

Telephones And Teamwork¹

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“What,” you ask, “does the telephone have to do with teamwork?”

More than you might at first think.

One of the most important elements of a highly functioning team is effective communication. Communication is the commerce of teamwork. Without exchanges among team members, there could be no teamwork. And, even in this electronic communication age of emails, texting, video conferencing, and data sharing, a telephone is still one of the important tools that we use to communicate. How we use that tool directly influences our ability to function as a team.

The telephone can also be one of the most egregious sources of frustration that we have during the course of our daily work. Telephone calls interrupt us when we are pushing to get something done. Telephone calls annoy us when they come from irrationally angry customers or co-workers. Telephone calls waste our precious time when they are used to convey unimportant or unnecessary messages to us when we are under pressure.



Telephone calls can also be frustrating to those with whom we interact if we don't use them properly. Not returning a call. Not answering for several rings. Answering a call with an unfriendly tone or an impatient sounding voice.

How we use the telephone can make or break our team. Poor use can alienate our customers.

So, let's look at a few things we can do to use this valuable tool more effectively and productively.

1. Promptly answer the phone.

The longer you allow the phone to ring before you pick it up, the greater the chance that your caller will become impatient and frustrated. This doesn't bode well for the kind of conversation you will likely have. This is particularly true if the caller is a team member expecting you to be responsive.



2. Avoid keeping the caller on hold for a long time.

My guess is that you've been kept on hold more than once. How did it feel? Talk about frustration! If you have to put someone on hold because of some interruption or because you are on another call, don't wait too long to give them a choice to continue holding, call back, or be called back. As I said earlier, communication is the commerce of teamwork. Keeping a team member on hold does not do much for building bonds with team members.

¹ From: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>

3. Answer with a friendly tone.



Start off being friendly. Set a positive tone for the conversation that is about to take place. Avoid answering the phone with an abrupt “Yes?” or a gruff “Hello!” that tells the caller to go away. Answer with a comfortable greeting like, “Good afternoon. This is Pete.” How you answer the phone sets the mood for your exchange.

4. Listen to what the other person has to say.

This sounds like a silly tip. After all, the very act of answering a phone is listening. But, surprisingly, many people don’t *truly* listen to what the other person has to say. All too often—because our mind is elsewhere or we are very busy or we don’t like the caller—we don’t concentrate on listening effectively. Not listening effectively not only will damage the quality of your exchange, it will also convey disrespect to the caller.



5. Keep your cool.

Inevitably, you will receive a call from someone who is angry, upset, or just plain in a bad mood. *Keep your cool!* Avoid the natural impulse to be defensive or competitive! Immediately set yourself into an even, objective, problem-solving state of mind. Give the other person time to blow off steam while you “center” yourself. Listen carefully while you hear them out. Then let them know that you have heard them by giving them feedback that shows you got what they were saying and you understand how they feel.



Even if you believe the caller is way off base, show them some empathy. Keep your tone even and logical, and use the caller’s name, which makes it more difficult for them to attack you. Listen carefully for ways to solve their problem, if it can be solved. If their grievance is just, acknowledge it with an expression of regret or even an apology where appropriate. If, in the end, there’s nothing you can do for them, do everything you can to end the call on a sympathetic and friendly note.

Finally, if they abruptly hang up in a fit of anger, do not take it personally—do not let it ruin your day! If it ruins yours, it is more than likely going to spill over to other members of your team.

6. Return calls promptly.

One of the most irritating things that can happen is when someone does not return your call promptly or, worse, doesn’t return it at all! Do not allow yourself to fall into that pattern of behavior. Not only is it disrespectful to the other team member, it also communicates to them that they are not at all important to you.



Make every effort to return a call as soon as possible—within a few hours if you can. Finally, if you have made a promise to call someone back at a certain time, do so.

Everyone practicing these telephone tips will strengthen your team. In the long run, you will find it less stressful to you.

Keep this in mind: today’s exciting technology with its emails, texting, video conferencing, and data sharing is great...but there is nothing like a personal contact by telephone!