



Is calling someone out of the blue a lost art or an unforgivable intrusion?

Let's be honest: the modern phone call has trust issues.

Somewhere along the way, a ringing phone went from a neutral event – or even a pleasant experience – to a full-blown emotional provocation. Most people now treat unexpected calls like they treat someone knocking on their front door unannounced: instantly suspicious, mildly alarmed, and low-key wondering whether this is the beginning of a true-crime documentary.

It's strange when you think about it. We carry the most powerful communication devices ever created in our pockets, yet many people behave like the voice-calling feature is an experimental technology still in beta.

It raises a real question: *is calling someone out of the blue actually rude, or have we quietly misplaced something important?*

Those of you who have been assaulted by my caller ID already know where I land. But let's take the scenic route.

The six-month misunderstanding

When I joined McKinsey, I arrived bright-eyed, caffeinated, and ready to connect with the people I'd be working with. Coming from another firm with the mission of rebuilding my internal network, the most natural way to do that was simple: *call them*.

No calendar ping. No pre-warning. No "Do you have 3 minutes?" text. Just an old-fashioned phone call where two human beings talk to each other in real time.

It did not go as expected.

The first few calls were answered with the kind of tension usually reserved for conversations that start with "We need to talk." People were bracing. They were scanning for an agenda. I could practically hear them gripping the edge of their desk.

"What's going on? What do you need? Everything OK?"

...a totally normal reaction these days.

I'd say, "Nothing! Just checking in," and the silence on the other end was the sound of someone rebooting. They didn't quite believe me. And honestly, why would they? In a culture where calls often mean escalation, a casual check-in can feel suspiciously wholesome.

Heck, it really threw them when I asked about family, their kids, or followed up on a funny story they told me during our last call.

It took roughly six months for everyone to realize I wasn't calling for anything. There was no hidden

request, no urgent issue, no slow build to a favor. I genuinely just wanted to know how they were doing and what was happening in their world.

Once they understood, the dynamics changed. People started calling me the same way. It became a small tradition that cut through the formality of consulting life. Those conversations created friendships, spotted issues early, surfaced great ideas, and built trust that never would have emerged from a chain of emails.

To this day, some of my favorite professional relationships began with someone finally understanding that I really did just want to chat.

Why the spontaneous call actually matters more in a digital age

Spontaneous calling has a bad reputation because it's been bundled together with "unexpected interruption." But that's not the full story.

A genuine out-of-the-blue call does something that no text, Slack message, or emoji-laced update can replicate. It creates presence. It breaks the pattern. It's a micro-moment of humanity that says, *"You crossed my mind, and I have a minute to hear your voice."*

In a world where communication is optimized for speed, not depth, an unplanned call signals something different:

You're not being managed.

You're not being scheduled.

You're not being triaged.

You're being reached out to because someone cares enough to check in, not check a box.

There's power in that. People open up more when they don't feel like they're performing. They share more when they realize the conversation doesn't have a deliverable attached. And they connect more naturally when the moment wasn't carved into a calendar weeks in advance.

A spontaneous call is one of the few things left that still feels like a gift.

Why people get nervous when the phone rings unexpectedly

While I'm firmly in the pro-call camp, it's important to acknowledge why some people dread them. It's not because they're cold or unfriendly. It's because our work culture has conditioned us to interpret incoming signals like battlefield alerts.

Context switching is the hidden villain.

People spend their days hopping between tasks, tools, and responsibilities. A call can feel like a derailment, not a connection.

Unexpected calls have historically meant bad news.

There's a learned anxiety baked into the sound of a ringtone. It's Pavlov, but instead of salivating, we brace for impact.

Everyone's running an invisible operating system.

Calendars, tasks, deadlines. A spontaneous call feels like something that didn't respect the OS. Even if

the intent is good, the interruption can feel rough.

Text-first culture has created a false sense of control.

With text, you can breathe, think, prepare. Calls feel like being thrown into the deep end without warning. Sometimes a brisk swim feels good – refreshing, healthy, and fun.

These reactions aren't personal. They're structural. And once you understand them, you can adapt without losing the magic of connection.

Modern calling etiquette: how to be spontaneous but considerate

I've found the key to a good out-of-the-blue call isn't the call itself. It's the energy you bring to it.

Here's the approach that works almost universally.

Open with transparency.

A quick "Hey, no agenda at all – just wanted to hear your voice and see how you're doing" disarms even the most calendar-driven soul.

Give them an exit ramp.

"Totally fine if now's a bad time" shows respect, not insecurity. It keeps the call from feeling like a trap.

Stay curious.

The best unexpected calls are the ones where you ask about their world, not yours. People can feel when you're genuinely listening.

Keep it pressure-free.

If they only have two minutes, great. If they want to talk for thirty, great. Let the natural flow happen.

Don't wedge yourself onto their mental to-do list.

You're giving connection, not creating work.

Listen, remember, and follow up.

People can feel the difference between being heard and being processed. The real gift of a spontaneous call is your presence, so let them talk and let it be about them. Remember what they share. Follow up later. Nothing deepens trust faster than someone circling back on something you casually mentioned days or weeks before. It shows that the call wasn't a drive-by check-in but a genuine moment of care.

When not to call out of the blue

As lovely as spontaneous calling can be, context still matters. There are moments when it's wise to give people space:

- When they're clearly in a crunch.
- When they're traveling or managing chaos.
- When you know they prefer async unless something is truly urgent.
- When the call's purpose is better served with prep or documentation.

Being pro-call doesn't mean being oblivious. It means knowing when the moment is right.

The unexpected truth: the best calls are the ones without a motive

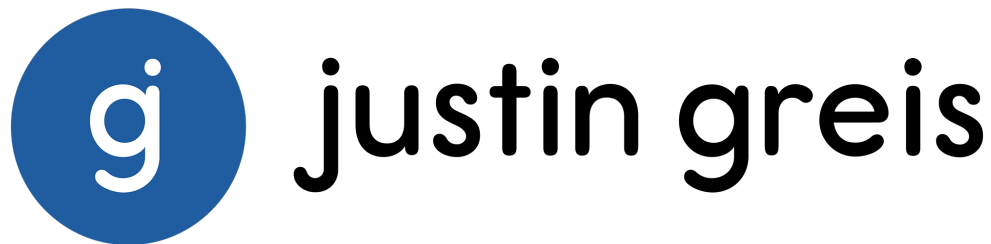
When you strip away the cultural noise, the etiquette debates, and the collective PTSD from years of calendar overload, you're left with something simple: people crave connection.

Most folks don't get many calls where someone just wants to check in with no strings, no asks, no agenda. Those conversations have a different tone, a different honesty, and a different weight.

It's amazing what people will tell you when they feel safe and unhurried.

You learn what's actually going on in their world. You hear the stories that didn't fit in an email. You catch the little sparks of excitement or frustration that usually stay hidden. You deepen the relationship without forcing anything.

Calling someone out of the blue isn't outdated. It's underrated. And in a world starving for real connection, it might just be one of the most generous things you can do.



hi, i'm justin
(nice to meet you)

I post weekly **professional insights** and **personal stories** from my life as a management consultant, a dad, and an eternal optimist.



Click here to learn more about my **professional**, **personal**, and “**perfessional**” background.

connect with me

- **Visit JustinGreis.com**
- **Learn more about Justin**
- **Subscribe to newsletter**
- **Contact Justin**