker that is talking. Standard Conference phones shut off distant speakers while local speakers talk.

- *Use Conference Calling Centers* - These can even have toll free numbers call in numbers that make it very easy for team members to join a meeting from many locations. They can often be obtained at only a small increase in cost over a standard phone call. In addition, they provide features like the announcement of callers entering and leaving. They always provide security features to prevent non-invited members from attending the meeting.

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