

Ringelmann Effect

Stop Zoning Out in Videoconferencing Meetings

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You join a video conference call. You're one of nine faces on the screen. About 10 minutes into the call, your mind starts to wander and you realize you have no idea what the last person just said. You pretend to keep listening while also checking your inbox. By the end of the meeting, you've caught up on some email but ultimately feel like it was another waste of time. For many of us right now, this scenario sounds all too familiar.

There is a lot of sound advice about how leaders can run more effective virtual meetings. While this advice is critical, what is often overlooked is the role that listeners play in ensuring a meeting's success.

In 1913, Max Ringelmann, a French architectural engineer made a discovery that actually explains why virtual meetings are often so unsuccessful. Ringelmann asked a team of people to pull on a rope. He then asked individuals — separately — to pull on the same rope. He noticed that when people worked as individuals, they put more effort into pulling than when they worked as a team. We call this the “Ringelmann Effect.” The bigger the group, the less responsibility each individual feels to ensure success. If one does not feel critical to a mission's success, it's easy to tune out or put in less effort. No one will notice anyway, right?

In virtual meetings — and especially on conference calls — the Ringelmann effect is magnified. When you are not in the room to help “pull the rope” for a meeting, you might feel less motivated to listen and participate. The less you feel needed, the more distracted you will become, and the less you will give to the meeting. And the less you give, the less fulfilling the experience.

Unfortunately, this dynamic of distraction not only makes for poor meeting outcomes, it also makes for a miserable experience for you, the listener. A 2010 study by psychologists at Harvard University showed that distraction from the present increases unhappiness. While it may be easy and tempting to get distracted during meetings, it's ultimately unfulfilling.

How can you minimize the Ringelmann effect and give more to (and get more from) virtual meetings? It's not through more or louder participation. Rather, the secret to effective participation involves thoughtful and targeted listening. Especially in a virtual context, listening needs to be active, participatory, and helpful. Here are five strategies to listen more effectively in your next virtual meeting:

Define your value beforehand.

Take a few moments before the meeting starts to distill the purpose of the meeting and what your value could be. What is the most critical information you have? What is it you want to contribute? Be ready with those points. If you do not have a critical role to play or do not need to present any information, identify exactly what you hope to learn from the call. Figuring this out beforehand will help you listen more carefully to what's being said and strengthen a listening muscle for future meetings.

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Acknowledge previous statements.

Participants sometimes jump in to make their point without first listening to or acknowledging what has just been said. In response, people may repeat or rehash earlier points, as they do not feel heard or understood. All of this slows down the meeting and leads to a disjointed and frustrating conversation. This dynamic is magnified in a virtual meeting, where people often talk over each other. Active listening can help. Before you raise a new topic, reiterate what you just heard or the previous point you plan to riff on — even ask the speaker whether you’ve characterized their point correctly. Not only does this help the conversation, but it makes it more likely that others will hear what you have to say. People are more likely to listen if they first feel heard.

Connect the dots.

Leading a virtual meeting is hard. Participants often provide scattershot commentary, and it’s tough for a leader to keep the conversation running smoothly. Again, your ability to listen will help. Listen carefully to participants’ contributions and then see how you can reflect on what you’ve heard to help move the conversation. For example, let’s say over the course of a meeting you notice that several participants mention that a client is frustrated. You might say, “I’ve heard several people say that the client seems frustrated. I wonder if anyone has any thoughts on why this frustration is happening right now?” Notice that you are not actually giving any new information. By listening first and then connecting the dots, you can help the other participants understand the larger dynamic and guide the conversation in a productive direction. Effective listening manifests itself when you speak up and reflect on what you’ve heard.

Bring your attention back.

Despite your best efforts to listen, it’s natural for your mind to wander during the call. It happens to even the best listeners. As with meditation, try to gently note the distracting thought and return your attention to the call. It helps to have a pad of paper next to you. This act of writing down wandering thoughts allows you to put the thought “somewhere” so that you can return to it later, after the meeting has ended. You can also write down any distracting thoughts before the meeting starts, which can help you to be more present and ready to listen.

Don’t be afraid to ask a question.

Sometimes when you get distracted and then return your focus to the meeting, you may find that you are lost, as the conversation has moved in a new direction, and you missed the transition. Give yourself a few minutes to get back on track, and don’t be afraid to ask a clarifying question. You might say, “I apologize. I lost track of the conversation for a moment. Would someone please help me understand why we are now focusing on...” This may also help others on the call, as it is likely you are not the only one who is confused.

We are all in some ways in the corporate trenches at the moment. In the isolation of the virtual world, we often feel like we have to fight to be heard, lest our voice get lost in the noise. Once again, listening comes to the rescue. Ironically, one of the best ways to be heard is to be a good listener. Thoughtful, active listening raises your status in the conversation and makes it more likely that others will want to sit up and listen to you. Perhaps most importantly, active, thoughtful listening is a precious gift to your colleagues. It provides meaningful connection during a time and place when people need it most.

